ARE WE REALLY WHAT WE EAT?

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Climate Control

There is little doubt that throughout 1997 the issue of censorship has been under the community microscope and firmly placed on the public agenda. To the extent that there is no definitive explanation as to the rejuvenation in public interest in the issue of censorship, the following factors may have contributed to its resurgence. One view is that the use of censorship laws are under constant and ongoing re-evaluation as artists, musicians and writers continue their challenge to push the boundaries of acceptability (and sometimes taste). As John Mortimer said: “The price of freedom is perpetual fussing”.

In this context, interest in censorship is triggered as a response to new material that crosses the indivisible boundary. In the past few months, we might consider such triggers to include the exhibition of New York photographer Andres Serrano and near hysteria over the blasphemous “Piss Christ” as part of the Melbourne Festival and the release of the pop single “Barbie Doll” by debut artists Aqua which has parents and citizen associations up in arms about the sexually suggestive lyrics.

Another view, is that the censorship debate is cyclical, like a pendulum swing trying to balance the right of adults to see, hear and read what they like on the one hand and protecting the young and vulnerable from information likely to harm or offend on the other. Or is it that we are in an era of political correctness, the return of the wowsers or is this the remnants of an attitudinal hangover in the aftermath of the Port Arthur tragedy and a community fret for the preservation of good society? the ground swell of community demand for censorship, frenzied speculation as to the alleged influence of the Lyons forum on the Coalition and the supposed infiltration of the religious right in Australian politics, suggests that a new age of censorship has gained momentum in Australia.

It there a link between what we see and do?

Nutritionists have long proclaimed that we are what we eat. Is it reasonable for censors concerned about the habits of an increasing number of media viewers living on a diet of sex and violence to suspect a similar causal relationship between what we see and do?

Are we what we eat? And if so, how can we promote a calorie controlled diet?

At offs with available empirical evidence, is the belief held by 65% of surveyed community members that television violence causes or significantly contributes to violent behaviour. such community concern often cites the findings of professor Leonard Eron (American Psychological Association), who, based on thirty years of reviewed research, rated the link between media violence and violent behaviour as “about the same as between smoking and lung cancer” (Lepski; *The Melbourne Age*, 1996).

The research undertaken to determine any causal relationship between media violence and violent behaviour falls into three categories.

i) International Comparative Research

Firstly, there are a litany of international comparative studies which examine the connection between exposure to television violence and homicide rates with
Brandon S. Centerwell’s (1992) methodology finding a causal link between rising homicide rates and the introduction of television in South Africa (compared to the rates in Canada and America) seems just as plausible as the more recent research undertaken by Wiio (1995) finding no such link between homicide rates and the number of television sets in over forty countries (‘A Report Into Youth Violence in New South Wales; 1995, pp. 169-9).

\[ \textit{ii) Felons vs. Non-Felons} \]

The second category of research undertaken to determine causality involves behavioural comparisons between felons and non-felons. One study conducted by Kruitshnitt, et al (19986) found a relationship between adult criminal violence and childhood exposure to television violence which “approached statistical significance” after controlling for school performance, exposure to parental violence and base-line level of criminality.

Also within this category are multiple and conflicting studies examining the extent of which a correlation exists between rape statistics, violence against women and pornography. Whilst laboratory studies of male college students indicate that prolonged exposure to sexually arousing materials can cause an increase in aggressiveness generally, researchers withhold any comment as to the likelihood of this aggression resulting in sexual violence or alternatively whether such aggression is channelled onto the football field.

\[ \textit{iii) Serial Killer Confessions} \]

The third category of research draws on the Ted Bundy-style confessions - a serial killer who cited pornography as the catalyst for murdering several female college students. Whilst there may be some basis of truth in would-be assassin John Hinkley being inspired by the film “Taxi Driver” and mass-murder Charles Manson being inspired by Beatles’ music and the “Book of Revelations” relying on the ramblings of psychopaths and classic dissemblers as the basis for conclusive evidence would seem unjustified. More recently, Martin Bryant’s video library consisted of such dangerous titles as “The Sound of Music” and “Babe”.

It is very likely amidst the mass of competing and conflicting evidence, that it is probably impossible to prove a causal link between what we see and do although there may be a non-quantifiable association.

Rather than dismissing out of hand the issues of causality or correlation, perhaps a more appropriate question might be - to what degree does the media influence behaviour?

Given the universal popularity of television as a source of entertainment, now occupying 50% of the average Americans free time and 21 hours a week per teenager, there must be some weight attached to the appraisal of media as a medium for influencing behaviour (Latham, The Sydney Morning Herald, 1997).

Indeed, society has developed a multi-million dollar industry on the basis that advertising can influence the behaviour of consumers. However, whilst we may accept that the media
can and does influence in part our thoughts and behaviour, we simply can not know or anticipate the effect the portrayal of media violence can have on disturbed and mentally unstable minds.

The IT Revolution

Social commentators suggest that the most significant challenge to Australia’s censorship laws relates to technology. As journalist Julian Wood stated: “technology is eroding our ability to control the viewing habits of a democratic society” (The Australian, 1996). The simple truth is that society cannot and has rarely succeeded in effectively policing access to information. The advent of the information superhighway makes this task near impossible.

What can be accessed on the electronic superhighway is truly breath-taking, crossing national borders beyond Australia’s jurisdiction to comprehensively regulate. A Boston based consultancy Forrester Research estimated that adult services sold in 1996 accounted for about $50 million or about 10% of all retailing on the Net to US customers.

Regulating the Net

Whilst it is essential for us to consider issues of content regulation while the Net is in its formative years, data from the February 1996 ABS survey “Household Use of Information Technology” negates the dire sense of urgency by countering the perceptions that our young and vulnerable are accessing naughties on the Net in households all across Australia.

i) Proliferation

If industry estimates are accurate, the IT revolution will, one day, penetrate a great proportion of Australian households and businesses. In January 1997, there were an estimated 57 million Net users worldwide. By the year 2000, the number of users is estimated to triple to about 150 million. But as of February 1996, only 2.5 million Australian households contained a computer, with a total of 3.9 million users over the age of five. 23% of Australian households which used a personal computer as of February 1996 also had access to a modem or external link.

In total, an estimated 262,000 household PC users accessed the Internet from home - a negligible presence. The 1.5 household PC users not connected to the Net indicated that they were either not interested in access (45%) or were constrained by prohibitive costs (27%). By far the most popular use of household computers was playing computer games. One tenth of the 3.9 million households users in Australia used their PCs solely for playing games and 34% identified games as the main use.

ii) User Profile

Research by US futurist Thom Blischock implies that the typical Net surfer is almost certain to belong to Generation X or the emerging Generation T. Blischock suggests that 98% of people born after 1983 have used a computer. He estimates that techno tots spend an average 4.4 hours per week on the computer, 18 hours
watching television and 7 hours on the telephone. Yet the concern that our young and vulnerable are accessing information from the Net likely to harm or offend is, at present, misplaced.

The demographic profile of Australian Net surfers indicates that the typical user is predominantly male and middle aged. Of the 262,000 internet users as at February 1996:

- 11% were aged 5-17 years;
- 18% were aged 18-25;
- 38% were aged 26-40;
- 28% were aged 41-55 and
- 6% were aged over 55.

The demographical profile of Australian Net users indicates an obvious gender bias (178,000 male and 84,000 female users as at February 1996) and an aged bias, not consistent with the perception that our children are those most at risk of accessing information likely to harm or offend.

### iii) Content

According to the Government’s own inquiry into On-line Services, materials of a sexual, violent or racially offensive nature represented around 0.01% of the information content of the Internet.

If there was ever any doubt that the never ending world wide conversation taking place daily on the Net should be subject to government regulation, the recent landmark decision of the US Supreme Court puts the right to free expression beyond contention. A recent attempt to limit pornography on the Net in the US via the Communications Decency Act 1996 had been struck down by the District court of Philadelphia as an infringement of free speech. In upholding that decision, the Supreme Court concluded “that the interest in encouraging freedom of expression in a democratic society outweighs any theoretical but unproven benefit of censorship”.

The decision leaves unanswered the vexed question whether governments can have any effective role to play in censoring the global electronic media even if as a policy decision, it were thought desirable to do so.

The introduction last month of a new bill by Senator Dan Coats, in Indiana Republican, requiring all commercial Web Sites carrying material judged harmful to minors to block their access or face criminal penalties, suggests that in America such a role for governments is desired by some. The outcome is pending.

Obviously the senate Select Committee on Community Standards agrees that it is necessary for governments to rigorously police cyberspace. The Committee’s recommendations include imposing heavy fines on Internet Service Providers (up to $100,000) for breach of codes of practice on pornography, or otherwise causing offence and random police audits of online material. While there is probably broad community support for some control over Internet content, recommendations so far are unlikely to
meet the particular challenges of regulating cyberspace. Any benefits of censoring the Net will be merely illusionary unless regulations meet their target.

Since the 1980s, Australia has been subjected to a relatively benign State based classification system premised on the basis that informed adults should be able to see, hear and read what they want while children should be protected from materials likely to harm or disturb. The system has worked tolerably well to classify the physical world of books, videos and film. But the new market place of ideas transmitted electronically into private homes is not susceptible to the same controls. Given that around 60% of all Net host computers are based in the US, the effectiveness of nation states seeking to regulate cyberspace within their own boundaries is limited.

An Australian “go it alone” approach to censorship on the Net will only apply to the tiny fraction of Internet content located here. 98% of questionable material is located overseas (Wilson, *The Australian Financial Review*, 1997).

The implications of a borderless electronic superhighway providing unlimited access to virtual experiences within the home poses a monumental dilemma for governments. Attempts to legislate control of Net content have been unsuccessful so far. The NSW draft legislative proposal to regulate the Net was rejected at a meeting of the Standing Committee of Attorneys-General on 11 July 1996 as unworkable.

A leaked copy of the proposal posed fines up to $25,000 and prison sentences up to a year for the transmission of banned materials (materials refused classification), offensive materials (X and R rated publications) and materials unsuitable for minors (MA+). The recommendation to penalise all transmissions using a public telecommunications system was, according to the Gazette of Law and Journalism, akin to prosecuting Telstra for what individuals said in their private telephone conversations.

This leads to the somewhat incongruous position that Australia’s censorship regime is effectively confined to the physical world of books, videos and film and to the absurdity that material banned in one medium may be readily available in another.

A more relevant query is whether there are any effective methods of controlling what may be accessed by children deliberately, or even accidentally, from a house based computer connected to the Internet? Parental control software allowing supervision of material that children can access on line may offer the most effective means of practical intervention. Currently available Net systems such as Net Nanny and CyberPatrol may either block designated sites or only allow access to services that contain no adult materiel.

These barriers however do not block sexually explicitly images and attempts to limit suggestive words such as “nudity” can have entirely unintended consequences, if for example, it prevents a child from looking at some of the world’s greatest art. verification of the users age or identity by password or credit card have proven to be unreliable as age determinants. Parents face an even more difficult patrol task where chat room discussion contains only some explicit references in otherwise unobjectionable content.

Despite the limitations of cybercop software, there is much to be said for empowering parents to make judgements about what they think is appropriate viewing material for their
children. Parents must understand that the Internet, just like a public library or a shopping mall is not a child-minding service. There are dangers in the path of the unwary. Supervision is required.

Another option currently being trialed in the US as a means of protecting children from online pornography is industry codes of conduct. Earlier this week, major online service providers including America Online, AT&T and Microsoft pledged to provide software tools to allow parents to block out objectionable material (Pressman, 2 December 1997).

Several enhancements to controls were announced including making the software easier to access when a parent begins each online session and adding a new category of restrictions for younger teens aged 13 to 15 years. The relative powerlessness of governments to regulate cyberspace may indeed herald a new age of parental responsibility. If it means that parents are forced to pay more attention to what will influence and shape the next generation, that will be no bad thing.