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# OPINION

editorials, letters, commentary and perspective

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## Parents, not software, should monitor internet use

**OUR OPINION:** Technology is an inappropriate way to clean up the internet

'Smut' is, by many accounts, an endearing word. It has a nice, harsh, coarse sound to it, like many words of German origin do. Pornography is nowhere near as appealing for reporters and headline writers. Not only is it shorter, but it doesn't have all those nasty legal connotations to it.

For any number of reasons, "smut" has become one of the new Internet buzzwords. Gone are the media's joyful exultations about the "Information Superhighway," wherever that famed stretch of electronic road was leading us. No, the Internet is now the realm of kiddie-porn purveyors. Smut sellers.

Thankfully, there is a new knight on a shining software horse riding to our rescue, and the same

newspapers and television shows that gushed with joy at the range of information available on the web are oozing at the possibility of censoring it.

The *Register-Guard* is the latest victim of such technological giddiness. On Thursday, the paper ran an Associated Press story under the headline "Industry to offer anti-smut software." Outright government interference in the form of the Communications Decency Act didn't work, but the private sector is all too willing to take up the censor's shears.

According to the story, President Clinton is working with computer industry leaders to make "anti-smut" software widely available. Such software allows users to designate certain topics as forbidden and then quietly severs access to sites that flunk the purity test.

Depending on the company, the software works in different ways and exerts varying degrees of control. Some programs rely upon sites to report their content and at the command of the computer user refuse to visit those sites that admit they contain unwanted ideas. What these programs do with unknown sites

While efforts by parents to play an active roll in their children's web viewing are admirable, software may not be the wonderful solution to smut the media have made it out to be. Not only are techniques to control content ineffectual and overly broad, but they present a number of dangers.

When software companies are able to determine what is and isn't naughty, their taste might not always be good. Ideas that don't concur with a corporation's ideology may end up mysteriously vanishing from the biggest source of information out there.

Even those items many people consider worthy of censorship may not be deserving of removal. Pornography is a touchy issue, but pages containing hate speech and inflammatory politics are also on the chopping block. Software that allows parents, liberal and conservative, to remove from discussion ideas they don't concur with makes it too easy to turn away from crucial social discourse.

More alarming is the possibility that, with the efforts of industry and the White House, software might spread out of the home and into schools and libraries. Just because some parents don't want their children to be aware of homosexuality doesn't mean everyone should be denied access to pages that might offer them support.

Unfortunately, that sort of thing is exactly what might happen if a community's information resources accept technological censorship. For libraries with a limited collection of books, the wealth of information on the Net can and should help compensate for inadequacies on the shelf.

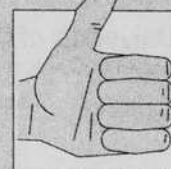
Instead of welcoming software as a solution to smut, the *Guard* and other papers should think about what their one-sided stories are advocating. With its prominent coverage of a book on women's sexual fantasies, the *Guard* might find it is advocating a technology that would censor its own newspaper.

The concern of parents is understandable. However, the solution does not lie in finding a technological way to enhance the machines they are using as a substitute for parenting. Instead of planting their child in front of the computer and ignoring him or her, parents should make the use of the web a family activity. By helping their children understand what is good and bad about the ideas on the web, parents will do far more good than any software company can.

Of course, if we are forced to engage in constructive discourse about the images of women, minorities and government presented on the Internet, we might not get to use words like "smut" nearly as often.

*This editorial represents the opinion of the Emerald editorial board. Responses may be sent to ode@oregon.uoregon.edu.*

All thumbs



**TO THE IRA CEASE FIRE**

We're not particularly optimistic about its longevity, given the nature of the conflict over Northern Ireland, but we're glad that people in the region have decided to stop killing each other over religion and politics, at least for a little while.



**TO THE U.S. HOUSE VOTE ON ART**

In another brilliant cost-cutting move, the House voted to eliminate funding for the National Endowment for the Arts in its latest budget rather than get rid of a tank or two. The Senate, meanwhile, has proposed providing a little over \$100 million — still inadequate, but at least they're being marginally rational. Art used to be a centerpiece of pride for communities. Now it has been relegated to a target of ridicule for the religious right.

**TO THE PROPOSED ELIMINATION OF TAX CREDITS FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS**

Okay, so not every GTF is destined to be Professor of the Year, but they work hard and deserve the tuition waiver. Under proposed budget cuts, however, that waiver would be considered taxable income. At a time when tax breaks for undergraduate education are being proposed, doesn't it make more sense to continue breaks that allow graduate students to continue their education?



depends, sometimes the programs limit access to sites known to be "safe."

Other programs work in much the same way that Internet search engines like Alta Vista and WebCrawler function by using key terms to isolate inappropriate content. Such techniques can lead to humorous results. According to an article in *Scientific American*, America Online's experimentation with such a device led to the blocking of breast-cancer support groups.

The results aren't always as amusing. The magazine article notes that one software's criteria include forbidding access to sites that tell people not to buy their product or that use the name of one prominent company critic. Such corporate control is alarming, but it might be a sign of the future.

### LETTERS

#### Media need critiquing

I wish to thank you who are the *Emerald* editorial board for your opinion of July 15, 1997, concerning establishment media coverage of the Country Fair. It is mostly difficult to discern critiques such as yours amidst the drumbeat of dominate culture, self-righteousness and triumphalism and middle-class complacency.

Remain vigilant in tearing the veil off mainstream attempts to dictate norms and marginalize/deligitimate those of us who continue to exalt personal liberation in the face of oppression even 30 years after the '60s passed on by.

Persist in your media critique and also in cultivating your awareness of the authoritarianism that is immanent in contemporary American society. You speak with the voice of wisdom.

Fire Horse Monk  
Eugene

#### Fair coverage

I am writing to applaud the *Emerald* editorial board for its column of July 15 ("Media made topless carnival out of fair"). I first attended the Oregon Country Fair in 1974, at the young age of 19, and found it to be a wonderful celebration of the fact that civilization could exist successfully and joyfully without the need of outside (i.e. Police and governmental) restrictions. Nobody cared how anyone dressed, either! We were just coming out of the Vietnam War, and the movements toward alternative lifestyles, that the fair epitomized, were beginning to appear as realizable ideals.

Although we knew we hadn't completely demolished the destructive forces of intolerance and greed, we all felt we had made inroads in the cause of freedom. Indeed not too many years later, the possession of cannabis, a harmless plant, was decriminalized in the states of Oregon and Hawaii, thus helping us to feel that political change could proceed

in a positive, humane direction.

I had come to Oregon originally because I believed that it was more enlightened state than my native Wyoming; multicultural and multifaceted, where no one's ideas were mocked. Eugene supported with equal tolerance both the Merry Pranksters and Holy Rollers. I stayed here until 1978 attending that little bit of Brigadoon every year, until forced to leave for personal, family reasons, and so until 1995 the '78 fair had been my last experience.

When I returned last year, and was able to show a Wyoming friend this great event I was pleased to find it basically unchanged, despite the growth Eugene had suffered in intervening years. There were the usual complaints, as well as the numerous (as nationally) persons forced into homelessness (due to the unsettling worldwide reestablishment of greed), but on the whole, it seemed that this community's diversity was given one more year to shine through three generations of believers in those Aquarian ideals, that

seemed to be coming into their own once again.

This year, through overambitious politicians, and their media lackeys, I saw the backlash. We all "oeyed," with wry smiles, but this gave us now-more-experienced, "hippies" an opportunity to exercise our rights within the politicians' and media hacks' playing fields.

The petition to recall Mr. Harcelrod received a great boost by his vocal complaint, and his call for stiff enforcement of an immoral law. I saw also that the OCTA (Oregon Cannabis Tax Act) petition gained new impetus in the face of this controversy, as well as our Governor's recent endorsement of the recriminalization of marijuana. So all in all, the media event created for the forces of intolerance succumbs to that famous third law (as applied to society) and that the "counter-cultural" reaction was, as usual, far more elegant.

Thank you.

Michael Hanson  
English