

Stevens demands online porn rating system

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In a week in which the Child Online Protection Act is back in the news, Sen. Ted Stevens, R-Alaska, used a committee hearing Thursday to fire a warning toward the adult entertainment industry.

"My advice to your clients is that you better do it soon or we will mandate it," Stevens told Paul Cambria, counsel of the Adult Freedom Foundation, of developing a rating system for online content.

Cambria, the object of derision from several senators, said his industry is trying to take steps toward keeping minors away from adult entertainment.

"We're going to attempt to come up with solutions in helping the filtering process be successful," Cambria said.

Cambria said that his organization represented "a group of very influential producers and distributors" within the adult industry, but that not every pornographer will go along with AFF standards.

He said that most of what his industry does is fully constitutionally protected.

"It's lawful adult expression that is accepted in America in both the marketplace of ideas and the commercial marketplace," Cambria said.

COPA has been hung up in court since becoming law in 1998, challenged by the American Civil Liberties Union, the Electronic

Frontier Foundation and others.

The Department of Justice, preparing for the next legal battle, this week subpoenaed Google to provide data that the search engine will not release willingly.

The ACLU contends that COPA is overreaching and that Internet filters do an adequate job of blocking objectionable content from children. The DOJ wants information from search engines to see just how effective filters have been.

Yahoo!, among other search engines, complied with the DOJ's request, which is for information that is general and not user-specific.

Google said in a statement, "Google is not a party to this lawsuit and their demand for information overreaches. We had lengthy discussions with them to try and resolve this, but were not able to and we intend to resist their motion vigorously."

Rebecca Jeschke, spokesperson for the EFF, said Google's stand is "a good statement in the battle for privacy."

She noted the chilling effect that COPA could have.

"One of the fears is that people may not search for information that they want because of Big Brother watching over their shoulder," she said. "It would be a shame if people weren't able to use the Internet the way they would like to."

She noted the EFF Web site offers anonymizing software for users who are concerned for their privacy.

Several senators broached the idea of creating a dot-xxx suffix for

pornographic Web sites.

Laura Parsky, deputy assistant attorney general for the Department of Justice, said dot-xxx is not a realistically useful idea.

"There are several issues of practicality and whether it would be effective," Parsky said.

Cambria noted that pornographers could flout the rule by setting up offshore sites. He instead suggested a dot-kids domain, where parents could set their computers to only allow the age-appropriate sites that have a dot-kids suffix.

James Burrus, deputy assistant director of the FBI's Criminal Investigation Division, said that the FBI was doing a good job curbing child pornography within the current legal climate.

"We're doing as best we can," he said. "With additional resources we could expand, but we can work without our present budget."

Burrus said the anti-child pornography effort should be two-pronged.

"In addition to the enforcement side, we think prevention is a key," he said.

James Weaver, a Virginia Tech professor, agreed.

"We must accept that no single solution will be sufficient," Weaver said. "We need multifaceted and innovative approaches to the problem at hand."

Sen. Blanche Lincoln, D-Ark., used the hearing to revisit a bill she authored last summer that calls for an Internet Safety and Child

Protection Trust Fund, which would finance government attempts to crack down on child pornography.

The trust fund would be bankrolled by a 25-percent excise tax on all legal Internet adult entertainment transactions.

"These are not costs that should fall on the backs of ordinary citizens," Lincoln said.

Jeschke said that Lincoln's proposal "seems to impinge upon the rights to possess constitutionally-protected material."

Sen. Bill Nelson, D-Fla., said that there are problems on the Internet beyond the mere existence of pornography.

"Online pornography is being enabled by spam and by spyware," he said, calling spyware "an insidious problem."

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