

Using technology against technology

June 8 2006

Media-industry experts stress the value of using technology to allow parents to control their children's media intake.

At a New America Foundation seminar Wednesday, experts and policy leaders promoted technological approaches for parental control as an alternative to regulatory approaches. This approach is accepted in part because of the rapid pace of media technology.

"Markets move quicker than regulators," said Adam Thierer, director the Center for Digital Media Freedom.

Because technology is moving so rapidly, in many cases parents are struggling to keep up with their children's media intake.

"Parents often don't know what to do," said Sen. Hillary Clinton, D-N.Y. "To help empower parents is our number one objective."

But this technology is also on the forefront to aid parents in deciding what material is appropriate for their children. Expert analysts and child protection advocacy groups are enthusiastic about the most recent feature of TiVo.

TiVo, created in 1997, in June is releasing a new option for parents to subscribe to called KidsZone. This component comes as part of the standard TiVo service and allows parents to locate and save programming they select. KidsZone only shows content that has been pre-approved by parents.

TiVo's new zone offers recommendation menus by organizations including, Common Sense Media and Parents Television Council among others, for parents to find new programming for their children.

"This cracks open a whole new level of options and opportunities for parents," said Joe Miller, vice president of TiVo, to United Press International.

Miller said this will allow parents to have access to a much wider range of content for their children.

"We are trying to provide a gateway for smart decisions," he said.

TiVo is an attractive option for parents and has received positive responses from experts because is more user friendly than previous technology including the V-chip that has less of a success rating among concerned parents.

"One thing TiVo has received high marks for is usability," Miller said. "It resonates with kids and parents."

Miller emphasized that it was the consumers and not the company who motivated the technology for KidsZone.

"Anything that improves a parent's ability to individualize a child's experience is good," said Elizabeth Perle, editor-in-chief of Common Sense Media. "We love KidZone. We think KidZone is great."

Technology to help parents monitor the media intake of their children is also extending to the Internet. Online social networks such as Facebook and MySpace have become increasingly more popular among children and teenagers. Media safety advocates say these networks can provide a unique sphere of social interaction for children but can also be

dangerous. These type of sites provide a space where young adults and children share personal information without adult supervision and it is extremely difficult to verify the ages of other members of the network.

Michele Stockwell, director of education and family policy at the Progressive Policy Institute, said the PPI has long advocated the use of digital certificates and smart cards to increase online safety. This technology, which is being developed to combat terrorism and identity theft, among other things, could also be used to increase child safety online by allowing social networking sites to verify the age of their users. Sites could then block those outside of its stated age range from using it as well as provide monitoring and restrictive features for sites with a younger age range.

"There is certainly a place for kids-only social networking sites, but parents should have the ability to monitor the chat that their kid is engaged in," Stockwell said. "If sites had the ability to reliably determine the age of the user, they could then customize the social network accordingly and provide the necessary oversight."

Rob Atkinson, president of the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation, believes that putting smart chips in identity cards would remedy a slew of problems. However, until the chips become ubiquitous they will not likely play a major role in increasing child safety online.

"We're a ways from it being an effective solution," Atkinson said.

The increase in technology and future convergence of streaming TV programming online personalizes programming and is predicted to subject children to more segmented advertising.

"As technology converges we are focusing on what convergence means for TV and Internet," said Patti Miller, director for Children & the

Media Program at Children Now. "We want to have protections for kids so they are provided with great content."

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