The Internet: A Clear and Present Danger?

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tion Great Debate. In this speech, she argues that some industry and government regulation of the Internet is necessary.

• Someone breaks through your firewall and steals proprietary information from your computer systems. You find out and contact a lawyer who says, “Man, you shouldn’t have had your stuff online.” The thief becomes a millionaire using your ideas, and you go broke, if laws against copyright violation don’t protect material on the Internet.

• You visit the Antiques Anonymous Web site and decide to pay their hefty subscription fee for a year’s worth of exclusive estate sale previews in their private online monthly magazine. They never deliver and, in fact, never intended to—they don’t even have a magazine. You have no recourse, if laws against fraud don’t apply to online transactions.

• Bob Guccione decides to branch out into the lucrative child porn market and creates a Teen Hustler Web site featuring nude adolescents and preteens. You find out and complain, but nothing can be done, if child pornography distribution laws don’t apply to computer transmissions.

• A major computer software vendor who dominates the market develops his popular office software so that it works only with his browser. You’re a small browser manufacturer who is completely squeezed out of the market, but you have to find a new line of work, if antitrust laws don’t apply online.

• Finally, a pedophile e-mails your son, misrepresenting himself as a twelve-year-old named Jenny. They develop an online relationship and one day arrange to meet after school, where he intends to rape your son. Thankfully, you learn in advance about the meeting and go there yourself, where you find a forty-year-old man instead of Jenny. You flee to the police, who’ll tell you there’s nothing they can do, if child-stalking laws don’t apply to the Internet.

The awesome advances in interactive telecommunication that we’ve witnessed in just the last few years have changed the way in which many Americans communicate and interact. No one can doubt that the Internet is a technological revolution of enormous proportion, with outstanding possibilities for human advancement.

As lead speaker for the affirmative, I’m asked to argue that the Internet poses a “clear and present danger,” but the Internet, as a whole, isn’t dangerous. In fact, it continues to be a positive and highly beneficial tool, which will undoubtedly improve education, information exchange, and commerce in years to come. In other words, the Internet will enrich many aspects of our daily life. Thus, instead of defending
this rather apocalyptic view of the Internet, I’ll attempt to explain why some industry and government regulation of certain aspects of the Internet is necessary—or, stated another way, why people who use the Internet should not be exempt from many of the laws and regulations that govern their conduct elsewhere. My opening illustrations were meant to give examples of some illegal conduct which should not become legal simply because someone uses the Internet. In looking at whether Internet regulation is a good idea, I believe we should consider whether regulation is in the public interest. In order to do that, we have to ask the question: Who is the public? More specifically, does the “public” whose interests we care about tonight include children?

CHILDREN AND THE INTERNET

Dave Barry describes the Internet as a “worldwide network of university, government, business, and private computer systems, run by a thirteen-year-old named Jason.” This description draws a smile precisely because we acknowledge the highly advanced computer literacy of our children. Most children demonstrate computer proficiency that far surpasses that of their parents, and many parents know only what their children have taught them about the Internet, which gives new relevance to Wordsworth’s insight: “The child is father of the man.” In fact, one could go so far as to say that the Internet is as accessible to many children as it is inaccessible to many adults. This technological evolution is new in many ways, not the least of which is its accessibility to children, wholly independent of their parents.

When considering what’s in the public interest, we must consider the whole public, including children, as individual participants in this new medium.

PORNOGRAPHY AND THE INTERNET

This new medium is unique in another way. It provides, through a single avenue, the full spectrum of pornographic depictions, from the more familiar convenience store fare to pornography of such violence and depravity that it surpasses the worst excesses of the normal human imagination. Sites displaying this material are easily accessible, making pornography far more freely available via the Internet than from any other communications medium in the United States. Pornography is the third largest sector of sales on the Internet, generating $1 billion annually. There are an estimated seventy-two thousand pornographic sites on the World Wide Web alone, with approximately thirty-nine new explicit sex sites every day. Indeed, the
Washington Post has called the Internet the largest pornography store in the history of mankind.

There is little restriction of pornography-related activity in cyberspace. While there are some porn-related laws, the specter of those laws does not loom large in cyberspace. There’s an implicit license there that exists nowhere else with regard to pornography—an environment where people are free to exploit others for profit and be virtually untroubled by legal deterrent. Indeed, if we consider cyberspace to be a little world of its own, it’s the type of world for which groups like the ACLU have long fought but, so far, fought in vain.

I believe it will not remain this way, but until it changes, we should take the opportunity to see what this world looks like, if for no other reason than to reassure ourselves that our decades-old decisions to control pornography were good ones.

With a few clicks of the mouse, anyone, any child, can get graphic and often violent sexual images—the kind of stuff it used to be difficult to find without exceptional effort and some significant personal risk. Anyone with a computer and a modem can set up public sites featuring the perversion of their choice, whether it’s mutilation of female genitals, eroticized urination and defecation, bestiality, or sites featuring depictions of incest. These pictures can be sold for profit, they can be sent to harass others, or posted to shock people. Anyone can describe the fantasy rape and murder of a specific person and display it for all to read. Anyone can meet children in chat rooms or via e-mail and send them pornography and find out where they live. An adult who signs onto an AOL chat room as a thirteen-year-old girl is hit on thirty times within the first half hour.

All this can be done from the seclusion of the home, with the feeling of near anonymity and with the comfort of knowing that there’s little risk of legal sanction.

The phenomenon of this kind of pornography finding such a welcome home in this new medium presents abundant opportunities for social commentary. What does Internet pornography tell us about human sexuality? Photographs, videos, and virtual games that depict rape and the dehumanization of women in sexual scenes send powerful messages about human dignity and equality. Much of the pornography freely available without restriction on the Internet celebrates unhealthy and antisocial kinds of sexual activity, such as sadomasochism, abuse, and degradation. Of course, by its very nature, pornography encourages voyeurism.

Beyond the troubling social aspects of unrestricted porn, we face the reality that children are accessing it and that predators are accessing children. We have got to start considering what kind of society we’ll have when the next generation learns about human sexuality from what the Internet teaches. What does unrestricted Internet pornography teach children about relationships, about the equality of women? What does it teach little girls about themselves and their worth?
Opponents of restrictions are fond of saying that it’s up to the parents to deal with the issue of children’s exposure. Well, of course it is, but placing the burden solely on parents is illogical and ineffective. It’s far easier for a distributor of pornography to control his material than it is for parents, who must, with the help of software, search for and find the pornographic sites, which change daily, and then attempt to block them. Any pornographer who wants to can easily subvert these efforts, and a recent Internet posting from a teenager wanting to know how to disable the filtering software on his computer received several effective answers. Moreover, it goes without saying that the most sophisticated software can only be effective where it’s installed, and children will have access to many computers that don’t have filtering software, such as those in libraries, schools, and at neighbors’ houses.

INTERNET TRANSACTIONS SHOULD NOT BE EXEMPT
Opponents of legal restrictions often argue simply that the laws just cannot apply in this new medium, but the argument that old laws can’t apply to changing technology just doesn’t hold. We saw this argument last in the early ‘80s with the advent of the videotape. Then, certain groups tried to argue that, since you can’t view videotapes without a VCR, you can’t make the sale of child porn videos illegal, because, after all, they’re just plastic boxes with magnetic tape inside. Technological change mandates legal change only insofar as it affects the justification for a law. It just doesn’t make sense that the government may take steps to restrict illegal material in every medium—video, television, radio, the private telephone, and print—but that it may do nothing where people distribute the material by the Internet. While old laws might need redefinition, the old principles generally stand firm.

The question of enforcement usually is raised here, and it often comes in the form of: “How are you going to stop people from doing it?” Well, no law stops people from doing things—a red light at an intersection doesn’t force you to stop but tells you that you should stop and that there could be legal consequences if you don’t. Not everyone who runs a red light is caught, but that doesn’t mean the law is futile. The same concept holds true for Internet laws. Government efforts to temper harmful conduct online will never be perfect, but that doesn’t mean they shouldn’t undertake the effort at all.

There’s clearly a role for industry to play here. Search engines don’t have to run ads for porn sites or prioritize search results to highlight porn. One new search engine even has sex as the default search term. Internet service providers can do something about unsolicited e-mail with hotlinks to porn, and they can and should carefully monitor any chat rooms designed for kids.
Some charge that industry standards or regulations that restrict explicit pornography will hinder the development of Internet technology. But that is to say that its advancement depends upon unrestricted exhibition of this material, and this cannot be true. The Internet does not belong to pornographers, and it’s clearly in the public interest to see that they don’t usurp this great new technology. We don’t live in a perfect society, and the Internet is merely a reflection of the larger social community. Without some mitigating influences, the strong will exploit the weak, whether a Bill Gates or a child predator.

CONCLUSION: TECHNOLOGY MUST SERVE MAN
To argue that the strength of the Internet is chaos or that our liberty depends upon chaos is to misunderstand not only the Internet but also the fundamental nature of our liberty. It’s an illusion to claim social or moral neutrality in the application of technology, even if its development may be neutral. It can be a valuable resource only when placed at the service of humanity and when it promotes our integral development for the benefit of all.

Guiding principles simply cannot be inferred from mere technical efficiency or from the usefulness accruing to some at the expense of others. Technology by its very nature requires unconditional respect for the fundamental interests of society.

Internet technology must be at the service of humanity and of our inalienable rights. It must respect the prerogatives of a civil society, among which is the protection of children.

vo·cab·u·lar·y
In your journal, write the meaning of the italicized words in the following phrases.

- steals proprietary information (1)
- rather apocalyptic view (7)
- legal deterrent (11)
- don’t have filtering software (17)
- the law is futile (19)
- cannot be in fixed (23)
- usefulness accruing to some (23)
- respect the prerogatives (24)

QUESTIONS FOR WRITING AND DISCUSSION

1. Before you read or reread Cleaver’s essay, write down your own thoughts and experiences about pornography on the Internet. Have you run into sites that you find offensive? Should access to such sites be made more difficult? Do you think children should be protected from accessing such
sites—either by accident or on purpose? What do you think are the best method(s) for such regulation: Internet software programs, parental regulation, governmental regulation? Explain.

2 Cleaver begins her essay with several scenarios describing potential abuses and crimes that occur online. Did you find these scenarios effective as a lead-in to her argument? Did they help you focus on her thesis? Should she use fewer scenarios? Why do you think she used all of these examples when only two dealt with child pornography on the Internet?

3 The rhetorical occasion for Cleaver’s argument is a debate sponsored by the College of Communication at Boston University. In her essay, can you find evidences (word choice, vocabulary, sentence length, tone, use of evidence, use of appeals) that suggest that her original genre was a speech and that her audience was college students, college faculty, and members of the community? Cite evidence from the essay showing where Cleaver uses debate elements appropriate for this genre and makes appeals to this audience.

4 Cleaver states her case for government regulation of pornography on the Internet, but who is against regulation, and what are their arguments? What arguments opposing Internet regulation does Cleaver cite? (Are there other opposing arguments that Cleaver does not consider?) How well does Cleaver answer these opposing arguments?

5 Arguing essays make appeals to reason, to character, and to emotion. Find examples of each type of appeal in Cleaver’s essay. Which type of appeal does she use most frequently? Which appeals are most or least effective? Does she rely too much on her emotional appeals (see paragraph 13, for example)? For her audience and her context (a debate), should she bolster her rational appeals with more evidence and statistics? Why or why not?

6 Imagine that you are at this debate on the Internet and that your side believes that there should be no or very little regulation of the Internet. What arguments might you make in response to Cleaver? Make a list of the possible pro–con arguments on this topic and explain which ones you will focus on as you respond to Cleaver.

**Multigenre Casebook on Web 2.0**

Farhad Manjoo, “You Have No Friends” [Online article]
Sarah Kliff, “. . . And Why I Hate It” [Magazine article]
“Facebook US Audience Growth” [Web site]
Emily Nussbaum, from “Say Everything” [Magazine article]