
Press Release

Computer Bulletin Boards Task Force Report Released

5 October, 1994

The main principles of the censorship system can be applied to computer bulletin boards with the cooperation of operators, according to a Federal Government inquiry.

Attorney-General Michael Lavarch today released the report of the Computer Bulletin Board Systems Task Force at the Sixth Censorship Conference, organised by the Office of Film and Literature Classification, in Sydney.

'Australians are the second largest users of bulletin boards after the United States,' said Mr Lavarch, who commissioned the Task Force inquiry jointly with Communications Minister Michael Lee.

The Task Force was convened by the Attorney-General's Department and included representatives of the Department of Communications, the Arts and Tourism, the Office of Film and Literature Classification and the Australian Federal Police.

Mr Lavarch said the scope of inappropriate use of bulletin boards was limited at present because only about four per cent of Australian households have the necessary prerequisites for access - a computer and modem.

'Rapid improvements in technology and falling hardware prices have the potential to make access to bulletin

boards fare more wide-spread,' he said.

The Task Force identified a range of concerns about the operation of bulletin boards - distribution of pornography, questions of copyright and defamation, distribution of stolen credit card numbers and racist and abusive material.

It found that there were practical limits on regulation. Comprehensive government scrutiny of bulletin board content would be prohibitively costly and would lead to accusations of putting roadblocks on the information highway.

However, the Task Force believes it is possible to apply the main principles of censorship system to bulletin boards with the cooperation of the operators. The principles are that adults should be able to see, hear and read what they want, while children should be protected from material likely to harm or disturb.

The report favours industry guidelines backed by a complaints mechanism which would not require legislation to implement initially, although continued monitoring is also recommended to establish whether failure to comply with the guidelines should be an offence.

Other options suggested for the government to consider include pro-

posals for legislation to deal with bulletin board material which would be refused classification under the present system, or to ensure that reasonable steps are taken to deal with restricted classification material.

'They do not support full classification of bulletin boards, as the cost would be prohibitive and enforcement very difficult,' Mr Lavarch said.

He said he would now discuss the government's responses to the report with Mr Lee and State and Territory censorship ministers, as well as the wider issues raised in the report regarding regulatory approaches to the new broad band information and entertainment technologies now being developed.

'A coordinated approach to policy development is essential,' Mr Lavarch said.

'As the Report says, issues concerning the development of Australia's information infrastructure should not be left to individual government agencies to consider within the context of narrow budget and program priorities.'

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