New statement on online information

Much of the advocacy work of ALIA involves providing advice and information to government, other national associations and ALIA members about regulation of access to the internet. In general terms, many of the issues are linked to the position outlined in the ALIA statement on freedom to read. The following statement has been endorsed by ALIA General Council.

Interim statement on use of online information in libraries

Preamble
Libraries have traditionally been vocal supporters of freedom to access the broadest range of information [see ALIA statement on freedom to read]. This is seen as part of the democratic right of all citizens. A well-informed community is generally better prepared to effectively participate in public debate and contribute to public affairs. The concern of the Australian Library and Information Association is that this basic right is not eroded in the development of regulatory measures for online information. The Association recognises that there are many regulatory issues which arise in relation to the use of online information. Regulatory challenges should not, however, prevent libraries from protecting the freedom to read in the online environment and in doing so producing the best internet experience for all users.

Industry codes
The Association supports a self-regulatory code of conduct within a broad government regulatory framework. A code of practice for the industry must not attempt to interpret community standards but deal only with illegal material. Internet Service Providers and access providers such as libraries cannot be held responsible for any illegal material which might be transmitted or accessed through the internet. Parents and guardians must be responsible for their childrens' access to library resources including online information.

Classification of online information
The Association recognises that any scheme to regulate the internet must address the issue of how online information is classified. Films, videos, computer games and publications are currently required by state, territory and federal legislation to be submitted to the Office of Film and Literature for classification. In our view, a comparable classification system must also exist in the online environment. Labelling technologies, such as the Platform for Internet Content Selection (PICS), have the potential to provide a system of labelling online content to ensure that the internet is a navigable source of information. Only a sophisticated labelling and tagging system which accurately identifies the category, class and origin of information can provide internet users with the best advice to make well-informed choices on the suitability of online information.

Filtering technologies
The Association recognises that while it is important to protect minors from illegal and inappropriate online content, librarians also have a duty to serve the broad and diverse interests of all individuals in the community. The Association does not advocate the use of filtering technologies because they cannot provide guarantees that all objectionable online information can be blocked. Their use introduces a false sense of security for parents, guardians and internet users.

Internet user education
The Association believes that an internet user education program should be a key component of any scheme to regulate access to the internet. A broad-based program of user education is critical and should embrace children, their parents, law enforcement agencies, teachers and librarians. To be effective the program must focus on the rights and responsibilities which internet users and organisations have as users and content providers. Libraries have a role in educating internet users that the responsibility for online content rests primarily with the content provider and the internet user. Library workers should encourage parents and guardians to supervise their childrens' internet experience. In this regard, a user education program must also specifically address issues of relevance to children in the online environment. ∎