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New Effort Aims to Give Pornography Sites Separate Domain

Ted Landphair

Washington

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Of all the enterprises that have set up shop on the globe-spanning computer Internet, the biggest moneymaker by far is pornography. Sex-oriented sites conservatively earn \$2 billion a year. The flood of e-mail pitches to buy access to this graphic porn helped spur recent government measures aimed at

blocking unwanted e-mail, or spam. There's another, radical idea gaining ground. It would restrict Internet smut in a surprising way.

Even those who loathe pornography, which by some estimates accounts for half the Internet's traffic, realize it is here to stay on the web. So more and more people are proposing it be given its own, separate Internet home - or domain, as it's called - where those who want porn could easily find it. So could parents, libraries, and schools seeking to shield children from this explicit material.

Since adult sites would be legitimate and easy to locate, supporters of the idea say pornographers would have less need to lure customers with the kind of annoying porno spam that e-mail users like Becky Quinlan detest.

"They'll put in the subject line, 'regarding, re: colon your call,' so that you think that maybe it's a response to a message you've sent," she said. "And then you open it up, and you see pornography or what-not."

Internet entrepreneur Stuart Lawley, a British citizen living in Florida, is promoting the idea of a new adults-only Internet domain. Instead of dot com or dot org, porn-related Internet websites and e-mail would carry addresses that end in .xxx, as in X-rated.

"That will both protect families and children, while at the same time allow the online, adult-entertainment website operators to responsibly self-organize and self-regulate," he said.

Supporters liken the concept to a cyberspace red-light district, like the enclaves of prostitution that some cities worldwide have tolerated, and in some cases, supported.

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Someone who might seem an unlikely advocate of a porn corner on the web is David Evangelista. He's executive director of the United States Internet Crime Task Force, a group of law-enforcement officers that has been at war with kiddie-porn web hosters who use deception - like naming their sites after cartoon characters - to lure unsuspecting children. Yet the task force is working with state legislatures to lobby Congress on behalf of the new .xxx pornography domain. That's because they add a catch: pornographers would be required to move to the xxx domain.

"If you make it voluntary, those that are in the business of tricking children would not opt in," said David Evangelista. "They will simply just leave their business the way it is, and we'd have accomplished nothing. By making it a mandatory registration, it will allow for better blocking for children. Those who did not comply would just not be routed. Their website should not be viewable in the United States."

Some pornography web hosters like the idea of an x-rated Internet zone as a business proposition. They have been battling credit card companies, which sometimes refuse payments to porn providers or charge them higher rates. This might change, website entrepreneurs believe, if porn had a legitimate home on the Net.

But Jonathan Katz, a lawyer who represents adult website owners, says they don't want to be forced into a porn ghetto. Segregating sex sites, he says, restricts freedom of speech and would expose porn providers to prosecution.

"This all would just be a much easier opportunity for the federal government to go after websites and charge them with obscenity," he said.

Parry Aftab is the executive director of Wired Safety, a website that exposes online con artists, stalkers, hackers, and identity thieves. At first she was skeptical about a separate porn Internet domain. Then, she says, she warmed to the idea and issued Stuart Lawley a challenge.

"Most importantly, setting rules that those who want a dot triple x site will have to follow if they want it: no spam, no pretending to be Disney, none of those windows that pop up all over the place, no child porn, virtual child porn, or pretending to be child porn. He said, 'OK'," she explained.

As Ms. Aftab sees it, if a pornographer violates these rules, those who regulate the xxx domain could shut down its site. But Donna Rice Hughes, the president of an anti-porn organization called Enough is Enough, smells a rat.

"Without a congressional mandate, I don't know that the pornographers would willingly go there," said Donna Rice Hughes. "They could not co-locate. In other words, they would have to give up their dot com addresses for this to effectively segregate adult material."

Ms. Hughes worries that sanctioning a dedicated porn domain on the Web might give tacit approval to hardcore obscenity and child pornography, both of which are illegal and subject to prosecution in the United States.

Three years ago, the private, international corporation called ICANN - which certifies dot com, dot org, dot net, and other website addresses - rejected the .xxx idea. It would have to reverse itself for a separate, x-rated Internet zone to become a reality.



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