

## **The Nigerian Web Content: Combating Pornography using Content Filters**

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### **Abstract**

*There is increased growing concern about the social and psychological impact that obscene and spurious web content will have on our society now and in the future. The invasion of pornographic sites on the Internet is an issue of serious consequences. It has been estimated that over 10 million people a week visit pornographic websites in Nigeria alone. The psychological effects of this and its attendant repercussions cannot be overemphasized. An increase in sex crimes resulting from these activities is already noticeable in some advanced countries of the world; this trend is expected to manifest itself in the third world. If something is not done the “global village” may as well metamorphose to a “global brothel”. So far in Nigeria, the only measures taken against obscene content is the placement of notices in cyber cafes prohibiting the browsing of sex sites. More has to be done technically. This paper reviews the impact of Internet pornography on web-users in Nigeria and advocates the use of web filtering programs as a robust measure against unwanted Internet content.*

**Keywords:** Cyber-café, filters, Internet content, SPAM, indecent content.

### **Introduction**

The increasing impact and application of information technology, expressed in the proliferation of computer networks worldwide, comes with both positive and dire consequences. Apart from the popular data security and system protection issues, computer professionals and other social workers daily express concern over the impact of some of the information available on the Internet.

### **Development of ICT in Nigeria**

The first Information and Communication Technology (ICT) initiative in Nigeria started in the 1950s with focus on print and electronic media. No major policy or other outcome was achieved because of strict government control. The full awareness of the importance of ICTs was absent. Only the private sector demonstrated ICT initiatives. The Obasanjo administration in 2001 established the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA) to serve as a bureau for the implementation of National Policy on Information Technology. NITDA is trying to

increase the Internet penetration levels in Nigeria but the agency's focus is not particularly on Internet Ethics and content delivery. Availability of on-line facilities to the populace on a private level is still very low. Therefore, one has to go to a cyber café even for rudimentary net access such as e-mail, net conferencing, browsing, etc.

### **The Emerging Trend of Internet Usage in Nigeria**

Research shows that in Nigeria, over 40% of Internet usage is related to browsing of sex sites. The remaining 60% is distributed among searches for information on academics, entertainment, migration, sports and etc. (Longe, 2004). The situation is alarming.

For millions of users, SPAM has truly become a known word and aside from the annoyance factor, it can impair smooth business communications. To combat the problem some organizations are deploying anti-Spam software of the freeware/shareware variety. Unfortunately these products tend to fall short. Today's enterprise can't afford the administrative overhead, inaccuracy and lack of support inherent with these products; they tend to trigger false hopes, often stopping business critical e-mail from reaching its destination. The concern in this paper is the socio-cultural downturn, which has to do with the future of an upcoming generation that sits in front of the computers at home, in offices and cyber cafés around us browsing sex and other sites with obscene content.

### **Pornography Defined**

In order to properly discuss pornography and be able to link it to moral decadence in the society, a basic understanding of the word pornography is required. The term pornography originates from two Greek words, *porne*, which means harlot, and *graphein*, which means to write. The combination of the two words was originally meant to describe, in literature, the sexual escapades of women deemed to be whores. As times had passed, this definition of pornography has grown to include all obscene literature and pictures. At the present date, the term is basically a blanket, which covers all types of material such as explicit literature (electronic or print), photography, films, and videotapes with varying degrees of sexual content. Itzin (2003) classified pornography into three sets: The sexually explicit and violent; the sexually explicit and nonviolent, but subordinating and dehumanizing; and the sexually explicit, nonviolent, and non-subordinating that is based upon mutuality.

Research consistently shows that harmful effects are associated with the first two, but that the third is usually harmless. These three categories basically exist as tools of discerning content. Although sometimes they overlap without a true distinction as in when the content is graphic in the sexual act and also in violence, but shows the act as being a mutual activity between the people participating (Nigerian Tribune, 2003).

## The Anonymity Factor

When the Internet began with the ARPANET, the intention was to make information exchange faster, portable and accessible (Sackson, 1996). The Internet in serving this purpose today comprised of over 6 million networked computers all over the world. As with every good innovation with an all comers entrant, certain unpalatable advantages are being taken of the Internet by those who see it as a means not only to gratify fleshy ends, but also a means to legalize that which is morally unacceptable. The invasion of pornographic and other sex sites on the Internet is an issue of serious concern for the world at large (Longe, 2003)

Saldarini & DeRobertis (2003) opined that the impact of a technologically induced feeling of anonymity has generated a “new self” one that will continue to expand in the 21st century. An online-self that exists in the arena of the cyberspace has been unleashed with a potential to behave in a way that is ethically suspect. They noted sex offenders find the anonymity of online interactions to be the Internet’s most attractive feature. Many find it startling to realize that 24 hours per day, seven days a week, virtual rapes occur in rape chats. In a variety of fashions men and women participate in this activity, either directly by contributing to the role-play or as “lurker” (i.e., a passive on-looker). Even psychologists who are optimistic about the potential of on-line anonymity to enhance self-exploration acknowledge such inherent dangers.

Pornography has served as a means of unlocking evils buried inside for long. It acts as the key to unlocking the evil in unstable minds. According to Edward Donnerstein, a leading researcher in the pornography field, the relationship between sexually violent images in the electronic and print media and the Internet in particular and subsequent aggression and callous attitudes towards women is much stronger statistically than the relationship between smoking and cancer (Itzin, 2004). Substantiated evidence when evaluated and quantified show that habitual use of pornographic material promotes unrealistic and unattainable desires in men that lead to violent behavior toward women and vice versa (Awake, July, 2003).

## Effects of Pornography

Itzin (2003) summarized the evil effects of pornography as follows:

- Women and young girls cannot have a healthy self-image of themselves when their husbands and fathers look at pornography. It is an evil addiction.
- It is dehumanizing
- It leads to increased incidence of rape
- It can lead to increased incidence of HIV and AIDS
- It usually comes with drug addiction
- It has led to an increase in home breakages
- It can create a chain reaction leading to violence and other moral & societal decay.
- Children are being sexually molested by those looking for sexual gratification
- Legal Threats: Employees can sue if organizations don't provide a work environment free of gender & minority harassment. That means taking reasonable care to block offensive content.
- Network Threats: An employee can crash the computer network just by logging into the wrong website.

- Security Threats: Many viruses enter networks through web-based porno-content.
- Kidnapping is on the increase by those wanting to have it by all means with their acclaimed sex models.

### **Immoral Gratification at the Click of a Mouse**

The Internet has popularized the sex business more than any other means of advertisement. With unlimited access to a variety of websites all over the world, and the impediment of needing to enter a brothel physically removed (anonymity), immoral gratification is just the click of a mouse away from any intending “customer”. That which pornographic films, books and magazines have not been able to do in 5 decades, the Internet has achieved in less than a decade. The legal system especially in some industrialized countries like the US and Canada contain laws that support pornography with clauses that it is meant for adults. These ideas will only get worse as society grows; only through actions, discussions and technical deterrents can the perpetuation of the negative impacts of pornography be swept from the closets and dark corners of the society (Dewey, 2003). What means do we have for preventing those who are not adults; the youths and children from participating in such cankerworm since they are the most sexually active of every population strata and the ones addicted to web surfing? The need therefore arises to look for schemes that will assist in reducing if not eliminate the effects so far identified and associated with increased pornographic content on the Web.

### **Content Filtering: An Emerging Solution**

Various measures are being adopted here in Nigeria to ward off unwanted web content. These include the placement of notices in cyber-cafes prohibiting the browsing of sex sites and outright denial of service when customers or users are caught. The measure of prevention attainable by these means is very low. More will have to be done technically to guide against the circumvention of the restrictive measures earlier mentioned by smart users.

The Internet Content Rating Association is an international, independent organization that empowers the public, especially parents, to make informed decisions about electronic media by means of the open and objective labeling of content (Coffman, 2003).

ICRA's dual aims are to protect children and youths from potentially harmful material, and to protect free speech on the Internet. There are two elements to the ICRA system: content labeling and filtering software.

### **Content Labeling**

Web authors fill in an online questionnaire describing the content of their site, simply in terms of what is and isn't present. ICRA then generates a Content Label (a short piece of computer code), which the author adds to his/her site. Users, especially parents of young children, cyber cafés etc can then set their internet browser to allow or disallow access to web sites based on the objective information declared in the label and the subjective preferences of the user. ICRA's labeling system is designed to be as objective as possible, and to cover a wide range of content types.

The system gives users a great deal of flexibility in their choices of what should and shouldn't be seen in their home or workplace. The browser's filtering system can of course be disabled and enabled easily (Baig, 2002). The broad topics covered are chats, the language used on the site, the nudity, sexual content of a site and the violence depicted on the site and others such as gambling, drugs and alcohol. Within each broad category the web author is asked questions about whether a specific item or feature is present or absent on the site.

### **Web Filtering Software**

Web filtering programs seem to be the only known solution for now to the dangers of obscene web content applicable to private companies, ISPs, Cyber cafés, public libraries and in all computers used to access the Internet with a growing need to ensure that their computers are not being abused to access illegal or inappropriate materials. The use of valuable computer resources cannot be controlled unless a powerful set of monitoring and blocking tools are employed. Internet filter blocks SPAM email and pornographic images transmitted to a web browser or via email by residing between a company's or ISP's (Internet service provider) connection to the Internet via both incoming and outgoing network connections. It examines the contents and images of a web site and can determine whether the site displays what is commonly accepted as pornographic content.

### **Advantages of Using Web Filters**

- It helps prevent unwanted web content.
- They are able to identify words similar to those used in other healthy but related sites and thus does not block educational, medical, and/or sites that are political in nature--not intended to "arouse prurient interest"
- They are cost effective.
- They can be updated to combat new tactics developed by sex site developers.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has been able to review the problems of Internet abuse in the light of increasing pornographic content on the web with special reference to the Nigerian experience. The unorthodox methods being used for prevention have been found ineffective hence the call to embrace technical measures to prevent the societal decay consequent to this malaise. Cafes and organizations should take advantage of some off-the-shelf web filtering products such as SurfControl, WinGuardian Snapshot, ChiBrow and Policy Central or Cyber Sentinel Network to filter unwanted web contents. The measures outlined are applicable to any instance of the subject matter anywhere in the world.

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