

Yahoo's capitulation to right-wing pressure groups sets dangerous precedent

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Following a barrage of e-mail protests from the Christian fundamentalist American Families Association (AFA), the Internet Service Provider (ISP) and portal Yahoo has pledged to remove all pornography from its shopping and auction channels and reject requests for related advertising. Yahoo has further agreed to censor home pages created by members of its Geocities service. Yahoo said it would restrict “inappropriate material” and make it more difficult to use the popular search engine to find listings of pornographic Web sites.

Yahoo had previously taken a “hard and fast” approach to “being the largest enabler of commerce on the web”, according to a statement by company president Jeff Mallett. Suffering under a slump in online advertising, Yahoo began to offer a broad selection of adult material, including videos and DVDs, through its shopping service.

The present policy change came after an article appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* on Wednesday April 11, which drew attention to the “Adult and Erotica” section of Yahoo's video shopping area. The section had been introduced last December and contained a directory of adult videos and links to stores that sell them.

The *LA Times* article prompted others to condemn Yahoo's promotion of pornographic material. Mallett said the company had received 100,000 e-mail messages complaining about pornographic content since the April 11 article appeared.

It would not have been difficult for America's Christian right to organise such a write-in. The rightwing AFA asked Attorney General John Ashcroft to prosecute Yahoo for participating in the sale of “obscene material and child pornography.” Though no such material is available in auctions hosted on Yahoo,

the AFA claims “Yahoo offers a substantial amount of child pornography, available on its own servers, through its web hosting service Yahoo! Geo Cities.”

Last year, Yahoo decided to remove the sale of Nazi memorabilia from its public auctions after a French judge ordered it to do so, following a case brought by anti-fascist organisations in France, where the sale of such material is banned.

In focusing on the issue of pornography, and specifically child pornography, the Christian right know that such material will be considered no less distasteful than fascist memorabilia. As such it is likely to evoke an emotional rather than a rational response when used as a vehicle for advocating censorship. In the French case, a campaign by so-called left wing anti-fascist forces enabled the judiciary to establish a precedent imposing the force of national laws over the international medium of the Internet. (The French court ruling was never tested on US soil, and most legal opinion believes it would not stand up to scrutiny under America's free speech laws.)

There is every reason to believe that Ashcroft would have acquiesced to the appeal of the AFA given his own fundamentalist politics. A Bush appointee, Ashcroft is the man who told the religious magazine *Charisma*, “It's said that we shouldn't legislate morality. Well. I think all we should legislate is morality. We shouldn't legislate immorality.” (See WSWs article: The Ashcroft nomination: a new stage in the attack on democratic rights in the United States <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2001/jan2001/ash-j19.shtml>) In the event, however, it was unnecessary for Ashcroft to do so. As with the French case, Yahoo threw in the towel before its opponents had even put on their gloves.

Once again Yahoo has accepted responsibility as an Internet provider for content hosted on its web site. It

has taken a further step in its transformation from the “gateway of the Internet”, as it once called itself, to the “gate keeper” or, more specifically, “Internet censor”.

The issue here is neither moral outrage against pornography, nor support for it, but to understand the very real threat to democratic rights posed by this decision. If Yahoo, by far the biggest and hitherto most open of the Internet gateways, can be forced into removing material from its web site in this way, the question must arise: what other content will the right wing fundamentalists consider “inappropriate” and call for to be banned? What would Yahoo's attitude be, for example, to a right wing lobby demanding that Yahoo stop posting links to left wing or progressive web sites in its “Full Coverage” news area?

Beyond the issue of censorship, the commercialisation of the Internet itself poses a very real threat to democratic rights.

As one of the first Internet gateways, Yahoo adopted a business model based upon an open policy, allowing users of the site to submit suggestions for links and new categories. Having established its dominant position however, Yahoo has been revealed to be no different than any other capitalist enterprise. It always was “all about dollars.”

Increasingly, the content one finds upon Yahoo and other Internet portals is determined by the financial arrangements made between the portal and the providers of the material. Banner ads, including ones for adult-oriented material, have appeared on Yahoo for a long time. The company has also sought to raise additional revenue by charging online commerce sites a fee to be listed in Yahoo's directories. With an estimated 185 million people accessing the site a month, Yahoo was able to charge a one-off fee for its “Business Express” service of \$199 for listing mainstream sites and \$600 for adult-oriented ones.

If the accounts cited in the *LA Times* article are to be believed, Yahoo “quietly expanded” its “adult and erotica” store, connected to the main Yahoo shopping channel, “as part of a company wide effort to offset a sharp drop in advertising sales.”

The paper states, “The softening Internet economy has forced Yahoo into an awkward balancing act between making money and endorsing the controversial porn market.” The article quotes John H Corcoran, executive director of Internet and new-media group at

CIBC World Markets, saying, “This is the opposite of what Yahoo is about, or chat and community and all the news you can get. This is all about dollars.”

Likewise, Yahoo's decision to remove the material that the Christian right found so offensive was bound up with commercial considerations. As the *LA Times* correctly points out, “Yahoo's rush for revenue is a risky gamble and could easily backfire by alienating advertisers, its main source of revenue.” The paper cites Van Baker, vice president of the e-business group at Dataquest saying, “This won't hurt them with advertisers in the young male demographic. But to everybody else—and certainly anyone who's advertising to the Christian or kids market—this is going to be shocking.”

In its origins, the Internet is an open and essentially free medium. For little or no cost, anyone can publish a website, which can then be submitted to thousands of search engines and be listed within directory services such as those provided by Yahoo. Entering the relevant keywords in a search engine or directory service should bring up a link to the site. But whether this is placed at the top of a list possibly numbering thousands, or at the bottom, is increasingly determined by what the site's owner is prepared to pay to an Internet portal such as Yahoo.

There is a basic contradiction between the Internet as an international medium for the free exchange of ideas and its ever-increasing commercialisation. Exercising an unparalleled monopoly over both access and content, the Internet Service Providers are potentially a powerful vehicle for censorship and control. In capitulating to the demands of the right wing in this manner, Yahoo has hindered the opposition to the transformation of ISPs into an arm of the state.



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