

The Hon Brendan O'Connor MP

Minister for Home Affairs

Growing up fast and furious: Reviewing the impacts of violent and sexualised media on children conference

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First, may I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet - and pay my respects to their elders, both past and present.

May I also acknowledge the CEO of the Australian Council on Children and the Media, Ms Barbara Biggins, and their Vice-President, Professor Elizabeth Handsley and thank them for their invitation to open today's conference.

The Director of the Classification Board, Mr Donald McDonald

Distinguished guests

Ladies and gentlemen.

The protection of children is one of a government's most important responsibilities. Children are, after all, the most vulnerable and impressionable people in our community. This obligation is not limited to protecting children from physical harm. It extends to protecting children from material that could harm their development as stable and productive members of our community.

A review on the Sexualisation of Young People published by the UK Home Office in February this year found, in relation to violent and sexually explicit content, that although it is overly simplistic to make a direct link between cause and effect...it is widely accepted that exposure to content that children are either emotionally or cognitively not mature enough for can have a potentially negative impact.

Article 17 of the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child requires us to encourage the development of appropriate guidelines to protect children from material injurious to their well-being.

We need to place restrictions on children's access to violent or sexually explicit content. However, there are limits to what a government should do, indeed can do.

We respect the rights of adults to make their own choices. We accept that within our community there will be a range of views about what is acceptable. This diversity enriches our community, this country.

And standards change over time. In light of the material we are confronted with today, it seems odd, but at different points in the Twentieth Century James Joyce's Ulysses and The Catcher in the Rye were banned in Australia.

My uncle, who arrived in Australia in the early 70s, had his tattered copy of Joseph Heller's seminal novel, Catch 22, confiscated at the border. The fact it was an anti-war and anti-violence book was lost on Government and officials of the day.

Government has a responsibility to balance the need to protect children with the recognition that people should be generally free to make their own decisions about what they will read, hear and see. This is a difficult balance to strike.

#### Material damaging to children

You will be hearing today from a number of eminent researchers on the impact different types of content can have on young children. Research into the effects of this material is valuable to the formation of good policy on how it should be regulated. However, this is a very complex and vexed area and the research is contested.

While some reports have found that there is a clear causal link between exposure to violent or sexualised material and anti-social behaviour, other studies have found that there is no such connection. Others have found that exposure to this material is one of many elements that can work together to encourage anti-social behaviour.

Ultimately, the community, and its elected representatives, need to make a judgment call about what is acceptable and what limits will be placed on access to material by children and, in some cases, by adults.

It is becoming increasingly difficult to prevent children from accessing inappropriate material as content shifts to online. Where there is a will to track down forbidden content, children and adolescents will often find a way. For some time it has been possible that a young person away from their parents at a sleepover might watch an MA 15+ horror film. Now it is possible that a young person can google their way into content you, or they, may not really want to find.

That is the reason why my colleague Senator Conroy, the Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy, is spearheading a number of initiatives to make the online world safer for children. This includes the Government's proposal to introduce mandatory filtering at the ISP level for overseas-hosted content that would be Refused Classification.

Technological advances have also led to a greater exchange of information across national borders. People are increasingly aware of content available in other places around the world, with an expectation that this material will also be available in our own community.

Initiatives to address changes in community and technology:

In most foreign jurisdictions, for example, adult ratings are available for computer games with content and themes targeted at adults.

As I'm sure most of you are aware, current classification arrangements in Australia do not provide for a classification higher than MA 15+ for computer games. In 1994 Censorship Ministers adopted a policy to classify computer games more strictly than films because of concerns about the interactive nature of computer games and the possibility that this interactivity would have a larger impact on minors.

To date this has resulted in a small number of games - 6 in 2009 - being refused classification. However, the market for computer games is growing and there will be more games targeted at an adult audience in the future.

The Commonwealth undertook public consultation on whether there should be an R18+ classification for games, as there is for films. We did so because this issue is of considerable importance to many people in the community. This was amply demonstrated by the volume of responses we received on this issue. My Department received about 60,000 submissions. This is a staggering response.

This government is committed to evidence-based policy and we will be taking into account the arguments made on both sides of the debate, as well as the volume of submissions received. The Commonwealth will be presenting a report to the next meeting of Attorneys-General on the outcomes of the consultation to enable further consideration of the issue.

While the Commonwealth Government does not presently have a view about whether an R 18+ classification is necessary, I believe that it is incumbent upon those who want change to present convincing arguments for that change.

The debate about an R18+ classification for games is also important in the context of a downloadable world. Films, games and publications can all be accessed online, or even on your mobile phone.

#### Convergence and changing technologies

But the Classification Scheme still reflects the three distinct types of content available at the time it was created, namely: publications, computer games and films. Technological developments since that time have blurred these distinctions and created new delivery platforms.

In 1995, during debate on the Commonwealth Bill establishing the classification scheme, parliamentarians expressed concern about 'bulletin boards' on the 'Information Super Highway'. These terms seem laughably quaint today and they remind us how far technology has come since the creation of the Scheme.

The convergence of technologies has meant that a single device can now be used to play multiple types of content. A Playstation console, for example, can now play computer games, DVDs and digital television while also connecting users to the internet.

Similarly, a single item can be shown over multiple delivery platforms. For example, the film *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* was simultaneously released on DVD, subscription television and online. DVDs of the film *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* included a code to download a digital copy of the film so that users could play the film on computers and personal music players.

Consumers, particularly tech-savvy children and teens, now have access to content of an unprecedented variety and scale from across the world. Classification and the regulation of online content will need to meet these new challenges.

Distribution of content over multiple media platforms is one of the new challenges for the classification scheme. When a child attends a cinema or goes to a video store, there is a person standing at the counter assessing the age of the person seeking to view that film. However, there is no person checking if it is a child who is accessing a film online or on a mobile phone or iPod.

If a film released on DVD is given a restrictive classification, how do we ensure that restrictive classification applies to copies of that film distributed online or over mobile phones? There needs to be some parity between these different platforms so that content is treated consistently, regardless of how it is delivered.

In addition to a greater volume of content available across new platforms, material now has the potential for greater interactivity. Unlike the video tapes available at the scheme's inception, consumers can now purchase DVDs that allow them to choose the angles of a film, or alternate endings.

3D technology is becoming available in home cinemas. Computer game manufacturers encourage users to put down their control pads and participate physically in a game through motion sensing technology. These interactive features are set to increase the impact of the material being enjoyed by consumers. We need to consider how increased interactivity will impact on children and what this means for content regulation.

These technologies will, of course, continue to evolve. We cannot predict with certainty how this evolution will develop, but we can be quite sure that, with these changes, new regulatory challenges will arise. We need to prepare for these changes and consider what influence they will have on the public, including their implications for the safety of children.

The importance of educating the public about appropriate content is set to increase. The best approach available to government to protect its vulnerable citizens may be to equip them with knowledge about how best to protect themselves.

The Government is undertaking a range of initiatives to encourage children's safe internet usage. ACMA's Cybersmart website contains a range of resources for children, parents and teachers. In addition, the Budd:e E-security Education Package is designed to raise the e-security awareness of Australian primary and secondary school students and help them stay smart online.

ACMA also runs a number of professional development and internet safety awareness programs for parents and children. And the ThinkUKnow program developed by the Australian Federal Police and Microsoft delivers interactive internet safety training to parents and teachers.

While there is always room for improvement, the National Classification Scheme, in my view, has served our community well over the last 14 years. We can be confident that consumers are generally aware of classifications and use classification markings and consumer advice to inform their entertainment decisions. We can be confident that the scheme has balanced the competing needs of protecting children while leaving informed adults largely free to make their own decisions.

However, changes in technology have created new challenges for content regulation in this country. Our classification system may need to adapt to ensure it continues to have integrity and meaning for future generations. The increasing impact of convergent technologies means that, again and again, we will be faced with new and unforeseen

developments. One of the most wonderful things about technology is also one of the most frustrating: it is constantly on the move.

It is important that our classification system supports our community values and its diversity. It is equally important that our classification system retains community confidence. It must keep pace with technological change. It must be able to be trusted to provide the best information to inform the choices we make for ourselves and our children.

I thank you again for inviting me to open today's conference and I hope that you will all find it productive and informative.

ENDS