A Modest Proposal for The Immodest Internet
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Last week, the Supreme Court decided to review the Communications Decency Act, congress's attempt to keep "indecent" material on the Internet away from minors. Such material includes pornography, and much more. In addition to determining the implications for freedom of speech, the Court must decide whether the likely benefits of the law constitute a compelling state interest. The Court's task is difficult because this vague law is, at best, a partial solution to the problem, which is about as effective as plugging some of the holes in a sinking ship. To truly solve the problem, congress must attack its core: the child literacy rate is simply too high.

There is probably no clearer evidence of the danger of pornography on the Internet to our young than the fact that Internet usage and the teenage pregnancy rate have both skyrocketed over the last 25 years. Where else could teenagers have come up with the idea if not from pornography? Since it is already illegal to sell pornographic magazines and videos to minors, the Internet must be the only place minors can access pornography. Something must be done.

The obvious fixes are all flawed. For example, with television, we simply made the broadcast of pornography illegal, but the Internet is not a simple broadcast medium like television. It is more like an open flea market for information. Millions of users all over the world are all free to put information out for display. Even if the U.S. makes putting pornography on the Internet a capital crime, those laws will never apply to Europeans or Asians, so no law can reduce availability of foreign pornography. We also can't reasonably make it illegal for the networks to carry pornography, any more than we would make it illegal for Federal Express to do so, as Federal Express would then have to open every package and even process any undeveloped film to see if it's pornographic. We can't even create network tools specifically for children that make it impossible for them to view pornography. Although software of this type is now available, and it does make it much harder to access pornography, it simply isn't possible to develop software that can withstand a full assault from a bright and determined adolescent.

The only option is to keep children off the Internet entirely, no matter how valuable the Internet may be as an educational tool, or the role it may play in the jobs of tomorrow. Even this isn't easy. Minors are prevented from going to X-rated movies because the ticket-taker is there to check their identification. Who can play that role when a young girl uses her mother's computer, and when asked for her age, types "21"? Only an observant parent can, and clearly this matter is too important to involve parents.

There is only one way to insure that minors are not able to access pornography on the Internet without the need for adult supervision. We must prevent children from learning to read until they are 21 years old. Illiteracy will make it nearly impossible for them to use the Internet. Not only is this approach more effective than the ill-conceived Communications Decency Act, but it is also probably easier to implement, since so many of our nation's schools have already begun the process.

Naturally, we all yearn for the days before troublesome technologies like the Internet and the printing press when we could be certain that our children were both educated and free from the influences of indecent material and ideas, but those days are gone. Today, we must choose either widespread access to an invaluable tool for education, communications, and economic development, or illiteracy and ignorance. The better choice is clear.