

Taking On The Internet Porn Industry

Fighting On The Side of Families With Children

A *Third Way Message Memo* by Jim Kessler, Vice President for Policy

The Issue: Progressives are often seen as out of touch on cultural issues.

The Message: *George Bush and the conservatives in Congress have had their chance, and they have failed to help parents protect their kids from the dark corners of the online world. I will help keep our kids safe, and I will take the costs of policing the Internet off the back of average taxpayer and put it where it belongs – on the pornographers.*

The Policy: A bill to require real child access prevention for pornographic websites and to impose a 25% "Smut Tax" on Internet pornography.

Introduction: Why Internet Pornography Matters

Internet pornography could be one of the defining culture/values issues of this decade. In the Internet Age, children are routinely exposed to hardcore images that would shock even the most hardened adults. And children now come into contact with Internet pornography so early in life that for many kids it is their first sexual education. This exposure leads to all of the wrong lessons about sexual behavior; it can lead to more teen promiscuity, pregnancies, and abortions, as well as life-long problems for many kids.

We strongly suggest making the fight against child access to online pornography a central pillar of a pro-family, pro-parent agenda. Unlike the culture/values issues that define the political debate – many of which involve passing judgment on the behavior of *other* people – this issue truly has an impact on any family that has children. Indeed, families confront this problem every day – it has become a struggle for parents to stay ahead of the wave of filth that their children are exposed to online, on their video iPods, and even on their cell phones.

In addition, the conservatives who run Washington are vulnerable on this:

- The explosion of Internet pornography occurred during the years of the Bush Administration and conservative dominance of Congress, and they have done absolutely nothing about it.

- A porn producer is a major donor to President Bush and attended an RNC fundraiser (accompanied by one of his porn stars).

This memo provides a brief overview of the Internet pornography issue and a recommendation for policy and communications ideas to make this the centerpiece of a pro-family agenda. For more information, please visit our website (www.third-way.com) and see our report entitled *The Porn Standard: Children and Pornography on the Internet* (found in *The Culture Project* section).

Background: Internet Pornography and Children

It used to be that pornography was relegated to a handful of “adult” bookstores on the outskirts of town, behind a door of a video store, or hidden behind a counter at the local newsstand. It was kept out of sight and mostly out of mind – especially for children and teens who had no way of getting past shopkeepers and store clerks. That is now a quaint relic of the past.

Internet pornography is now an immense and lucrative online industry, generating earnings of more than \$12 billion — roughly equal to the combined annual revenue ABC, NBC, and CBS. One out of every 8 Internet websites is pornographic, and there are over 400 million pornographic web pages on the net. Over the last eight years, the number of Internet porn sites has increased 30-fold.

However, most appalling is the reach that Internet pornography has into our homes and into the lives of our children. Home computers, as well as many portable devices, are now portals into this dark world. Moreover, this immensely profitable industry makes money based on the number of people who come to their websites, regardless of whether they buy anything and whether they are adults or children. (They make money from advertisers based on “page views.”)

- The most frequent viewers of Internet porn are kids 12-17 years old.
- The average age at which children are first exposed to online pornography today is 11 years old.
- Certain Internet pornography producers imbed children’s words like Teletubbies and Pokemon as “meta-tags” to drive kids to their sites.
- Approximately 20 new children appear on pornography sites every month, many of them kidnapped and sold into sex.

The ease with which pornography is available online makes a mockery of the restrictions that society has traditionally placed on the access of minors to sexually-explicit materials. While a teenager cannot walk into a 7-Eleven and buy a pornographic magazine, the thin veil separating a child from online pornography is the question “are you over 18 years of age” in the anonymity of cyberspace. In addition, while blocking devices can help keep very young children away from porn, many of those used by parents are easily disabled by tech-savvy kids.

Policy: Protecting Children from the Internet Porn Industry

A group of moderate Democrats have worked with Third Way to draft and introduce pro-family legislation that will rein in the Internet porn industry. Led by Senator Blanche Lincoln of Arkansas and Representative Jim Matheson of Utah, the Internet Safety and Child Protection Act will:

Replace the “porn standard” with a real age verification standard

The flimsy honor system used by the porn industry (known as the “porn standard”) will be replaced with a new FTC-approved system that uses existing technology to require porn sites to accurately verify the age of those accessing their materials. The new system is based on available technology used by online merchants, banks, and credit card companies in which sales of certain materials are not processed without age verification.

Protect kids from on-line predators through the Internet Safety and Child Protection Trust Fund (ISCP Trust Fund)

This new fund will centralize federal resources in support of efforts on the part of law enforcement and others to combat Internet- and pornography-related crimes against children, as well as federal resources that assist parents in their efforts to monitor the content to which their kids are exposed online. Trust Fund revenues will be allocated to a range of federal, state, private, and non-profit Internet safety and child protection initiatives, in accordance with priorities established in the bill.

Make the porn industry pay for enforcement through a 25% Internet Pornography Excise Tax:

The Trust Fund will be financed by a 25 percent excise tax levied on videos, magazines, DVDs, memberships, and other pornographic products sold via the Internet, providing roughly \$3 billion in revenue to the fund each year.

This legislation has already won the endorsements of the National Children’s Alliance, Presbyterian Church, Isafe.org (the leading Internet safety organization), United Methodist Church, and other pro-family organizations.

Strategy: Making this Part of a Pro-Family Agenda

1. Press Events

Do a press conference at a school or library in the computer room. Invite the PTA, teachers union, school board, local law enforcement, clergy, Boys & Girls Club, or other groups to participate with you. Talk about the findings in the Third Way report and your support for the Internet Safety and Child Protection Act.

2. Religious Outreach

Even if you are not a regular on Christian radio, do call-ins to Christian radio shows to talk about the problem and the solution that you are offering. If you ordinarily attend or speak at church or other religious worship ceremonies, mention the online pornography issue and your approach to the problem.

3. Organize Online

Talk about this on your website, and use web-based outreach to pro-family groups to inform them of your campaign on this issue.

4. Put it in Your Literature

Consider mentioning the problem and your solution to it in your direct mail, walk pieces or other literature.

5. Mention in Speeches

Families, particularly in suburban and rural areas, will be eager to hear your pro-family stance against online porn.