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Statement of Rep. Henry A. Waxman
Hearing on Stumbling into Smut: The Alarming Ease of Access to
Pornography on Peer-to-Peer Network
March 13, 2003

Today, I join with Chairman Tom Davis to draw attention to an Internet technology that gives kids easy access to incredibly graphic pornography.

I am on the dias today because I'm a congressman. But I do not want to speak as a public official. I want to speak as a parent and a grandparent. I want to speak about how difficult it is to raise a child today ... and to raise some new issues that families must begin to consider.

Today, Chairman Davis and I are releasing two reports on Internet file-sharing programs. One report is by the General Accounting Office, and one was prepared by our investigative staff.

What is in these reports should concern every parent in America. There's a new technology that's widely available that allows teenagers to download x-rated videos directly into their home computers.

The most popular of these programs is Kazaa, which has been downloaded nearly 200 million times. Other popular programs include Morpheus, BearShare, and Grokster. At any given time, there are millions of teenagers between the ages of 12 and 18 using these programs.

Most adults I talk with don't know about these programs. But if they do, all they know is that the entertainment industry doesn't like them because they threaten their copyrights.

This hearing is not about that issue. It's not about recording company profits or freedom of the Internet. It's about something more basic: how to raise children safely in today's digital age.

We asked a company, Media Defender, to assess how much pornography is available to teenagers when they log onto the Internet with Kazaa or other file-sharing programs. What we learned was astounding: at any given time, there are six million pornographic files available to kids to download. All of these files can be downloaded completely free of charge directly to any computer that's connected to the Internet.

And if your child has access to a broadband connection, the most hard-core, triple-x videos imaginable can be downloaded in just a matter of minutes.

Imagine if there was a library that held six million pornographic videos and magazines. No parent would allow their child to wander at will through its collections.

But this is exactly what can happen every day in millions of homes across America. Whenever a tech-savvy teenagers log on to programs like Kazaa, he or she has access to millions of hard-core pornographic files.

But it's even worse than this. As GAO's investigation found, kids will be bombarded with pornography even if they aren't looking for it. GAO did searches for popular entertainment figures like Britney Spears and the Olson Twins and for cartoon characters like Pokemon. And what they found was that more than half of the files they retreived were pornographic. In fact, they even retrieved files that contained illegal child pornography.

Parents may think that by installing parental control software programs like Net Nanny or Cyber Patrol, they can protect their children from this pornography. But our investigation also found that while these programs might work to keep kids from pornography on the World Wide Web, they do not work in the same way for file-sharing programs. There are some programs that can be configured – after some effort – to block access to all file-sharing programs. But there's really nothing that works effectively in filtering out pornographic files once a child has access to these programs.

As legislators, we can try to pass laws. But I'm not sure there's a legislative solution available for this problem. In this case, parental awareness and parental involvement matter more than legislation. Parents need to better understand these file-sharing programs and know if their kids are using them. Parents need to talk to their children about what to do when they come across this pornography.

In short, we have to close the online generation gap.

To help parents meet this challenge, Chairman Davis and I have put together some straightforward recommendations that we will be distributing today. These recommendations will also be available on our websites.

I want to make clear that technical innovation on the Internet is tremendously important. When we discuss problems and challenges with computers and the Internet, we need to keep in mind that these technologies afford us many opportunities and can be great resource for our children. We should be aware that in trying to help children to deal with the challenges of our times we must not stifle the sort of innovations that have made the Internet and computers such powerful tools.

But we also must make sure that their experiences on the Internet are safe ones.

As part of helping parents learn more about these programs, we have arranged for a demonstration of how these programs work. Before we start this demonstration, I want to warn the members and audience that even the names of the files can be offensive and pornographic. We're going to show the unredacted names on the screens in the room because that's what our children are actually seeing. But we also have posters up that display the results in a redacted form for those who find this less offensive.