back page

The US Congress has passed, along with the Telecoms bill, a rider called the Communications Decency Act (CDA). The basic idea is that it is against the law to send indecent material around the Net where a minor could see it.

This is one of those times when a country's being litigious is a good thing. Clinton had barely put the Presidential pen back in the inkwell before two suits were filed seeking an injunction to enjoin the government from actually enforcing this law.

I'm not in favour of disseminating pornography to minors. But that's not what this is about.

There are far more serious threats to many children's wellbeing than the Net. Poverty, poor education, lack of prospects for adult working lives, and physical violence are all much bigger problems and far more widespread. My theory is that politicians just love regulating the Net because it a) makes them look like they're doing something and b) annoys a relatively small group of people.

Furthermore, while there are technical solutions that can be deployed, these need to be available to concerned parents, not sprayed randomly around the Net. For every pornographer caught out when you ban the word 'breast' there are 25 women who can't find mutual support and comfort from talking with other sufferers about their cancer.

It's apparent that the lawmakers don't have the faintest understanding about the technology they're trying to legislate on. The most important of the many misunderstandings among the unwired is that it's not like you plug into the Net and pornography just flows across your screen. You have to go out and look for it, sometimes with great difficulty. Ironically, some of my friends seem to be having an easier time finding salacious material on AOL, the family-oriented service, than they do on the Internet proper, where anarchy and lack of organisation reign.

But AOL has made an important step in the right direction: parents should be given the tools to make their own decisions, and the rest of us should be treated like the adults we are. Why should another adult have the right to censor what I, as an adult, see, hear, or read?
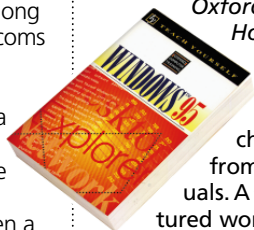
Wendy Grossman

Wendy Grossman is a freelance journalist and a regular contributor to *What PC?*.

Teach Yourself Windows 95

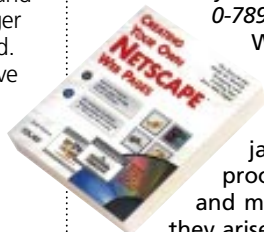*Oxford Computer Training. 274 pages. Hodder & Stoughton. £7.99. ISBN: 0-340-63946-6*

Teach Yourself Windows 95 has a lot going for it. It's small, portable and cheap, and there's no real competition from Microsoft in the form of official manuals. A shame then, that it's such a poorly structured work and tends to finish at just about the point where most people would start seeking help from a manual.

This book offers no fewer than ten pages on how to use the recycle bin and twenty on how to use the help system, which leaves far too little space for the explanation of tricky concepts or coverage of those areas where the on-line help is particularly weak. For example, more chapters like the one on understanding and using objects (a weird word and an even weirder concept to the newcomer) would have been much more appropriate.

Creating Your Own Netscape Web Pages

Andy Shafran. 252 pages. QUE. £27.99. ISBN: 0-7897-0734-9

Want to publish your own 'home page' on the World Wide Web? This book promises to warm the water before you enter by scything through the jargon and guiding you through the process. It has a clear, tutorial-style layout and most technical terms are explained as they arise; tip boxes are also used at strategic points to highlight additional useful information.
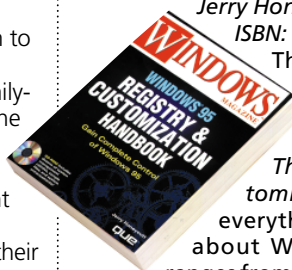
HTML – HyperText Markup Language – is the programming language behind Web pages and much of the author's text here relies on an HTML editor called Hotdog, supplied on an accompanying CD-Rom. Unfortunately, Hotdog's installation instructions, printed early on in the book, do not match the locations and filenames as stored on the CD. This is not a problem for experienced users, but beginners will find themselves cursing halfway through chapter 2.

As a standalone text for an experienced PC user wishing to publish Web pages, this book is a useful and informative guide; as a comprehensive tutorial package for beginners, it is flawed.

Windows 95 Registry and Customization Handbook

Jerry Honeycutt. 430 pages. QUE. £46.99. ISBN: 0-7897-0725-X

There are plenty of documented tweaks for Windows 95, but there are even more undocumented ones. Until now, that is. *The Windows 95 Registry and Customization Handbook* is a guide to everything Microsoft doesn't tell you about Windows 95. Its subject matter ranges from what the Registry is all about and how to change it, to exactly what Windows 95 uses your start-up files for, even though it isn't supposed to need them at all.

Anyone who's interested in more than just the superficialities of Windows 95 will find this a fascinating book to dip into and its lucid style makes even the more technical matters readily understandable.