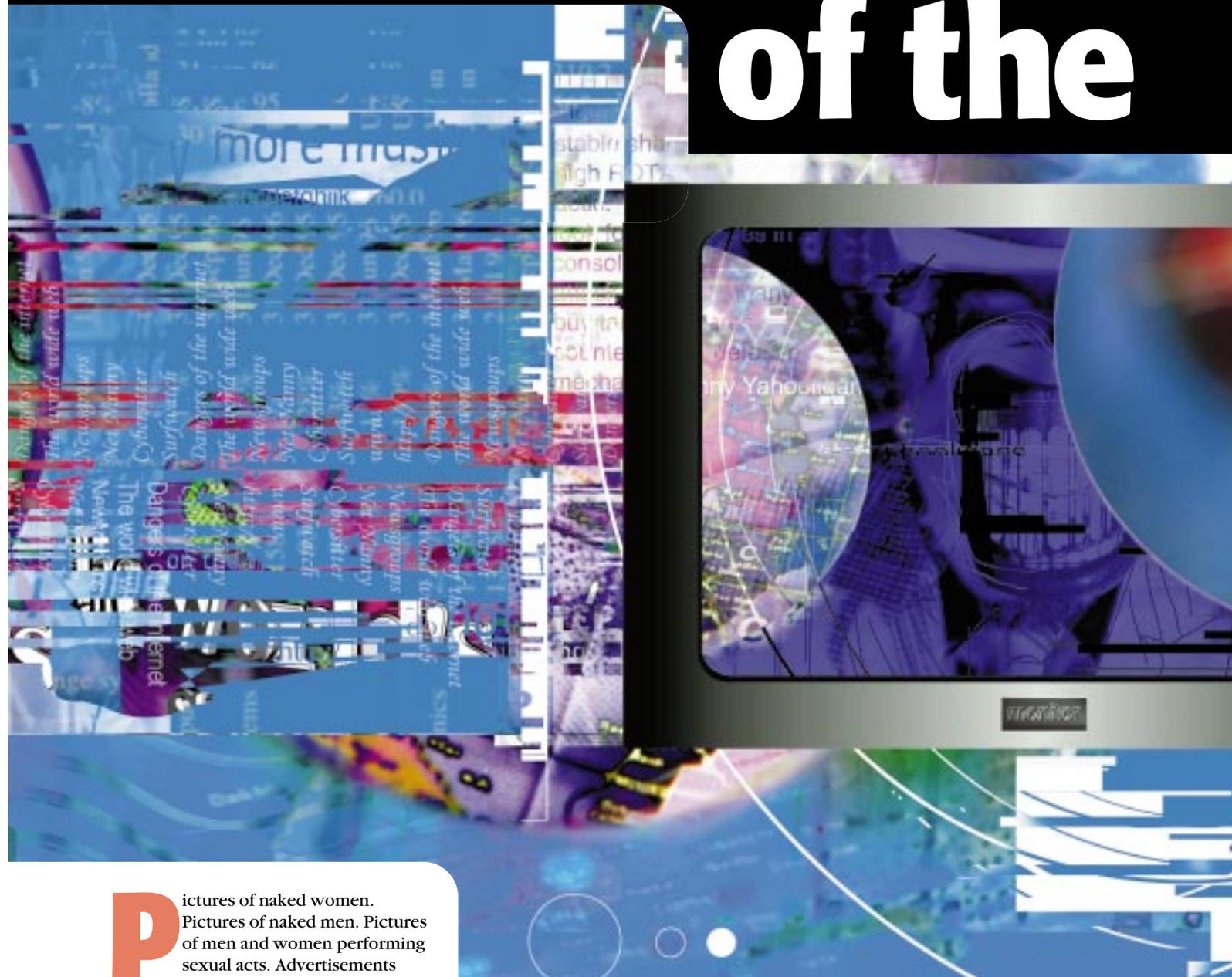


DANGERS of the



Pictures of naked women. Pictures of naked men. Pictures of men and women performing sexual acts. Advertisements offering sexual services.

Graphic descriptions of illegal sexual activities. Racist propaganda.

All this and more can be found on the streets of most cities in the UK - in newsagents, bookshops, specialist stores and even telephone kiosks. Is anyone getting worked up about it? Not really. Start talking about the same material available on the Internet though, and you get front page headlines. So why is the Internet different?

Well, it isn't. The Internet is a distribution medium just like paper and

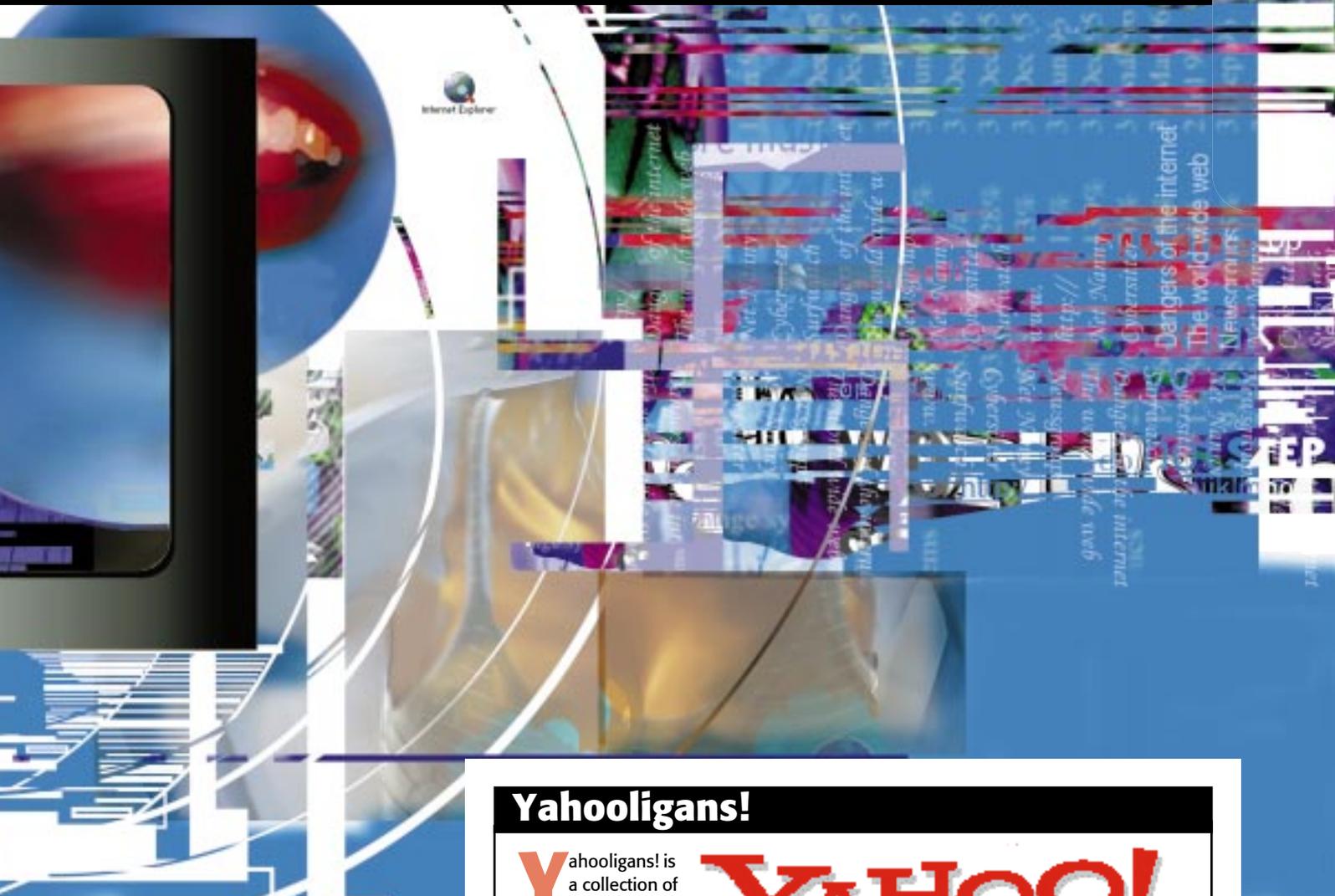
video tape and no one wants to put blocks on those. But the unregulated nature of the Net does make it something of a special case. Much of the pornography available online, for example, is illegal to sell in the UK, and racist organisations with Web sites would have difficulty voicing their extreme beliefs in any other way. The Internet is also less discriminating about the age of the people using it - almost anyone can download pornographic images from the Web but few 'adult

shop' proprietors would risk selling similar material to a minor.

So is there cause for concern? It depends. Just as it's possible to walk down a high street without seeing anything offensive, it's the same for the Internet. If you do stumble across an adult-oriented site while browsing the Web, you're usually given plenty of warning before you see anything other than requests for your money. Look for offensive material, though, and you'll find it on the Net somewhere, no matter

Pornography and racist propaganda are easy to find on the Internet. So how can you protect your child from the evils of the Web?

INTERNET



how extreme the subject matter. But then who would have cause for complaint if they had to tear off a magazine's cellophane wrapper before being disgusted by the pictures inside?

Of course, the Internet starts to present problems when it's used by children. Whether it's by accident or design, the Net contains material that simply isn't suitable for young eyes. It can be a dangerous place for a naive child and parents need to be aware of the potential perils, and how to avoid them.

Yahooligans!

Yahooligans! is a collection of Web sites

maintained by Yahoo! – creator of the Yahoo! search engine. Yahooligans! is designed specifically for children between the ages of seven and 12, and its sites are hand-picked for suitability.

Yahooligans! is a bit like a mini-Internet. It has its own search engine and all Web links are self-contained. Use the site as the start page for your Web browser (View/Internet Options/Home Page in Internet Explorer, Edit/Preferences/Home Page in Netscape Navigator) and providing they don't type in their own Web addresses, young children have a safe way of browsing the Net.

www.yahooligans.com

YAHOO!
UK & IRELAND



THE PROBLEM

The World Wide Web

The World Wide Web (WWW or Web) is just a part of the Internet. Web sites - pages of information on the Web - make widespread use of images and sounds, and there's information available on almost every subject imaginable.

You won't be surprised to hear that one of the most popular subjects on the Web is sex - a search on the word using Alta Vista gave more than 10 million sites. Not all of them are about the pornographic interpretation of the word, but unfortunately, many of them are.

Since they exist in huge numbers, sex sites are easy to find accidentally - usually by going to a site thrown up during a routine search. If you're actually trying, then sex sites are even easier to find, and most of the obvious words have been used in Web site addresses.

Fortunately, it's rare to come across a sex site whose content isn't blatantly obvious from its main page. Almost all sex sites have explicit warnings about their content, and entry often requires you to click on an 'I am over 18 and am not offended by sexual material' button.

Less easy to chance upon are sites for neo-Nazi, racist and other hate groups. Whether such sites are actually harmful is open to debate, but they're certainly offensive and children should not be freely exposed to the views they contain.

Unfortunately, there is material available on the Web that is very deeply disturbing. Although some of the graphic images and texts on show may not be illegal, they are certainly likely to deprave and corrupt, and certainly should not be seen by children.

Newsgroups

Newsgroups (sometimes called UseNet) are where people around the world can hold online discussions about many different topics. There are thousands of Newsgroups, covering a bewildering variety of subjects. The groups are identified by unique names that divide and subdivide into narrower and narrower topics. The *rec* Newsgroups, for example, are for discussions about recreational topics and cover such things as music, television and fine art. For example, the *rec.arts.disney.animation* Newsgroup is for discussions about Walt Disney.

Although Newsgroups are a perfect way for people to communicate with like-minded individuals around the world, there are a number of problem areas. Many of these lie in the alternative or *alt* groups. Browse through these and you'll find topics which range from



Newsgroups can be entertaining but they can also throw up disturbing 'alt' group sites.

the serious (*alt.agriculture.beef*) to the bizarre (*alt.aliens.they-are-here*) to the positively undesirable.

'Colourful' language, vicious personal abuse and extreme viewpoints abound in Newsgroups, but pictures pose the biggest threat. Some Newsgroups exist solely for the exchange of pornography - some of it illegal in any country.

The preoccupation with sex of some Newsgroup users has also filtered through to other groups, and it's rare to find a discussion topic that doesn't contain a message advertising a sex Web site.

IRC

IRC stands for Internet Relay Chat and it's a little like a live Newsgroup. Once you go to an IRC site (or channel), you

can 'talk' with several other people by typing messages into a window.

There are hundreds of IRC channels covering a range of serious subjects but, unsurprisingly, IRC is widely abused. While the chat sections of adult Web sites usually require a fee, there are still countless free IRC sites where adult themes are discussed.

THE SOLUTION

• Understand it

If you want your children to use the Internet, but are worried about what they'll see, talk to them about it. Understanding is fundamental to coping with undesirable material on the Net, and if a child has some idea of what can

Useful contacts

Internet Watch Foundation

The IWF is an independent organisation that acts as an Internet watchdog. Its broad aims are to hinder the use of the Internet to transmit illegal material and to encourage the classification of legal material on the Net. The IWF will act on reports of illegal material found on the Net, and its Web site contains more information. www.iwf.org.uk

Recreational Software Advisory Council on the Internet

The RSACi is an independent organisation that provides a rating system for Web sites. Browsers like Internet Explorer use the RSACi rating and they're a simple way to restrict access. www.rsac.org

Yahooligans and Launch Site

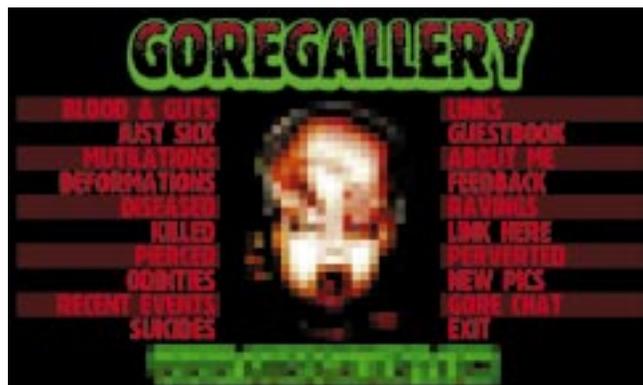
Two Web sites designed solely for children - perfect as the start page for your Web browser. www.yahooligans.com, www.launchsite.org

NCH Action For Children

Britain's largest childcare charity has some useful Internet information for parents on its Web site. www.nchafc.org.uk/internet/index.html



Neo-Nazi, horror and racist sites may not be illegal but they are often offensive and are certainly not suitable for viewing by children.



be found, he or she is less likely to be surprised or disturbed when they encounter it.

Try not to be too embarrassed when you come across something unexpected. Your child's age is obviously a guide here, but if you're suddenly asked 'Mummy/Daddy, what's a...?', an explanation is often better than a swift finger on the PC's off-switch.

• Supervise it

Supervision is essential for safe surfing. If you're worried about what your child is getting up to on the Internet, spend time with them when they're online. It's also a good idea to keep the PC in a communal place, not hidden away in an upstairs bedroom. Lay down some rules about online use too - never give out any personal details is the most important. Some other useful rules can be found at the NCH Action for Children Web site, at www.nchafc.org.uk/internet/rules.html

• Rate it

From version 3 onwards, Microsoft's Internet Explorer has its own security features which are based on the ratings system developed by the Recreational Software Advisory Council on the Internet (RSACi).

RSACi ratings cover four subjects - language, violence, sex and nudity - with

four levels for each. Level 0 language, for example, means a site contains no offensive language, whereas Level 4 covers crude, vulgar language or extreme hate speech. The idea is that Web sites are rated for each subject, and sites that have ratings above those your browser allows are blocked. Unfortunately, not all sites use the RSACi ratings, but you can set Internet Explorer to block all unrated sites with a password.

• Filter it

Not all Web browsers support the RSACi ratings, and the ratings don't cover Newsgroups. The solution to this is to use a third-party Internet filtering program that runs in the PC's background and blocks access to parts of the Net.

Net filters can block access to certain Web sites and Newsgroups, and some will even censor words used in Web searches and e-mails. No Net filter is completely secure, and sites can slip through, but most filters can be regularly updated at little or no charge. Net filters can also be sampled for free with a download from a Web site.

• Use something else

If you're unhappy with the Internet's lack of restrictions, even with a Net filter in place, then an online service is the solution.

Online services like AOL and MSN are a subset of the Internet and contain vetted material. This means that you won't come across offensive material within the confines of the service, and anyone who abuses features such as chat or e-mail will be heavily penalised.

Online services also allow parents to place controls over what can be accessed. MSN is the weakest in this respect and can only use the security features already provided as part of Internet Explorer.

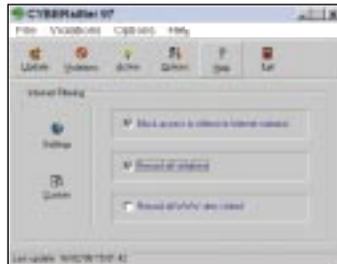
CompuServe is a little better. Parents can block access to parts of the Web-based service using a supplied Net filter, and online time can be restricted to certain parts of the day for specific amounts of time.

For concerned parents, AOL is perhaps the best option. It provides members with five accounts, one of which is the master account. The master account holder can then set controls for the other four accounts, blocking access to online chat, preventing file downloads, allowing e-mail from specific senders only and selectively restricting Newsgroup access. Unfortunately, AOL doesn't have any specific controls for blocking access to certain Web sites, but because its built-in browser is based on Internet Explorer, parents can use its RSACi controls. Julian Prokaza

Net filters

CYBERSitter

CYBERSitter blocks access to unsuitable Web sites, Newsgroups and IRCs, and watches for banned keywords in applications. It has several groups of blocked Web sites, including adult, gay/lesbian, hate and, oddly, sports. Free site group updates are available online, and you can also add your own sites and keywords.



Any violations are logged but no warning is displayed and offending programs aren't closed down. The time, date and type of each violation is recorded, but the program in which it occurred isn't. CYBERSitter is also choosy about which applications it works with. Although it blanked out swear words received by e-mail, for example, it was happy for them to be typed in Microsoft Word 97.

CYBERSitter claims to examine a word's context before deciding whether to block it. This should prevent words with double meanings being inadvertently blocked. But in our tests CYBERSitter even censored harmless words like 'Scunthorpe'. Not very impressive.

Although CYBERSitter is simple to configure, it doesn't cover enough bases for it to be classed as a complete solution.

- £34.08
- POW! Distribution: 01202 716726
- www.cybersitter.com

CYBERSitter					
Ease of use	★	★	★	★	★
Features	★	★	★	★	★
Performance	★	★	★	★	★
Value for money	★	★	★	★	★
Overall	★	★	★	★	★

Net Nanny

Net Nanny uses lists of information to look out for, covering Web sites, Newsgroups and key words. When an item on a list is detected, you can opt to display a warning, block further use of the offending program and even close the program down.



The keyword list can be used with any application, and it prevents words you deem unfit from appearing on your PC's screen. If the word 'porn' is on the list, for example, typing it in Word will result in 'XXXX' appearing instead. Similarly, if you receive an e-mail with banned words, they'll be blocked out.

Net Nanny has lists to get you started and you can also download updates from the Net Nanny Web site. You can edit the lists yourself, but although this is a simple process, a certain amount of care is needed. Net Nanny takes no account of context, and words with a double meaning should be blocked with care – block 'breast', for example, and you might hinder someone using the word processor to write a recipe for chicken curry...

The easiest to use, but no support for Internet Explorer 4 limits its use.

- £34.08
- NetP@rtner: 0171 493 5133
- www.netnanny.co.uk

Net Nanny					
Ease of use	★	★	★	★	★
Features	★	★	★	★	★
Performance	★	★	★	★	★
Value for money	★	★	★	★	★
Overall	★	★	★	★	★

SurfWatch

Unlike CYBERSitter and Net Nanny, Spyglass's SurfWatch

filters Internet-related activities only. It blocks access to unsuitable Web sites and also restricts Newsgroup access. The list of blocked sites is split into four groups – sexually explicit, gambling, violence/hate speech and drugs/alcohol. IRC channels can also be blocked and the program can even restrict Net access to the Yahoo!igans! site or sites that you specify.



Although effective, SurfWatch isn't without its problems. When someone tries to access a barred site, for example, a warning appears on-screen and the site is blocked, but the violation isn't recorded.

Its list of barred sites also seems arbitrary. While all the undesirable sites we tried to access were successfully blocked, so was a perfectly innocent homepage. Finally, SurfWatch periodically caused Outlook Express and Lotus Notes to crash.

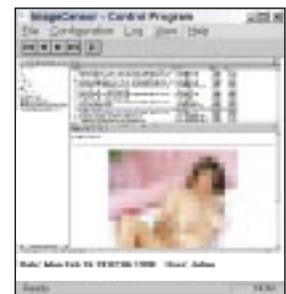
Although SurfWatch is effective it doesn't record enough information about violations and has some peculiar blocking rules.

- £64.63
- Grey Matter: 01364 654100
- www.surfwatch.com

SurfWatch					
Ease of use	★	★	★	★	★
Features	★	★	★	★	★
Performance	★	★	★	★	★
Value for money	★	★	★	★	★
Overall	★	★	★	★	★

ImageCensor

Rather than block Web sites or look out for profane language, ImageCensor detects only pornographic images. While this may seem a little limiting, if you're concerned about your PC being used for pornography, then ImageCensor is extremely versatile.



It works by looking for images that appear on a PC's screen – whether they've been downloaded from the Net, been received by e-mail or stored on a floppy disk. The precise detection method is secret, but you won't be surprised to discover that it looks out for flesh tones.

ImageCensor is surprisingly effective. When an image is detected, the whole PC screen is saved as a file, and there are also the options of sounding an alarm or locking the PC with a password. Saved images can be browsed later, together with the time and date of the violation. ImageCensor isn't perfect and works only for colour images, but the detection sensitivity can be altered.

Although best used with a Net filter, ImageCensor is amazingly effective at spotting pornographic images.

- £29.95
- Microtrope: 01295 252002
- www.microtrope.com

ImageCensor					
Ease of use	★	★	★	★	★
Features	★	★	★	★	★
Performance	★	★	★	★	★
Value for money	★	★	★	★	★
Overall	★	★	★	★	★