



**Families now have access to reliable information that will assist them to select an Internet filter that suits their needs, with the ABA and NetAlert releasing a report during March 2002 on the effectiveness of Internet filter products.**

# Report on effectiveness of Internet filter software

Families now have access to reliable information that will help them to select an Internet filter that suits their needs.

The ABA and NetAlert on 26 March 2002 released a report on the effectiveness of Internet filter products. The report provides details on the performance of 14 products. Almost nine hundred web sites in 28 categories were used to conduct the tests.

Speaking at the launch of the report, ABA Chairman Professor David Flint said that the report provided the most comprehensive information available on the effectiveness of filter software products. 'This is the first time that available

products have been tested in Australia on such a large number of Internet sites, representing a broad range of content available on the Internet,' he said.

The Chairman particularly thanked the ABA Director, Industry Performance and Review, Andree Wright, Managers, Suzanne Shipard and Richard Fraser, Project Officer, Rosalie O'Neale and the members of the Content Assessment Section.

The products were tested by the CSIRO, on behalf of the ABA and NetAlert.

The report shows that available products differ in their effectiveness in blocking certain types of content.

Variations in effectiveness appear to be related to the blocking techniques used by different products, with those products that combine two or more techniques generally performing better.

As is to be expected, products that employ 'inclusion filtering' (or 'white lists') are the most efficient at blocking offensive content, as they allow users to access a preselected set of sites that have been assessed for their suitability. However, as a consequence, they also block a significant amount of content that may not necessarily be offensive. 'Filter products and services that employ this technique are likely to be most suitable for families with younger (primary school age) children, for whom access to the wider Internet may be less important than ensuring they are protected from harmful content,' said Professor Flint.

Products based on URL and keyword 'black lists' are effective in blocking particular types of unwanted content in most cases. The research indicates that products that employ human verification of black lists tend to be the more accurate in blocking offensive content, and are less likely to

block access to suitable content. Filters of this type are likely to be more suitable for families with older children, with requirements to access a broader range of content.

The ABA and NetAlert commissioned the research to help inform Internet users about the range of products available. Results of the ABA's recent *Internet @ home* research showed that some 60 per cent of Internet users thought that filter software was an effective mechanism for preventing access to unwanted content. Around one half of those surveyed indicated an interest in obtaining more information on this subject.

Professor Flint also emphasised that filter software was most effective when used in conjunction with household rules for Internet access, and parental supervision. 'The software is not a substitute for good parenting practices,' he said.

The results contained in the report are broadly comparable and consistent with results from tests recently conducted overseas as part of the European Union's Safer Internet Action plan.



**Above:** ABA Chairman, Professor David Flint, at the launch.



The ABA will use the report to update its web site for families, [www.cybersmartkids.com.au](http://www.cybersmartkids.com.au), with information about each of the products tested.

**Background**

The ABA and NetAlert have joint responsibility for providing information to Internet users, particularly families with children, about managing access to Internet content. The ABA's website for families [www.cybersmartkids.com.au](http://www.cybersmartkids.com.au) contains useful information for children and parents to help ensure their Internet safety.

Filters are one option available to Internet users who want to guard against offensive or harmful Internet content. The results of the ABA's research into Internet usage in Australian homes showed that about 60 per cent of Internet users thought that use of blocking software was an effective way of avoiding



Above: Chairman of NetAlert, Karen Hart.

offensive and harmful Internet content, and just under a half of those surveyed expressed interest in obtaining more information about available means of doing this.

In this context, the ABA and NetAlert commissioned the CSIRO to test and report on the effectiveness of the Internet filter software products listed in the schedule to the registered code of practice for ISPs ([www.ija.net.au/code6.html](http://www.ija.net.au/code6.html)).

The following products were tested:

- AOL Parental Control (AOL version 6.0)
- Arlington Custom Browser
- Cyber Patrol 5.0
- Cyber Sentinel 2.0
- Cyber Sitter 2001
- Eyeguard
- I-Gear 3.5
- Internet Sheriff
- N2H2
- Net Nanny 4.0
- Norton Internet Security 3.0
- Smart Filter 3.0
- Too C.O.O.L.
- X-Stop 3.04

The general approach of the research was to answer the following questions for each of the scheduled filters:

- Is it easy to install, configure, use and update?
- Is it easy to disable or bypass?
- How well does it stop access to undesirable content?
- Does it stop access to desirable content as well?
- Can it effectively track access?

Filtering effectiveness was tested by installing the product under test and then attempting to access all of the Web pages on our standard test list. This list includes 895 sites covering 28 subject categories, and includes both sites that could be expected to be blocked and sites to which access should be allowed.

The tests also considered whether the filtering products were easily bypassed or disabled.

These results are presented as a chart for each product, showing the percentage of sites blocked or passed in each of the content categories. The passed/blocked numbers often do not add up to 100 per cent because tests only reflect the state of the Internet at the time the test was run. Sites come online and go away again, leading unavoidably to access failures at times.

The results show that products vary in their effectiveness, and that particular types of products are likely to suit the varying requirements of Internet users. For example, products that employ 'white lists' are the most effective in blocking access to offensive content. However, because they allow access only to a preselected range of Internet sites, they also block access to many sites that may not contain offensive content. Filters of this type may be suitable for families with children of primary school age.

A filter that employed URL



Above: Chief Executive IIA, Peter Coroneos.

and/or keyword 'black lists' was more likely to suit families with older children, because it permitted access to a wider range of content, although it may also block some content that is not offensive or harmful.

In addition to commissioning the report from the CSIRO, the ABA is monitoring international developments relating to filter software, particularly in Europe, where the European Union has funded a range of projects to develop improved filter technologies that can be used by Internet users across Europe ([www.saferinternet.org/filtering/index.asp](http://www.saferinternet.org/filtering/index.asp)). A discussion of these developments can be found at [www.aba.gov.au/internet/eufiltering.htm](http://www.aba.gov.au/internet/eufiltering.htm).



**Copies of the report**  
Copies of the report can be obtained from the ABA's website at [www.aba.gov.au/internet/research/filtereffectiveness.pdf](http://www.aba.gov.au/internet/research/filtereffectiveness.pdf).