

TESTIMONY
OF
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BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON YOUTH SERVICES
OF THE
COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK

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IT WAS AN APPALLING STORY TO READ: A 12 YEAR OLD BOY FROM A GOOD FAMILY CAUGHT USING THE MOST ABOMINABLE LANGUAGE WHILE COMMUNICATING ON AN ELECTRONIC DEVICE; A MARRIED MAN SETTING UP AN ASSIGNATION WITH A MARRIED WOMAN TO ENGAGE IN ACTS DEGRADING TO THE INSTITUTION OF MARRIAGE AND OF FAMILY LIFE USING THIS SAME MEDIUM; A SWINDLER WHO BILKED A MAN OUT OF HIS LIFE SAVINGS IN A MATTER OF WEEKS, RUINING HIM AND HIS FAMILY, HAVING SOLICITED BUSINESS BY THIS SAME MEDIA; AN ANTI-GOVERNMENT ORGANIZATION THAT HAS ADOPTED THE MEDIUM AS ITS OWN MEANS OF GROUP COMMUNICATION TO EXCHANGE IRRESPONSIBLE CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND DOWNRIGHT TRAITOROUS SENTIMENTS.

YES, EVERY ONE OF THESE THINGS HAPPENED, EVERY ONE OF THESE INCIDENTS OCCURRED, USING THE SAME WONDER OF SCIENCE, THE SAME NETWORK THAT HAS ITS INSIDIOUS FINGERS REACHING INTO NEARLY EVERY HOME AND SCHOOL IN THIS LAND.

THEY POINT OUT THE DANGER INHERENT IN THE USE OF – THE TELEPHONE.

ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO THESE ARE THE SORTS OF ITEMS ONE COULD FIND IN NEWSPAPERS WHEN SOME FEARED THAT TELEPHONE COMMUNICATION WOULD BE THE DOWNFALL OF AMERICA. A FEW YEARS LATER, ANOTHER MAN WHO SAT IN THE VERY

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SEAT I NOW OCCUPY ON THE BOARD OF EDUCATION, ANNING S. PRALL, AGITATED FOR STRICTER GOVERNMENT CONTROL OF RADIO PROGRAMS WHICH HE FELT WERE DEGRADING THE MORAL LIFE OF AMERICANS AND ENDANGERING CHILDREN. WE HERE HAVE ALL LIVED THROUGH THE 1950S, 1960S AND 1970S WHEN THE DESTRUCTIVE POWER OF TELEVISION WAS REGULARLY DECRIED - AS IT STILL IS TODAY IN SOME QUARTERS.

ON THE OTHER HAND, JUST AS MANY FEARED THAT OUR SOCIETY WOULD DISINTEGRATE FROM THE POISONOUS INFLUENCE OF THESE ELECTRICAL DEVICES, THERE WERE MANY OTHERS WHO PROPHESED A BRIGHT ELECTROMAGNETIC DAWN THAT WOULD ARISE WHEN RADIO, AND LATER TELEVISION, BECAME THE NORMAL MEANS FOR CHILDREN TO RECEIVE THEIR EDUCATION. WE WERE TOLD, OR AT LEAST WE WERE GIVEN THE IMPRESSION, THAT THE STUDENT OF TOMORROW WOULD LEAVE THE STUDENT OF YESTERYEAR BEHIND AS PUPILS (WHOSE MINDS WERE MYSTICALLY OPENED BY AUDIO-VISUAL AIDS HITHERTO UNKNOWN) WERE ALMOST INSTANTLY ENDOWED WITH EINSTEINIAN INTELLIGENCE, SO ADVANCED THAT THOSE WHO LEARNED MERELY FROM BOOKS AND LIVE TEACHERS WOULD SEEM LIKE BRAIN-DAMAGED CRO-MAGNONS BY COMPARISON.

OF COURSE, NEITHER OF THESE THINGS HAS COME TO PASS. THE TELEPHONE, RADIO AND TELEVISION HAVE CERTAINLY HAD AN IMMENSE IMPACT ON SOCIETY, OFTEN WITH NEGATIVE RESULTS, BUT THE WORLD HAS WEATHERED THE STORM AND MANKIND IS STILL HERE TO TELL THE TALE. TELEVISION, VIDEO AND OTHER GADGETRY HAVE OFTEN PROVED HELPFUL TOOLS IN SOME EDUCATIONAL SITUATIONS, BUT THE PLACEMENT OF A TELEVISION IN EVERY SCHOOL HAS NOT RAISED OUR CHILDREN'S READING ABILITY ONE IOTA, NOT ENABLED THEM TO LEARN ANY MORE MATH, AND NOT REALLY IMPROVED THEIR CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS.

ALL OF THIS BRINGS US TO 1997, AND THE LATEST MORAL COBALT BOMB OR EDUCATIONAL WIZARD'S MAGIC WAND – DEPENDING ON WHO YOU ARE LISTENING TO: THE INTERNET.

ON THE ONE HAND, PARENTS AND POLITICIANS DREAD THE DEADLY TOUCH OF THE INTERNET ON THEIR CHILDREN, WHOM THEY FEAR WILL HAVE THE MOST DISGUSTING FORMS OF PORNOGRAPHY THRUST AT THEM AGAINST THEIR WILL, OR WHO WILL BE INDUCED TO SMOKE AND BOOZE WHEN THEY OTHERWISE WOULD BE TOTAL ABSTAINERS.

ON THE OTHER HAND, EDUCATORS AND SOME OF THOSE SAME POLITICIANS HAVE REPLACED SOLID ATTEMPTS AT EDUCATIONAL

REFORM WITH THE EASY ANSWER OF STICKING A COMPUTER AND MODEM IN EVERY SCHOOL, IN EVERY CLASSROOM EVEN, AS IF BY DOING SO THEY HAVE SOMEHOW MET THEIR RESPONSIBILITY TO OUR NEXT GENERATION.

THERE IS TRUTH, BUT MUCH MORE FALSEHOOD, LURKING BEHIND BOTH OF THESE POSITIONS. THE INTERNET, LIKE LIFE ITSELF, IS A MESSY PLACE THAT CAN BE DANGEROUS, BUT LIKE LIFE ITSELF IT WILL DEFY MOST ATTEMPTS TO REGULATE IT. EDUCATED AND RESPONSIBLE VIGILANCE BY PARENTS (FIRST AND FOREMOST) AND PEDAGOGUES (AS THOSE TO WHOM PARENTS ENTRUST THEIR CHILDREN), WITHOUT PANIC OR PARANOIA, WILL BE THE MOST EFFECTIVE MEANS OF SAFEGUARDING OUR YOUNG PEOPLE.

INDEED, THE AMERICAN FREE MARKET SYSTEM HAS RESPONDED: SENSING THE POSSIBILITY OF PROFIT, THERE ARE NOW A HANDFUL OF COMPANIES WHO MANUFACTURE VARIOUS TYPES OF MONITORING AND "LOCK-OUT" SOFTWARE THAT WILL MAKE IT IMPOSSIBLE FOR ANY YOUNGSTER TO EVEN TURN ON THE COMPUTER WITHOUT AN ADULT PRESENT, OR LOG ON TO AN INTERNET SERVICE, OR, IF LOGGED ON, ACCESS A PARTICULAR SITE OR ANY SITE THAT MEETS CERTAIN CRITERIA (DEPENDING ON HOW MUCH PARENTS FEEL THEY NEED TO CONTROL A PARTICULAR YOUNGSTER'S ACCESS). IT IS

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WITHIN THE POWER OF PARENTS AND SCHOOLS TO SIMPLY FILTER OUT WEB SITES THAT, NOT ONLY FORBID PORNOGRAPHY, BUT AS THE FOCUS OF THIS PUBLIC HEARING IS ADDRESSING, FILTERS OUT WEB SITES REFERENCING ALCOHOL OR TOBACCO.

SO, THOUGH PARENTS AND THEIR SURROGATES MUST KEEP THEIR EYES OPEN, WE HAVE NO NEED TO FEAR THE INTERNET, NOR DO WE NEED TO CREATE MORE GOVERNMENT CONTROL OF ITS OPERATIONS (CONTROL WHICH WOULD PROBABLY ULTIMATELY FAIL ANYWAY), ESPECIALLY CONSIDERING THAT THE ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT HAS MANIFESTED ITSELF IN PRODUCTS THAT GIVE PARENTS – AND SCHOOLS – ON-SITE CONTROL OPTIONS. THAT IS PROBABLY WHERE CONTROL BELONGS ANYWAY, AND THERE ARE, AFTER ALL, SOME PROBLEMS THAT LAWS CANNOT SOLVE AND THAT CAN BE SOLVED WITHOUT LAWS.

WHILE WE AS A SOCIETY DO NOT NEED SOMETHING THAT TAKES US A STEP CLOSER TO TRUE CENSORSHIP IN CYBERSPACE, OUR SCHOOL SYSTEM MUST UNDERSTAND AND MAKE VALUE JUDGEMENTS CONCERNING COMMERCIAL INTERESTS. BEFORE WE EVEN APPROACH THE PROBLEMS OF THE MARKETING OF REGULATED SUBSTANCES LIKE ALCOHOL AND TOBACCO TO THOSE TO WHOM IT IS ILLEGAL TO SELL THEM, WE CAN AND SHOULD CUT THE ISSUE OFF AT THE PASS,

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SO TO SPEAK, BY OBJECTING TO THE USE OF EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY IN THE SCHOOLS FOR ANY COMMERCIAL PURPOSES WHICH WILL MISGUIDE, AND NEGATIVELY IMPACT ON THE LEARNING SET GIVEN TO THE STUDENTS BY THE SCHOOLS AND THEIR PARENTS. THUS, WE SHOULD NOT SIMPLY BE PROTECTING STUDENTS FROM AGGRESSIVE MARKETING BY CIGARETTE AND ALCOHOL MANUFACTURERS WHILE IN SCHOOL: WE SHOULD BE PROTECTING THEM FROM ANY AND ALL COMMERCIALIZATION OF EDUCATIONAL TOOLS WHICH WILL UNDO THE VERY DECENCY OF A YOUNG PERSON'S MIND. FURTHER, THERE IS AN IMPORTANT DIFFERENCE IN A COMPANY INDICATING ITS SUPPORT OF SCHOOLS AND THAT COMPANY ADVERTISING ITS PRODUCTS. FOR EXAMPLE, I BELIEVE IT TO BE PROFESSIONALLY ACCEPTABLE TO INDICATE ON A SOFTWARE TRAILER: SPONSORED BY A GRANT FROM IBM, THE WIZ, OR COCA COLA. I WOULD, HOWEVER, PREJUDICIALLY, INDICATE I WOULD NOT WANT A SOFTWARE TRAILER TO SAY: SPONSORED BY A GRANT FROM PHILLIP MORRIS OR REMY MARTIN. WE JUST CANNOT AFFORD TO SEND MIXED MESSAGES TO OUR YOUNG PEOPLE. IT IS BAD ENOUGH THAT TOO MANY OTHER MIXED MESSAGES ARE COMMUNICATED TO THEM EACH AND EVERY DAY. NO WONDER, OUR YOUNG PEOPLE ARE CONFUSED IN OUR ADULT WORLD.

IN ADDITION, IF WE NEED NOT BECOME OVERANXIOUS ABOUT THE DARKER POSSIBILITIES FOR THE INTERNET, WE SHOULD NOT BECOME OVERLY OPTIMISTIC ABOUT ITS PROMISE WHEN IT COMES TO ADDRESSING FUNDAMENTAL EDUCATIONAL ISSUES. OF COURSE THE INSTANT ACCESS TO RESEARCH MATERIAL AND RESOURCE PERSONS THE INTERNET PROVIDES HAS CREATED A WEALTH OF POSSIBILITIES FOR, SAY, HIGH SCHOOL SCIENCE STUDENTS OR JUNIOR HIGH SOCIAL STUDIES CLASSES THAT WERE UNTHINKABLE JUST A FEW YEARS AGO. EVEN THE ABILITY OF A CLASS IN NEW YORK TO EXCHANGE NOTES AND CHAT ABOUT TYPICAL "KID'S STUFF" WITH A CLASS IN EASTERN EUROPE, OR THE MORE REMOTE ARCTIC REGIONS OF CANADA OR EVEN THE RURAL DEEP SOUTH OF OUR OWN COUNTRY HAS GIVEN SOME OF OUR STUDENTS A CHANCE TO EXPAND THEIR MINDS AND HORIZONS, AND RE-EVALUATE SOME OF THE MOST COMMON EXPERIENCES OF THEIR EVERYDAY LIVES.

THE INTERNET, HOWEVER, WILL NOT TEACH A YOUNGSTER TO READ, IS NOT A SUBSTITUTE FOR "TIMES-TABLES" DRILLS, WILL NOT PROVIDE THE OPPORTUNITY TO CHEW AND DIGEST THE POETRY OF ROBERT FROST, IS NO SUBSTITUTE FOR PLANNING, RESEARCHING, OUTLINING, COMPOSING, WRITING AND REWRITING A TERM PAPER, AND SO ON. SIMPLY PUTTING A MACHINE IN EVERY SCHOOL OR

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**CLASSROOM AND THEN WALKING AWAY, SATISFIED THAT YOU HAVE
ADVANCED THE CAUSE OF EDUCATION IS FOOLHARDY AT BEST.**

**WITH ALL OF THE ABOVE, I WOULD LIKE TO TAKE THIS
OPPORTUNITY TO POINT OUT, THEREFORE, SOME AREAS IN WHICH
THE COUNCIL'S IMMEDIATE ATTENTION IS NEEDED:**

**FIRST, BE ASSURED THAT, AS A MEMBER OF THE BOARD OF
EDUCATION, I AM COMMITTED TO SEEING TO IT THAT OUR INTERNET
CONNECTIONS IN THE SCHOOLS ARE USED FOR EDUCATIONAL
PURPOSES – NOT AS TOYS FOR ENTERTAINMENT OR AS A BULLETIN
BOARD FOR ADVERTISEMENTS. I SUGGEST THAT TEACHERS AND
ADMINISTRATORS RESTRICT YOUNGSTERS' ACCESS TO COMMERCIAL
SITES FOR THE PURPOSE OF NON ACADEMIC EXPLORATION WHEN IN
SCHOOL. IT IS REASONABLE AND, THEREFORE, EXCEPTABLE FOR
INSTANCE, THAT A CLASS TAKING A HEALTH COURSE OR STUDYING A
UNIT ON CONSUMER AWARENESS TO DO A PROJECT ON MARKETING
TECHNIQUES USED BY ALCOHOL AND TOBACCO COMPANIES – USING
THE COMPANIES' OWN WEB SITES AGAINST THEM! THIS APPLICATION
MAY NOT BE SENSABLE IN ALL INSTANCES, BUT A SCHOOL BASED
MANAGEMENT TEAM CAN MAKE APPROPRIATE JUDGEMENTS IN THE
BEST INTEREST OF THE STUDENTS.**

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BEYOND THE NARROW SCOPE OF THIS PUBLIC HEARING, I FEEL IMPELLED TO OFFER STILL OTHER OPINIONS ABOUT THE INTERNET WHICH MUST BECOME DISCUSSIONS OF THE CITY COUNCIL, PART OF DEBATE AND GIVEN EVERY CHANGE OF CONSIDERATION. THEREFORE, IF, AS I MENTIONED, THE INTERNET IS A VALUABLE RESEARCH AND RESOURCE TOOL, ITS MOST IMPORTANT USE MAY NOT BE IN THE CLASSROOM ITSELF, BUT AS A TOOL FOR TEACHERS. THE COUNCIL, THEN, SHOULD TAKE A CLOSE LOOK AT A PROPOSAL TO LINK EVERY TEACHER'S HOME TO THE INTERNET TO INSURE THAT PEDAGOGUES IN THE NEW YORK CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS ARE GIVEN ALL OF THE TOOLS COMMENSURATE WITH THEIR CAPABILITIES AND THE MISSION WE HAVE SET FOR THEM; THIS IS A VALUE ADDED OPPORTUNITY NOT TO DISMISS LIGHTLY. THUS, REFERENCE TO THIS PUBLIC HEARING, TEACHERS AT HOME WILL HAVE ACCESS TO LIQUOR AND CIGARETTE ADVERTISING, AND IF THEY CHOOSE CAN EDUCATE THEMSELVES ABOUT THE KIND OF PRESSURE SOME STUDENTS MIGHT ENCOUNTER, AND THE KIND OF "CODE WORDS" AND REFERENCES HIS OR HER STUDENTS MIGHT USE TO DISCUSS TOBACCO AND ALCOHOL USE. BEYOND THAT, THINK OF THE QUALITY CONTACT TIME TEACHERS CAN HAVE WITH THEIR STUDENTS IN ON-LINE CHATS ABOUT HOMEWORK!

THE COUNCIL CAN HAVE AN ENORMOUS IMPACT ON OUR SCHOOLS AND SAVE THE CITY MONEY BY SEEING TO IT THAT ALL NEW CONSTRUCTION IS MADE COMPATIBLE WITH THE TECHNOLOGY THAT IS STATE-OF-THE-ART AT THE TIME OF CONSTRUCTION. THERE IS NOTHING MORE EXPENSIVE THAN RETROFITTING A BUILDING FOR NEW COMMUNICATIONS MEDIA. SCHOOLS BEING BUILT NOW SHOULD NOT JUST BE WIRED FOR CABLE TELEVISION, BUT FOR INTERNET USE, AND FOR WHATEVER THE ANTICIPATED TECHNOLOGY IS, AND WE SHOULD RECOGNIZE THAT WHAT IS STATE-OF-THE-ART WHEN A SCHOOL IS FIRST DESIGNED MAY BE QUAIN ANTQUES BY THE TIME CONSTRUCTION BEGINS. THIS APPLIES TO SOFTWARE AS WELL AS HARDWARE. THE LATEST FILTERING PROGRAMS SHOULD BE PART OF THE TOTAL SOFTWARE PACKAGE PURCHASED FOR SCHOOLS.

FINALLY, WE SHOULD EXPAND OUR OWN VISION OF WHAT THE INTERNET CAN MEAN. WE CANNOT BE LIMITED TO IN-CLASSROOM INSTRUCTIONAL USE. CREATING A LINK THAT WILL GIVE CLASSROOM TEACHERS EMERGENCY MEDICAL INFORMATION AND FIRST AID RESOURCES TO HANDLE EMERGENCIES IS AN IDEA WHOSE TIME HAS COME, AND SUCH A SYSTEM COULD ALSO HELP EDUCATE OUR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS SO THAT WE COULD BE GIVING OUT EMERGENCY MEDICAL TECHNICIAN CERTIFICATIONS WITH HIGH SCHOOL

DIPLOMAS SOMEDAY. AFTER ALL, WEB SITES THAT MARKET ALCOHOL AND TOBACCO PRODUCTS DO NOT DOWNLOAD THEMSELVES: STUDENTS MUST GO LOOKING FOR THEM. IF THEY ARE BUSY WITH HEALTHIER TYPES OF LEARNING, OR JUST MORE INTERESTED IN OTHER THINGS, THOSE WEB SITES WILL HAVE NO IMPACT.

SO, MY MESSAGES TO THE COUNCIL ARE THESE:

THANK YOU, FOR ALL YOU HAVE DONE TO PROVIDE THE INTERNET TO OUR SCHOOLS. IT IS, AS I SAID, A USEFUL TOOL IN MANY INSTANCES AND IS SOMETHING YOUNG PEOPLE SHOULD BE FAMILIAR WITH. WE MUST BE VIGILANT, THOUGH, THAT WE ARE NOT FACED WITH A FINANCIAL CRISIS SIMILAR TO THE ASBESTOS EMERGENCY WHEN FUTURE SCHOOLS WILL HAVE TO BE RETROFITTED ALMOST BEFORE THEIR CONSTRUCTION IS COMPLETED.

DO NOT FEAR THAT BY PROVIDING IT YOU ARE OPENING A DOOR BEFORE THEM TO SOME HELLISH UNDERWORLD, BUT DO HELP US AS WE REMIND PARENTS THAT THEY ARE AS RESPONSIBLE FOR MONITORING THEIR KIDS' USE OF THIS ELECTRONIC PLAYGROUND AS THEY ARE FOR KEEPING AN EYE ON THE TELEVISION PROGRAMS THEY WATCH, THE MOVIES THEY SEE, AND THE THINGS THEY DO AND FRIENDS THEY "HANG OUT WITH" ON SUMMER EVENINGS. THE BEST

WAY WE CAN COUNTERACT PRESSURE ON KIDS TO TRY ALCOHOL AND TOBACCO IS TO SEE TO IT THAT PARENTS ARE EDUCATED AND TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR DISCUSSING WITH THEIR CHILDREN THE IMAGES AND MESSAGES THEY RECEIVE FROM TELEVISION, SPORTING EVENT SPONSORSHIP, THE INTERNET AND PEERS.

DO NOT THINK THAT THE INTERNET IS A SUBSTITUTE FOR SOLID PAY, SOLID TRAINING AND SOLID HIRING REQUIREMENTS FOR TEACHERS, FOR ADEQUATE FUNDING FOR ARTS EDUCATION OR TEXTBOOKS, FOR FULL SUPPORT FOR BUILDING MAINTENANCE AND CONSTRUCTION, OR ANYTHING ELSE. DO NOT EXPECT THAT PROGRAMS THAT INCLUDE INTERNET USE WILL RAISE READING SCORES, IMPROVE MATH SCORES, OR CUT HIGH SCHOOL DROP-OUT LEVELS.

FINALLY, EXPAND YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT THE INTERNET CAN MEAN. IT IS NOT JUST A CLASSROOM GADGET BUT CAN BE A TOOL FOR TEACHERS BEFORE THEY EVEN ENTER THE CLASSROOM, AND A VALUABLE RESOURCE FOR ALL THE THINGS SCHOOL MUST PROVIDE IN THE WAY OF STUDENT SERVICES BEYOND THE SIMPLE EDUCATIONAL MISSION.

THE TELEPHONE WAS INVENTED JUST A FEW BLOCKS FROM MY HOME, BY A STATEN ISLANDER, ANTONIO MEUCCL, YEARS BEFORE ALEXANDER GRAHAM BELL GOT HIS PATENT.

IF WE ADOPT THE ATTITUDES I HAVE OUTLINED, WE WILL KEEP NEW YORK AT THE FOREFRONT OF TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION, PROMOTE THE RESPONSIBLE USE OF THE NEW MEANS OF COMMUNICATION, AND GIVE OUR CHILDREN THE BASIC FOUNDATION THEY NEED SO THAT THE INVENTOR OF WHATEVER TAKES THE PLACE OF THE TELEPHONE TOMORROW MIGHT VERY WELL BE A PROUD GRADUATE OF THE NEW YORK CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS.