PICS rating services

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**PICS Rating Services:
evolution since 1998-1999 and state in late
2001 [1]**

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Promoting safer use of the Internet by combating illegal and harmful content on global networks is now a major concern for our societies. To address this concern, a lot of initiatives can be taken. Particularly, providing filtering techniques which can be used as parents/educators empowerment tools is frequently put forward. Among these techniques, some involve the electronic rating of Web sites. This kind of rating usually entails a standard called 'PICS' (Platform for Internet Content Selection).

The first and most important distinction that PICS introduced is a separation between labelling and filtering. From an a intellectual and ethical point of view, PICS is thus a beautiful solution: it can help to manage cultural and individual diversity.
PICS is promoted both by a part of the Internet industry and by regulators [Particularly, the European Union and the Council of Europe].

But, PICS, which is an already 'old'[2] standard, did not expand as expected and the PICS standard home page seems to be now nearly dead.

Between 1998-99 and the end of 2001, there have been several changes in PICS rating services.

First, we note that four of nine PICS services available and analysed in 1999 (see d'Udekem-Gevers 1999) were no longer to be found in 2001: two PICS Self-Rating services (Adequate.com and IT-RA) as well as two PICS Third -Party Rating Services (evaluWEB and Net Shepherd's Rating) seem to have disappeared.

Secondly, three self rating Web sites, Vancouver Webpages Rating Service, SafeSurf and Safe For Kids Web sites, still exist but are not very active.

Thirdly, one pioneer third party rating service, SurfWatch, is still alive but is now a "part of the SurfControl family of Internet management products. It is presented today as being dedicated exclusively to Original Equipment Manufacturer (OEM). And the SurfWatch Web site does not refer to PICS anymore. What has really occurred is thus not so clear.
Fourthly, one (national) Self-Rating (RSACi) was folded into an international system (ICRA). This seems to become more and more important.

Moreover, two other PICS Third-Party Rating Services are analysed in this current survey: ESRBi and SafetyOnline. (Both were already in existence in 1999 but were not included in our previous survey.)

Among the seven PICS rating services Web sites available, ICRA's seems to be the most dynamic and active. And ICRA system is the only one currently trying to tackle the challenge of the

cultural diversity. The others are written only in English except for SafetyOnline which is only in Japanese.

One conclusion we can draw of our current survey is that 3/4 of the current self ratings services have been developed by organisations or individuals with a non-profit goal. But there is no doubt that beyond some so-called 'non-profit organisations', as it is the case for ICRA, the economic and financial considerations involved are both enormous and world-wide. Moreover, filtering criteria have been defined by a non profit body for two current third party ratings services and by an Advisory Committee for the last one which has a commercial goal.

Which filtering services can use the current PICS ratings? We have found only 28 (of 146) filtering tools (suggested by GetNetWise) which are PICS compliant.

The number of PICS rated sites is a very relevant parameter to evaluate the efficiency of PICS based filtering techniques. Currently, the number of PICS rated sites still seems to be very low when compared to the total of existing Web sites. They are very far from reaching the critical mass needed to have efficient PICS based filtering techniques. But this situation could improve notably due to increased public support and incentives and due to technical progresses (such as the planned 'robotic third party labelling').

We think that the filtering techniques can provide a useful help for parents but are only one part of a whole set of elements which have to be implemented in the framework of the so-called Internet "co-regulation" (see d'Udekem-Gevers § Poullet, 2001). We underline that the market alone is unable to answer the need for a variety of European user opinions and cultures.

It is certainly worth providing parents with PICS based techniques. How to reach the critical mass of rated sites? We think that it would be contrary to the freedom of expression that the state impose a label on each Web site. But the public authorities can provide support and incentives to rate Web sites. Moreover, one way to reach a critical mass of PICS rated sites more easily is to concentrate the efforts on a few rating services or perhaps even on a single one.

Since 1998-99, several PICS rating services have disappeared and several are not very active. But only one, ICRA system shows a very positive evolution. It has received the support of the EU authorities and of the Council of Europe. It is the only one to try to tackle the challenge of cultural diversity. Moreover, because of its international nature, the ICRA system could be the focus of concentrated efforts and so perhaps more easily reach a critical mass of PICS labelled sites. Will the (financial) support of the industries which are behind the ICRA 'non-profit' association and the support of some authorities be enough to have this system and, finally, PICS also succeed?

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