

Your reference:

Our reference:

Date: 28th August 1996



METROPOLITAN POLICE SERVICE

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Dear

Councillor Goodman

Obscenity on the Internet

Thank you for your letter dated 23rd August.

You have apparently been misinformed about the current Metropolitan Police Service initiative to work with service providers to remove illegally obscene material from the Internet. This is a complex issue which I will attempt to briefly clarify in this letter but if you require further information please do not hesitate to contact me on the above telephone number.

You should be aware that the responsibilities of this unit include operations and policy matters relating to all forms of obscene publications across the Metropolitan Police District. We have been working with the Internet service providers through their representative trade association, and with the Home Office and DTI, examining the growing problem of pornography on the Internet.

I must emphasise that I am referring to obscene material of the most extreme nature, including an extensive and growing availability of paedophile pictures and video clips. The nature of this material is such that when presented in the more conventional forms of video and magazines individuals are being prosecuted almost daily for possession and/or publication of the material. It certainly does not fall within the rather innocuous term of 'chatlines' that you refer to in your letter.

As a result of ongoing work with service providers, and arising from a recent seminar at New Scotland Yard I wrote to a number of participants with a list of Newsgroups which had come to our notice from a variety of sources. When we examined the contents these had been found to contain material that breached the Obscene Publications Act or the Protection of Children Act. This was not a comprehensive list of all Newsgroups carrying such material but a starting point for the service providers to assist in the desire for self regulation. Unfortunately, this is not a desire by all of the industry and some companies are taking an irresponsible attitude attempting to shy away from their responsibilities by claiming 'censorship' in an attempt to abrogate their legal duty.

I acknowledge that the international nature of the Internet and the difficulties associated with the technology will always make the removal of illegal material difficult but the alternative is to do nothing and allow this hard core obscenity to proliferate freely available to anyone, including children, with access to a computer connected to the Internet. Software which attempts to block

access at the 'user' end is now becoming available but this does not remove the duty of service providers to work within the law. They have a crucial role to play in this and self regulation is going to be one of the most effective ways of combating the problem.

I trust this has gone some way to clarifying the situation but please telephone me if you require any further information.

Yours sincerely



Stephen French
Chief Inspector