Child Protection and the Internet: The "3-E" Solution (Empower, Educate & Enforce)

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Congress continues to explore ways to protect children from potentially objectionable content on the Internet as well as more serious threats, such as online predators. Myriad legislative and regulatory efforts are being considered to deal with these concerns. When thinking about these issues, Congress should divide them into two categories—the "bad pictures" problem (shorthand for all potentially objectionable content) and the "bad people" problem (predators or child pornographers lurking online). Then, Congress should embrace the "3-E" solution: **Empowerment, Education and Enforcement**.

When dealing with the so-called "bad pictures" problem, empowerment and education—not regulation—offer the best solution. They represent the better approach to objectionable content because they are, at once, both more practical and more effective than regulatory solutions. Empowerment and education solutions are more practical because they avoid the legal wrangles associated with regulatory solutions, which spend years in the courts under scrutiny (and are often struck down as unconstitutional). And they are more effective because they can adapt more quickly than regulatory solutions and be tailored to various societal / parental needs as well as breaking technological developments.

The first "E," **empowerment**, is primarily an industry responsibility. Companies, trade associations and non-profit organizations are providing numerous tools to help parents deal with objectionable content. These include: labeling and ratings systems (especially the use of metadata tagging); various filtering or monitoring technologies; set-top box parental controls (including gaming consoles); and other technological tools. The combination of these tools mean that parents now have multiple layers of technological protection at their disposal.

Education solutions are also being undertaken by industry. Almost every sector expends significant sums educating their consumers, parents and even children. But more could be done, especially on industry-wide, cross-sector basis. Government has an important role here, too. Media literacy needs to be integrated into school curricula beginning very early in the educational process. A more aggressive government educational role might also include public service announcements and campaigns that resemble the seat belt safety campaign that public officials have pushed for many years.

Finally, the third "E"—**enforcement**—refers to enforcement of existing laws governing online child pornography or child abuse (the "bad people" problem). This is where the government has a clear role. But we don't need more laws to do this job, nor do we need more regulation of the online industry. What is needed is better enforcement of existing child protection laws. More specifically, Congress needs to make sure that law enforcement officials have the resources they need to carry out the important task of protecting children from online threats. Importantly, Congress needs to make sure that law enforcement officials can spend most (or all) of their time dealing with the "bad people" problem in this fashion, and not be sidetracked in dealing with the "bad pictures" problem. Again, empowerment and education offer the superior solution to those issues.