

Business

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Antiobscenity bill focuses on cyberspace

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Urban renewal may soon be making Boston's Combat Zone a thing of the past. But on the Internet, where information is often free and there are no risks of communicable diseases, sexually explicit services have been growing steadily in size and popularity for more than a decade.

The best known are the Internet's news groups devoted to sexual-

ly explicit stories and photographs. With names like alt.sex.bestiality and alt.sex.pictures.male, they offer an array of sexually oriented information, including graphic descriptions of rape, incest, torture and murder, as well as vivid photographs that leave nothing to the imagination.

But US Sen. Jim Exon (D-Neb.) says its time to clean up cyberspace.

In early February, Exon introduced legislation that would make it illegal to transmit obscene, indecent

or harassing information over any telecommunication device. The Communications Decency Act would also prohibit the use of toll-free "800" numbers for adult "phone sex" lines, require cable systems to scramble the audio and video portions of adult pay-per-view programming and give cable operators the authority to block public access or leased access programs that include obscenity, indecency or nudity.

"I want to keep the information superhighway from resembling a red

light district," said Exon. "The explosion of technology also threatens an explosion of misuse."

Others disagree.

"I fear that these efforts to regulate obscenity on interactive information services will only stifle the free flow of information and discourage the robust development of new information services," Sen. Patrick J. Leahy (D-Vt.) said in a recent speech.

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"Instead of rushing to regulate ... we should encourage the development of technology that gives parents and other consumers the ability to control the information that can be accessed over a modem."

Civil rights advocates warn that while the Exon may mean well, his legislation would create a new era of censorship for all network users.

"The bill will have a chilling effect on network communications," says Marc Rotenberg, director of the Washington-based Electronic Privacy Information Center. "It will en-

courage companies and universities to engage in self-censorship, and to deny people the opportunity to get information on-line that they can routinely obtain in a bookstore, newsstand or library."

Rotenberg is also worried that the law would institutionalize eavesdropping on the Internet. At the MIT Media Lab, where the pornographic groups account for 37 out of 3,091 groups that are readily available on the lab's network, system administrator Anh Ho doubts that the law would even have its desired effect. "I think it would be impossible to enforce," said Ho.