



## A Pastoral Letter from the Catholic Bishops of Australia

As we approach the end of the first decade of the 21st Century, our society once again seems to be at the dawn of a new age. Young people leaving school today are the first generation to have grown up entirely in the Internet Age.

Their reality has been formed by the Internet and the mobile phone in ways that many of us from previous generations are still trying to understand. Together with the mobile phone, the Internet has transformed the way that conversations are held, friendships are maintained, entertainment is sought and information is gained. In the space of just two decades, the Internet has changed our lives in extraordinary ways.

Much of this change has been immeasurably for the better. The world has opened up and communication among people is now quicker and easier than ever before. Thanks to Church websites, the message of Jesus Christ is conveyed to people around the world in ways that the first evangelists could not even dream of. But the sheer magnitude of information available on the Web means that all of us must be discerning in what we read and the activities in which we engage on the Internet.

Even more importantly we have taken note in recent times of a growing tide of concern in the community about Internet Safety. Parents, educators, Church leaders, psychologists and others are increasingly raising concerns about the dangers of the Internet, particularly for young people, but for older people as well. A generational and technological divide can often mean that parents feel out of their depth when trying to monitor their children's Internet use.

This Pastoral Letter seeks to address these issues through the context of faith. In identifying some of the dangers of the Internet, and bringing some of the wisdom of our faith tradition to bear upon them, it is our hope that we can all be alert to those aspects of the Internet which can be a danger to our safety, to our human dignity, and to our relationships with each other and with God.



## What exactly is the Internet?

As the old maxim goes, the only constant in life is change and that is certainly true of the Internet. The uses of the Internet are constantly evolving.<sup>i</sup>

For many of us, the Internet will mean browsing websites. Anyone can set up a website and can post whatever information or entertainment they desire on it. Most companies, churches, groups and organisations will have a website, allowing people to access information about them. Individuals can do the same. Websites today are often a mix of text, pictures, sound and video.

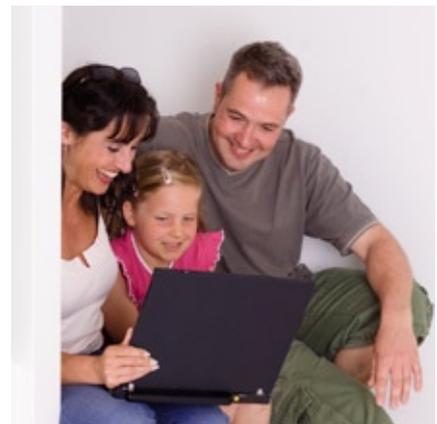
The Internet is a constantly unfolding entity and the next 'big thing' is always just around the corner.

For others, email is the primary use of the Internet – sending electronic mail to colleagues, friends and others. This has allowed us to communicate almost instantly with people, whether they be in the next room or across the globe. It is impossible to imagine the business world existing now without the speed of communication provided by email.

Chat rooms or online meeting places, are another use of the Internet. In these chat rooms, people can send messages back and forth to each other via their computer instantly, as though in conversation. Sometimes these chat rooms are purely social. In other instances, they might centre on a certain topic of mutual interest. Blogs and forums are another way that people exchange information and views on the Internet.

The newest phenomenon to sweep the Internet is known as social networking. Young people, in particular have flocked to these sites, such as Facebook and MySpace, which are seen as being the electronic equivalent to hanging out with your friends. Simply by creating a profile on one of these sites, you can share all manner of information with those people who you nominate as one of your social networking 'friends'. This can include photos, profiles of your likes and dislikes, as well as messages, music etc. The Church in Australia is helping young people to engage in faith-based social networking with the emergence of a number of such sites.

The use of the Internet on mobile phones is now commonplace. Essentially, whatever you can access or download on your home or office computer, can also be downloaded onto the latest mobile phone. Similarly video or photographs can be taken on mobile phones and uploaded onto websites. One such site, which is a repository for all kinds of video is YouTube ([www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)). On YouTube you can view everything from a video taken by kids on a mobile phone to messages from political leaders and even Lenten Messages from Bishops.



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## The Church and the Internet

### A world of possibilities

The Church takes “a fundamentally positive approach to the media” and this includes the Internet<sup>ii</sup>. In his message for World Communications Day in 2002, Pope John Paul II hailed the Internet as “A New Forum for Proclaiming the Gospel”<sup>iii</sup>. Throughout history, he said, the Church has had to cross many cultural thresholds, each of which called for fresh energy and imagination in proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The ageing Pontiff realised that with the communications and information revolution in full swing, the Church stood at another decisive gateway.

*“Like the new frontiers of other times, this one too is full of the interplay of danger and promise and not without the sense of adventure which marked other great periods of change.”<sup>iv</sup>*

The Church approaches the Internet “with realism and confidence”<sup>v</sup>, realising that, like other communications media, it is a means, not an end in itself.

The Internet can offer magnificent opportunities for evangelization “if used with competence and a clear awareness of its strengths and weaknesses”<sup>vi</sup>.

*“Above all, by providing information and stirring interest it makes possible an initial encounter with the Christian message, especially among the young who increasingly turn to the world of cyberspace as a window on the world. It is important, therefore, that the Christian community think of very practical ways of helping those who first make contact through the Internet to move from the virtual world of cyberspace to the real world of Christian community.”<sup>vii</sup>*

## Possibilities bring responsibilities

While embracing many of the opportunities presented by the Internet, Pope John Paul II did warn about some aspects of its ephemeral nature and the flood of information that the Internet provides.

“The Internet offers extensive knowledge, but it does not teach values; and when values are disregarded, our very humanity is demeaned...”

– POPE JOHN PAUL II

*“The Internet offers extensive knowledge, but it does not teach values; and when values are disregarded, our very humanity is demeaned and man easily loses sight of his transcendent dignity. Despite its enormous potential for good, some of the degrading and damaging ways in which the Internet can be used are already obvious to all, and public authorities surely have a responsibility to guarantee that this marvelous instrument serves the common good and does not become a source of harm.”<sup>viii</sup>*

Pope Benedict XVI has also spoken about the need to safeguard children and families from the dangers of the Internet.

*“On the one hand, undoubtedly, much of great benefit to civilization is contributed by the various components of the mass media,” he said. “On the other hand, it is also readily apparent that much of what is transmitted in various forms to the homes of millions of families around the world is destructive.”<sup>ix</sup>*

Indeed, it is the Church’s firm view that the Internet should be no more exempt than other media from reasonable laws against hate speech, libel, fraud, pornography – especially child pornography, and other offences.<sup>x</sup>

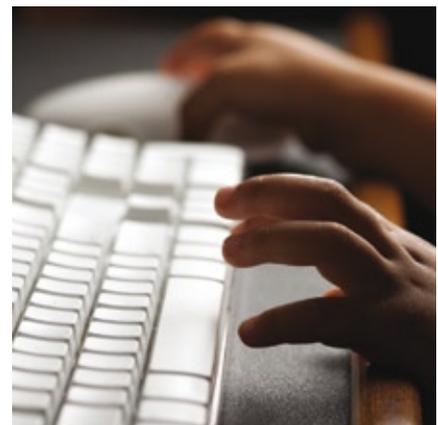
## Keeping children safe on the Internet Unwelcome sites

Any parent with even an elementary knowledge of the Internet knows that there is the ever-present danger of their children being exposed to dangerous material. This can be in the form of websites that are pornographic, violent or offensive. Children can come across this material quite inadvertently, while searching for other content, or particularly with teenagers, they might seek it out, thinking that they are doing so in the privacy of cyberspace. A recent online survey of teenage girls, run by an Australian teen magazine, found that seven out of 10 of those surveyed had accessed pornography sites by accident and 21 per cent on purpose<sup>xi</sup>.

The Federal Government’s NetAlert website advises parents to encourage safe-searching techniques with their children and to use family-friendly search engines. Internet filters to screen out much of this material are available by visiting the NetAlert website at [www.netalert.gov.au](http://www.netalert.gov.au).<sup>xii</sup>

Christian families should also discuss these Internet dangers with their children when they are discussing the wider issue of pornography and its damaging impact on human dignity and on relationships.

The Catholic Church in Australia has spoken before on its view that the Federal Government should regulate to ensure that Internet Service Providers block inappropriate material before it reaches home computers, as occurs in some other countries in Europe and the United Kingdom<sup>xiii</sup>. We welcome the Federal Government’s policy to require ISPs to filter content and look forward to the implementation of this policy at the earliest opportunity.<sup>xiv</sup>



## Stranger danger

The danger of the Internet for children is not always confined to material they might come across. There is the real prospect of 'stranger danger', particularly if children give out personal information to people they meet in chat rooms. Because of the anonymity of the Internet, paedophiles can prey on young people by pretending to be young themselves. They might then persuade children to meet them, on the pretense that they are meeting a friend the same age as them. It is imperative that children are taught never to give out any personal information to people they chat to on the Internet. Most particularly they should never reveal where they live, where they play sport or go to school, or that they are home alone at certain times.



## Cyber-bullying

A new form of an age-old problem is that of cyber-bullying. Whereas in the past, children might bully one another in the school ground or on the bus, the relative anonymity of the Internet has created a whole new scenario of harassment and bullying. This can be carried out via chat rooms and other social networking sites, as well as via text-messaging on mobile phones. According to NetAlert, Cyber-bullying can include teasing and being made fun of, spreading rumours online, exclusion from friendship circles, sending unwanted messages and defamation<sup>xv</sup>. This type of bullying may be more psychological than physical and may be harder for parents to detect. Talking openly with children about bullying is a good place to start so that they feel they can come to you if a problem develops.

## Financial exploitation

Finally, the Internet presents all sorts of opportunities for children, teenagers and unsuspecting adults to be exploited. Unwanted marketing aimed at children can be a financial risk, especially if children can gain access to a family credit card. Websites can feature all sorts of hidden features that cost money if they are 'clicked on'. Spam and computer viruses hidden as attractive advertisements or emails are also something to be guarded against.



## What can parents do to help children navigate the Net safely?

The dangers of the Internet can be navigated safely by putting in place a few simple principles.

The dangers of the Internet can be navigated safely by putting in place a few simple principles. The first is to supervise children's Internet use. Keep the family computer in a public space and don't allow children or teenagers to have a computer in their bedroom. A time limit on Internet use can also be helpful.

Family-friendly filters should be installed on the family computer to block out many of the inappropriate sites. Information on these is available from the NetAlert site [www.netalert.gov.au](http://www.netalert.gov.au)

Even more fundamentally, parents need to educate children on the dangers of the Internet and empower them to make correct and informed decisions. In this way a sense of trust can be formed so that young people grow into responsible users of the Internet, both at home and elsewhere.

## Internet pornography – insidious relationship wrecker

One of the most evil uses of the Internet is the ready availability of pornography. The relative anonymity of the Internet and its private nature means that there is a real danger of pornographic addiction. The decentralised nature of the Internet means that much of the material available online is extreme and violent. Materials that would not pass Australia's film and television system are freely available on the Internet. Indeed, according to a newspaper article on this topic, images of rape, coercion and abuse are commonplace on the Internet<sup>xvi</sup>. All of these images are humiliating and degrading, most often towards women.

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There is a growing body of research about the damage that Internet pornography is doing to marriages and relationships. In 2007, the Sydney Morning Herald spent two months charting this new social phenomenon which it said was “poisoning couples and destroying families”. The investigation found that counselors were reporting that an increasing number of clients had begun to cite Internet pornography as a factor in their relationship breakdowns. Michael Flood, a research fellow in gender studies at La Trobe University and co-author of the 2003 report “Youth and Pornography” in Australia told the SMH that “Men in growing numbers are using porn in ways that are secret, shameful and damaging. It is having a damaging impact on intimacy and sexuality”.<sup>xvii</sup> Some counselors refer to an Internet pornography addiction, others label it a compulsion.

Figures provided by Nielsen/NetRatings NetView show 2.7 million Australians visited an “adult” website in March of 2007 (this figure counts repeat visitors to adult websites only once); 4.3 million visited in the first quarter of that year. More than 35 per cent of all Internet users in the quarter ending March visited an adult website at least once.<sup>xviii</sup> The effects of sustained use of Internet pornography on a marriage can be heartbreaking. The person accessing the pornography can become less and less connected to the reality of a loving sexual partnership within marriage and the spouse becomes isolated and stricken with poor self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy. Of course, addiction to Internet pornography is no less damaging to single people or to those dedicated to living a life of celibacy, especially if this becomes an alternative to secure personal friendships.

The Church commends the intimate giving of spouses to each other. Pornography undermines this. It injures the dignity of its participants (actors, vendors, the public), since each one becomes an object of base pleasure and illicit profit for others. It immerses all who are involved in the illusion of a fantasy world.<sup>xix</sup> Civil authorities should prevent the production and distribution of pornographic materials, and that includes, as far as possible, distribution on the Internet.

## Conclusion

The Internet is the pervasive cultural influence of our time. It will continue to grow and evolve at a dizzying rate and the possibilities which this evolution will bring to us, as individuals, families and Church are as yet undreamt of. We should not be afraid to embrace those opportunities wholeheartedly. But there are dangers on the Internet which can affect the physical, spiritual and emotional safety and well-being of both children and adults. This Pastoral Letter has sought to highlight just some of those dangers and to view some of these issues through the prism of our faith in Jesus Christ.



We pray that in spending time getting to know some of the dangers of the Internet and in reflecting on how those dangers can impact on safety, human dignity and relationships, we can all be better prepared to avoid those dangers and to focus on the many positive attributes of the Internet. We hope that parents and grandparents who feel out of touch with the lives their children lead on the Internet will be encouraged by this letter to become more involved and more educated. Spending time together on the Internet and keeping the lines of communication open is the best way to stop problems from developing. Creating appropriate boundaries, rules and expectations regarding Internet use are also good practical steps.

We endorse the steps being taken by the Federal Government to require Internet Service Providers to filter out offensive material before it reaches home computers. While such filtering may never screen out all of the websites in question, it is operating successfully in other countries and is a major step forward in protecting the community from unwanted material on computer screens. We pray that ISP filtering will be a reality in Australia in the near future.

As Christians, we are called to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with all. Let us embrace the Internet with faith, enthusiasm, and wisdom, as we live our shared vocation in the cyber-age.

# Internet safety weblinks

**NetAlert – Protecting Australian Families Online - Federal Government**  
<http://www.netalert.gov.au>

**“Internet – a New Forum for Proclaiming the Gospel” – Pope John Paul II**  
[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/messages/communications/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_mes\\_20020122\\_world-communications-day\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/messages/communications/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_20020122_world-communications-day_en.html)

**Church and Internet – The Pontifical Council for Social Communications**  
[http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/pccs/documents/rc\\_pc\\_pccs\\_doc\\_20020228\\_church-internet\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_20020228_church-internet_en.html)

**Your Family and Cyberspace – US Conference of Catholic Bishops**  
<http://www.usccb.org/comm/cyberspace.shtml>

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- i Cf *NetAlert: A parent's guide to internet safety: How to keep young internet users safe*, (Commonwealth of Australia, 2007, p 2.
- ii Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *The Church and Internet*, (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2002), n. 1.
- iii Pope John Paul II. Message of the Holy Father for the 36th World Communications Day, “Internet: A New Forum for Proclaiming the Gospel”, accessed at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/messages/communications/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_mes\\_20020122\\_world-communications-day\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/messages/communications/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_20020122_world-communications-day_en.html), on February 18, 2008.
- iv Pope John Paul II, “Internet: A New Forum for Proclaiming the Gospel”, n 2.
- v *Ibid*, n. 3.
- vi *Ibid*, n. 3.
- vii *Ibid*, n. 3.
- viii *Ibid*, n. 4.
- ix Pope Benedict XVI, “Address to Plenary Council of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications”, March 9, 2007, accessed at <http://www.zenit.org/article-19115?l=english> on February 20, 2008.
- x *Ethics in Internet*, n. 16.
- xi Michael Carr-Gregg, “For kids, net result is gross” in *The Herald-Sun*, November 8, 2007.
- xii Australian Government, *NetAlert: A parent's guide to internet safety: How to keep young internet users safe*, (Commonwealth of Australia, 2007), p. 5.
- xiii Cf ACBC statement, “Catholic Church welcomes moves to block pornography, violence from home computers”, March 23, 2006, accessed at <http://www.acbc.catholic.org.au/bc/evanmis/200603231.htm>.
- xiv Senator Stephen Conroy, Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy, “Government welcomes ACMA report on internet filtering”, February 21, 2008, accessed at [http://www.minister.dbcde.gov.au/media/media\\_releases/2008/011](http://www.minister.dbcde.gov.au/media/media_releases/2008/011) on April 10, 2008.
- xv *Ibid*, p. 5.
- xvi Maree Crabbe and David Corlett, “The internet and the rise of porn”, in *The Age*, January 3, 2008.
- xvii Michael Flood quoted by Adele Horin in “How porn is wrecking relationships”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, accessed at [www.smh.com.au](http://www.smh.com.au) on May 29, 2007.
- xviii *Ibid*.
- xix *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n 2354.