PICS

Platform for Internet Content Selection

http://www.w3.org/PICS/

Main article: PICS: Internet Access Controls Without Censorship, Paul Resnick and Jim Miller, Communications of the ACM, 1996, vol. 39(10), pp. 87-93
Available at: http://www.w3.org/PICS/iacwcv2.htm

Why is there a need?

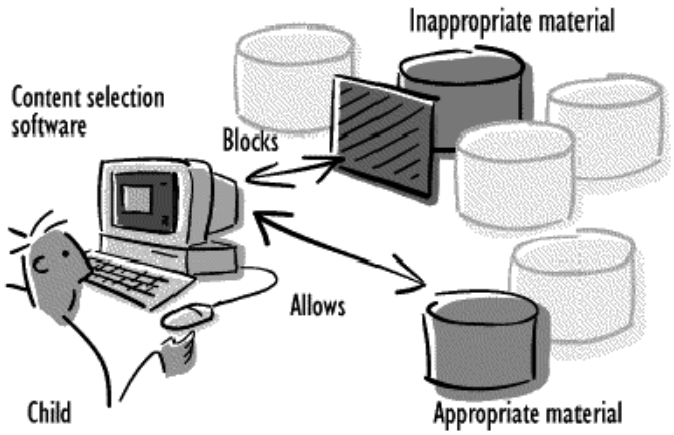
- Things are legal/illegal in different areas
  - E.g. gambling is legal in Nevada, but not in Pennsylvania
- Not all materials are appropriate for all audiences
  - Parents may wish not to expose their children to inappropriate material
  - Companies may want to prevent their employees from visiting recreational sites
- Searching the Web has become an extremely difficult task

Why something new?

- The CDA was a failure
  - How should it be enforced?
  - Only applicable in the US
  - Overly broad and vague, violating the right to free speech
- Existing nanny software is often inaccurate and “crude”
  - Often merely a keyword search or blocking a particular site
- Search engines are also inaccurate, “crude” and/or return too many hits
  - Some, but not all engines can use the META tag to specify keywords to index and a short description

So what can we do?

- Establish censorship offices everywhere (a’la George Orwell’s 1984) ?
- Disconnect the Net, segregating it into local pieces?
- Lobby the on-line publishing industry and the big ISPs?
- Label the content on the Internet and interpose selection software between the recipient and the on-line documents?



The Requirements:

- Labels must be able to be transmitted
  - in an HTML document
  - with a document transmitted in an RFC-822 format (email, news, HTTP)
  - via an HTTP-based database query
- Must not specify a particular labelling system, but rather a way of describing labelling systems
- Must be widely deployed by the industry
- Must be widely adopted by the on-line publishing industry
- Must have the support of a number of governments world-wide. It must not be culturally biased, must support full internationalisation, and be capable of significant localisation

What is PICS?

- PICS is an infrastructure for associating labels (metadata) with Internet content
- PICS is a pair of specifications that allows content to be labelled and queried about:
  - A syntax for describing rating services
  - A syntax for labels
  - An embedding of labels into the RFC-822 transmission format and the HTML document format
  - An extension of the HTTP protocol, so clients can request labels with a document
  - A query-syntax for an on-line database of labels
- PICS is voluntary

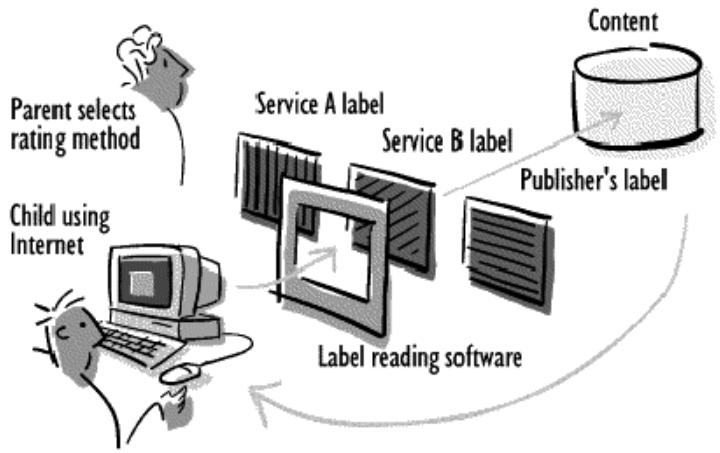
A Tour of PICS, rating service

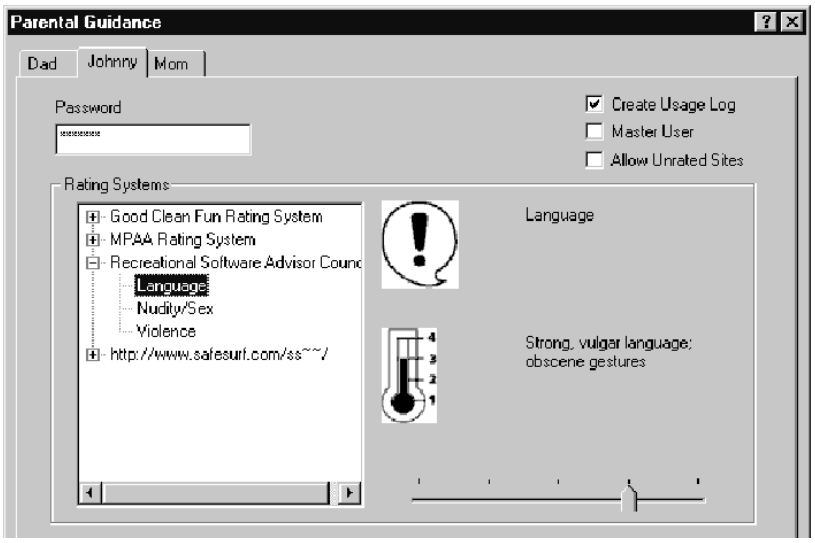
```
((PICS-version 1.1)
 (rating-system "http://MPAAscale.org/Ratings/Description/")
 (rating-service "http://MPAAscale.org/v1.0")
 (icon "icons/MPAAscale.gif")
 (name "The MPAA's Movie-rating Service")
 (description "A rating service based on the MPAA's movie-rating
   scale")

 (category
  (transmit-as "r")
  (name "Rating")
  (label (name "G") (value 0) (icon "icons/G.gif"))
  (label (name "PG") (value 1) (icon "icons/PG.gif"))
  (label (name "PG-13") (value 2) (icon "icons/PG-13.gif"))
  (label (name "R") (value 3) (icon "icons/R.gif"))
  (label (name "NC-17") (value 4) (icon "icons/NC-17.gif"))))
```

A Tour of PICS, label

```
(PICS-1.1 "http://old.rsac.org/v1.0/" labels
 on "1994.11.05T08:15-0500"
 until "1995.12.31T23:59-0000"
 for "http://www.gcf.org/stuff.html"
 by "John Doe"
 ratings (r 2))
```



What isn't PICS?

- PICS does not specify how supervisors set configuration rules
- PICS specifies little about how to run a labelling service
  - Not the labelling vocabulary
  - Not the granularity
  - Not who creates the labels
  - Not the coverage

Other Uses for Labels

- Guidence
  - Collaborative labeling
  - Matching end-users based on their joint labelling
- Classification
  - Label search
- Intellectual property
  - ©opyright notices

Summary

PICS provides a labeling infrastructure for the Internet. It does not specify how to label or how to run a labelling service or how to set configuration rules. It rather specifies how to describe a labelling service and labels, accommodating any set of labeling dimensions and any criteria for assigning labels.

Any PICS-compatible software can interpret labels from any source, because each source provides a machine-readable description of its labeling dimensions.

"Around the world, governments are considering restrictions on on-line content. Since children differ, contexts of use differ, and values differ, blanket restrictions on distribution can never meet everyone's needs. Selection software can meet diverse needs, by blocking reception, and labels are the raw materials for implementing context-specific selection criteria. The availability of large quantities of labels will also lead to new sorting, searching, filtering, and organizing tools that help users surf the Internet more efficiently."