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The Real Cost of the “.xxx” Domain

On March 18, 2011, ICANN (the organization that governs domain names on the internet) approved the formation of a new “.xxx” domain that will be reserved for sexually explicit and pornographic material. After ICANN’s decision was announced, the chief executive of ICM Registry (the company that will oversee the new .xxx domain pursuant to a registry agreement with ICANN) stated, “ICANN’s decision to give .xxx final approval is a landmark moment for the internet.” However, while ICM claims to have the best interest of the internet at heart, it appears that, like other “for profit” ventures, its real interest is in the untapped revenue source associated with selling domain names to providers of sexually explicit material. According to ICMRegistry.com, over 333,000 websites have pre-reserved with ICM as of March 21, 2011, at the cost of approximately \$70.00 per website. That represents a whopping \$23,310,000.00 in revenue, and the numbers are only growing. It really is somewhat of a sad commentary that so often in our society pecuniary gain for the one controls the collective conscience of humanity more than decency and good judgment.

With the advent of the internet, we have seen an interesting phenomenon. As the supply of sexually explicit material has increased, there has been a corresponding increase in the demand for such material. Yet, policy-makers continue to make decisions that effectively increase the supply of sexually explicit material to children, individuals and families – those who are harmed the most by such content. Social scientists increasingly support the conclusion that a person’s ability to form positive loving relationships (both in and out of the home) and to see others as human beings and not mere objects to be acted upon are severely compromised when one uses pornography. Additionally, science now substantiates the conclusion that pornography is addicting in a very real sense, much like other natural addictions such as gambling or over eating, and can diminish a person’s ability to make rational, healthy decisions. The effects of pornography on the actual user are devastating; but, like other addicting substances, the secondary effects to children, spouses, loved ones and even other innocent members of society are equally devastating. Ecclesiastical leaders or professionals who counsel with such individuals (those who use pornography and those who experience the secondary effects of such use) will unequivocally testify to the reality of the devastation, heartache and unhappiness that result from pornography addiction.

Now, some may attempt to distinguish the mounting social science evidence supporting the negative effects of viewing pornography, arguing that “the data can’t be conclusive because I view pornography and I am not experiencing any negative effects.” This argument ignores reality and is akin to arguing that “I consume alcohol and have not experienced any harmful effects; therefore, the harmful effects of alcohol consumption do not exist.” The social science data relating to the harmful effects of alcohol consumption, both on the individual user and on family members and society in general, are irrefutable

– health problems, traffic accidents, spousal and child abuse, etc. In fact, the harmful effects of alcohol consumption, on the individual user, family members and innocent members of society, are so accepted that our society has created laws governing the supply and distribution of alcohol (e.g. age limitations, restrictions on driving a vehicle, etc.) as well as the misuse of alcohol (e.g. criminal punishment). Most would agree that such laws are beneficial for the good of individuals, families and society in general.

But, for some reason, we have taken a “hands-off” approach to controlling the supply and distribution of pornography and sexually explicit material. Two examples to support this assertion will suffice: First, during the last two administrations of President Bush and President Obama, very few, if any, decisions have been made to prosecute producers and distributors of illegal obscene pornography on the internet under existing federal laws; second, the recent decision by ICANN to approve the creation of the .xxx domain.

Some have argued that the .xxx domain will encourage filtering and will consequently be a form of censorship. Interestingly, the adult entertainment lobby, at least publically, has opposed the creation of the .xxx domain on such grounds. Others have argued that having sexually explicit content on the .xxx domain will make such content more easily filterable, and thereby make the internet safer for minors and children. However, these arguments are largely irrelevant because they ignore one critical fact, that registering a website on the .xxx domain is completely voluntary and optional to providers of internet pornography. And so, with the costs of entry so low, it is likely that providers of internet pornography will strategically choose to double their coverage by registering on the .xxx domain while maintaining a presence on the .com domain. From a business standpoint, this is a no-brainer for an internet porn provider – a de minimis cost for a significant benefit to the bottom line.

And so, we, as a society are duped again, into sitting back and lackadaisically allowing policy makers to increase the supply of sexually explicit material uninhibited by controls, which would, if implemented and enforced, benefit children, individuals, families and society as a whole. How long can this laissez-faire attitude go on before we realize that there are some things we ought to be protecting more than the bottom line? How long before we, as a society, decide to stand against those things that threaten the very foundation of a stable society – the well being of children, individuals and families – without which, society could not exist, at least, not for long.