

Internet sites could be given 'cinemastyle age ratings'

Culture Secretary says

Internet sites could be given cinema-style age ratings as part of a Government crackdown on offensive and harmful online activity to be launched in the New Year, the Culture Secretary says.

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In an interview with *The Daily Telegraph*, Andy Burnham says he believes that new standards of decency need to be applied to the web. He is planning to negotiate with Barack Obama's incoming American administration to draw up new international rules for English language websites.

The Cabinet minister describes the internet as "quite a dangerous place" and says he wants internet-service providers (ISPs) to offer parents "child-safe" web services.

Giving film-style ratings to individual websites is one of the options being considered, he confirms. When asked directly whether age ratings could be introduced, Mr Burnham replies: "Yes, that would be an option. This is an area that is really now coming into full focus."

ISPs, such as BT, Tiscali, AOL or Sky could also be forced to offer internet services where the only websites accessible are those deemed suitable for children.

Mr Burnham also uses the interview to indicate that he will allocate money raised from the BBC's commercial activities to fund other public-service broadcasting such as Channel Four. He effectively rules out sharing the BBC licence fee between broadcasters as others have recommended.

His plans to rein in the internet, and censor some websites, are likely to trigger a major row with online advocates who ferociously guard the freedom of the world wide web.

However, Mr Burnham said: "If you look back at the people who created the internet they talked very deliberately about creating a space that Governments couldn't reach. I think we are having to revisit that stuff seriously now. It's true across the board in terms of content, harmful content, and copyright. Libel is [also] an emerging issue.

"There is content that should just not be available to be viewed. That is my view. Absolutely categorical. This is not a campaign against free speech, far from it; it is simply there is a wider public interest at stake when it involves harm to other people. We have got to get better at defining where the public interest lies and being clear about it."

Mr Burnham reveals that he is currently considering a range of new safeguards. Initially, as with copyright violations, these could be policed by internet providers. However, new laws may be threatened if the initial approach is not successful.

"I think there is definitely a case for clearer standards online," he said. "More ability for parents to understand if their child is on a site, what standards it is operating to. What are the protections that are in place?"

He points to the success of the 9pm television watershed at protecting children. The minister also backs a new age classification system on video games to stop children buying certain products.

Mr Burnham, himself a parent of three young children, says his goal is for internet providers to offer "child-safe" web services.

“It worries me - like anybody with children,” he says. “Leaving your child for two hours completely unregulated on the internet is not something you can do. This isn’t about turning the clock back. The internet has been empowering and democratising in many ways but we haven’t yet got the stakes in the ground to help people navigate their way safely around... what can be a very, very complex and quite dangerous world.”

Mr Burnham also wants new industry-wide “take down times”. This means that if websites such as YouTube or Facebook are alerted to offensive or harmful content they will have to remove it within a specified time once it is brought to their attention.

He also says that the Government is considering changing libel laws to give people access to cheap low-cost legal recourse if they are defamed online. The legal proposals are being drawn up by the Ministry of Justice.

Mr Burnham admits that his plans may be interpreted by some as “heavy-handed” but says the new standards drive is “utterly crucial”. Mr Burnham also believes that the inauguration of Barack Obama, the President-Elect, presents an opportunity to implement the major changes necessary for the web.

“The change of administration is a big moment. We have got a real opportunity to make common cause,” he says. “The more we seek international solutions to this stuff – the UK and the US working together – the more that an international norm will set an industry norm.”

The Culture Secretary is spending the Christmas holidays at his constituency in Lancashire but is planning to take major decisions on the future of public-service broadcasting in the New Year. Channel Four is facing a £150m shortfall in its finances and is calling for extra Government help. ITV is also growing increasingly alarmed about the financial implications of meeting the public-service commitments of its licenses.

Mr Burnham says that he is prepared to offer further public assistance to broadcasters other than the BBC. However, he indicates that he does not

favour “top-slicing” the licence fee. Instead, he may share the profits of the BBC Worldwide, which sells the rights to programmes such as Strictly Come Dancing to foreign broadcasters.

“I feel it is important to sustain quality content beyond the BBC,” he said. “The real priorities I have got in my mind are regional news, quality children’s content and original British children’s content, current affairs documentaries – that’s important. The thing now is to be absolutely clear on what the public wants to see beyond the BBC.

“Top-slicing the licence fee is an option that is going to have to remain on the table. I have to say it is not the option that I instinctively reach for first. I think there are other avenues to be explored.”