

- *A school-based arbitration process.* Arbitration is a quick and inexpensive way of settling disputes: guidelines about what is open to arbitration are established; both sides present their cases to an independent arbitrator; and the decision that is made generally stands up in court. Why shouldn't schools set up an arbitration procedure in which the rights of the disruptive students are taken into account, but the rights of the rest of the class to an education are paramount? This separate school judicial system could handle many of the problems that never get to court under the current system.

But if we are to make our schools safe and orderly, parents must also get involved. Parents of violent or disruptive students often show up to plead for their children. However, few parents of the 95 percent who want to learn ever step forward to demand safe and orderly schools for their kids. There is no question about the clout these parents would have if they rose up and told school boards what they have already told public opinion polls—that they have had enough.

Albert Shanker

Make Bombs, Not Porn?

If you can answer the following question, you are ready for big-time politics: Why is the U.S. Congress willing to put smut on the Internet under wraps but allow mayhem manuals to continue to zip along unobstructed?

Objections raised to regulating either type of material are basically the same: the regulations are said to infringe upon the right to free speech. Nevertheless, shaken by the Oklahoma explosion, legislators initially did take note of Internet messages such as “I want to make bombs and kill evil Zionist people in the government. Teach me. Give me text files.” Legislators were even more shaken by the

responses to such messages: the easy access to detailed texts, diagrams, and instructions on how to concoct bombs. (*The Big Book of Mischief* runs the equivalent of 93 pages. Other manuals, such as *The Terrorist Handbook*, are shorter but no less explicit.)

In light of this information, a Senate subcommittee held hearings on whether to curb the dissemination of bomb-making instructions via the Internet. Civil libertarians raised strong opposition. When Senator Dianne Feinstein argued that “protecting such speech...is not what this country is about,” Jerry Berman, executive director of the Center for Democracy and Technology, exclaimed: “Excuse me, Senator, but that *is* what this nation is all about.” Lawyers from the U.S. Department of Justice put forward the traditional objection: such a ban would “criminalize constitutionally protected speech.”

It was further argued that the suggested statute is discriminatory and makes no sense because bomb-making recipes are freely available elsewhere, from the *Encyclopedia Britannica* to the *Ragnar's Guide to Home and Recreational Use of High Explosives*. Efforts to limit only on-line recipes were said to constitute an attempt to “demonize” one medium, the Internet. Following such arguments, the proposed antiterrorism act contains no ban on guides for bomb-makers (other than outlawing the dissemination of information about making explosives if it is knowingly or intended to be used for a crime...which is like saying no glass cutters or lockpick sets for anyone who is about to commit a burglary).

Shortly thereafter, legislators were alarmed by reports that two teenagers had run away from home after forming friendships with strangers over the Internet. In one of these cases, a 13-year-old girl from Kentucky was found in Los Angeles after her on-line male friend suggested that “we can run around our room naked all day and all night.” Legislators were also exercised about obscene material readily available on the Internet, including depictions of sexual violence and bestiality. This time, though, faced with practically identical objections to those fielded during the antiterrorism hearings, Congress has moved to impose heavy fines and jail sentences on people who circulate certain sexually explicit material over electronic networks. (Several state assemblies, including those of Maryland and Virginia, have passed their own computer related anti-smut laws.)

Our elected officials are not required by law to make their acts consistent with one another or to explain themselves, unless properly challenged. One tries to fathom a reason.

The magnitude of the danger could make a difference; but are bombs less dangerous than smut? Even those most disturbed by porn concede that it is just one factor among many that may dispose its consumers to act abusively. And they recognize that we live in a culture drenched with sexually alluring messages, rushing at us from numerous channels, reinforcing one another. Each individual piece of sexually provocative material adds but an immeasurably small drop to the deluge of sexual promotion.

By contrast, a single bomb manual will do the devil's work all by itself. It tells one how to obtain the materials, how to mix them to worst effect, ways to fashion the trigger, where to place the bomb to maximize damage, and how to conceal it smartly. A potential bomb-maker only has to display one such mayhem manual on a PC or download the document to a printer.

Social scientists differ about the total effects of porn. While some believe it helps cause untoward behavior, others hold that it provides a harmless outlet to potentially dangerous psychological predispositions. Those who watch obscene videos, peep shows, and movies might otherwise be on the street acting out. (The amount of masturbation that occurs in these settings provides some credence to this notion.)

In contrast, I cannot find anyone who argues that bomb manuals have harmlessly vented anybody's violent proclivities. On the contrary, given that most hyper-aggressive individuals are not the tidy obsessive but the impulsive type, one of the best ways to slow them down is to make it more cumbersome for them to act out their violent fantasies. Having to go to a public place, a library, is just enough to keep some potential bomb-makers out of explosive mischief. Having to identify themselves to a librarian, and fearing that someone may be looking over their shoulders, will stop still others. In contrast, making mayhem manuals available to them by computer, day and night, at the flick of a switch, allows them to fashion explosives in complete privacy and with all the comforts of home.

Most difficult is to assess the size of the damage done. Porn may contribute to the sexual abuse of women and children, a very serious matter. Bombs kill, sometimes blowing away buildings full of people, including scores of children. Maybe Congress took into account that there was only one bombing in Oklahoma while sexual abuse is rather common? Even if one forgets about the World Trade Center and the Unabomber (on the grounds that these expert terrorists hardly need the Internet manuals), one notes that in 1993 (the last year for which information is available) there were 2418 bombings and 562 attempts. These explosions received less attention than Oklahoma City because they killed just a few individuals each time, but still 281 people were injured and 43 were killed in one year alone.

In short, it may be difficult to prove that bombs engender more harm than porn; but surely they do not create much less. Anyhow, no one is asked to choose between the two; if our elected officials can find that one may be regulated, then one is hard pressed to find a rational reason not to regulate the other.

Some members of Congress may feel that as a society we have always been much more prudish about sex than we have been circumspect about violence. But porn is more abusive than it is sexual. And recently we have begun to turn against violent images on TV, in movies, and in rap songs. Why skip mayhem manuals? I just don't get it.

If all else fails, maybe we can declare that bomb-making guides are deeply offensive to our values, without redeeming social merit, most assuredly obscene material, and hence covered by the new anti-smut provisions. This will spare Congress the trouble of having to make sense.

Amitai Etzioni