

ICRA's content labels and filter help parents protect their children from harmful Internet sites.

Internet Content Rating Association (ICRA)

The Internet Content Rating Association (ICRA) is an independent non-profit organisation with offices in the UK and the US. ICRA's mission is to help parents to protect their children from potentially harmful material on the Internet, whilst respecting the content providers' freedom of expression.

It provides a rating engine that web authors can use to label their web pages according how suitable they are for viewing by children, as well as a content filter that parents can download for use on their home computer.

ICRA is supported by a board whose members are from all the major players in the Internet and communications markets, including AOL, BT, Cable & Wireless, IBM, Microsoft, Novell and The Bertelsmann Foundation.

Cable & Wireless has been involved since the early days of ICRA's work and contributed financially to the development of both the content rating engine and the content filter.

How does content labelling work?

ICRA uses the Platform for Internet Content Selection (PICS), developed by the World Wide Web Consortium, which enables labels to be associated with Internet content. It was designed to help parents and teachers control the information that children access on the Internet.

Web authors are responsible for labelling their own pages — ICRA does not operate as a censor for Internet content

or make judgements about its suitability for children. To label a site, the content provider completes a questionnaire on the ICRA website, from which the ICRA labelling engine creates an appropriately formatted label.

The label is displayed onscreen and sent to the content provider via email. The content provider pastes the label onto the head of the web page and it will then be transmitted with the page each time it is called up by an Internet user. The system allows for the labelling of a single page, a directory or an entire site with a single label. The content provider does not need to paste the label onto every page if all the pages have the same type of material.

Web pages carrying this type of content label can be read and interpreted by the ICRA filter. ICRA is also working with product developers at Microsoft and Netscape to ensure that the next generation of their Content Advisor and NetWatch filtering tools have this capability.

Filtering categories

ICRA's labelling system is designed to be as objective as possible and to cover a wide range of content types. The broad filtering categories are:

- chat
- language used on the site
- nudity and sexual content of the site
- violence depicted on the site
- other issues such as gambling, drugs and alcohol

- **self-labelling, not censorship**
- **maximise visits to your site**
- **parents have full control**



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When the web author completes the ICRA questionnaire, they are asked questions within each category about whether a specific item or feature is present or absent on the site, and the context in which it appears. This information is carried in the label and used by filtering based on the ICRA filter and other applications to determine whether access to a site should be allowed.

Why label content?

If content providers are confident that their websites contain nothing that could be harmful to children, they may think it is not necessary to label them. However, if a site is not labelled, it may be blocked by default — when parents set up a filter for their child, they are offered an option to allow or disallow access to sites that have no rating. To maximise the number of visits to a site, it therefore makes sense to label it, even if it contains no material that could be described as harmful.

Operators of sites designed specifically for children will want to label them, as some search engines build their database of ‘child-friendly’ sites by looking for ICRA labels.

Most operators of ‘adults only’ sites are generally keen not to harm children and will label them accordingly. The labels will also help adult visitors who want to search for such material, as they can set their filter to find sites that are labelled as containing content of an adult nature.

In general, a site that carries an ICRA label is more likely to be perceived as trustworthy than one that isn’t labelled. If the vast majority of sites are labelled in a responsible manner, it will also help to demonstrate that the World Wide Web is willing and able to regulate itself, and doesn’t need to be controlled by government legislation.

Downloadable content filter

ICRA has developed its own content filter, to help parents control which Internet sites will be blocked and which will be allowed for their children. However, a filter is only part of the answer to the problem of children accessing harmful or unsuitable material, and they should always be supervised while they are online.

The filter can be downloaded from the ICRA website and provides the following features:

- reading of ICRA labels
- creation of the user’s own block and allow lists
- installation of templates — sets of rules for what to block or allow based on ICRA labels (or their absence), block lists and allow lists. These are made available by organisations in whose ideas and policies parents can choose to put their trust
- blocking of various online services, such as chatrooms and email
- creation of multiple profiles — you can set different rules for different members of your family

In compiling a profile of what to allow and what to block, you have to make a lot of choices. Filtering templates provide a quick and easy shortcut. By installing one or more templates, you let the template creators set up the filter for you. A template consists of:

- lists of websites that will be blocked (known as ‘block lists’)
- lists of websites that will be allowed (known as ‘allow lists’)
- rules to block or allow access to sites based on ICRA labels

You can get a list of currently available templates from the ICRA website. Even if you install templates, your own settings will always take priority. For example, if you include a site in your own block list, it will be blocked even if it is allowed by your templates.

Blocking is transparent — you can see why a particular site has been blocked, and choose to override it if necessary, using a password.

For more information, or to access the content providers’ questionnaire and the filter, please visit the ICRA website at www.icra.org