A matter of priorities

The Government last week took its first step towards regulating the Internet in Hong Kong by releasing a terse six-page document on how minors could be protected from being contaminated by undesirable materials from the global computer network.

An inter-departmental working group will spend the next month soliciting views from the 75 Internet service providers on whether they are willing to form a trade body for self-regulation. Officials are also looking into the possibility of fine-tuning the Obscene and Indecency Control Ordinance so that offensive digital data would fall within the ambit of legal control.

Worried that they would have to take on an extra legal burden, the Internet service providers took a sceptical view of the official effort.

The authorities' plan came after a federal court in Philadelphia ruled the Communications Decency Act as a breach of the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States.

Ironically, an American cyberspace guru, Dr Nicholas Negroponte of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, has been preaching in the region this week that official attempts to decide what should be banned from the Net are futile. Dr Negroponte, who wrote the popular book *Being Digital*, said any meaningful regulation of digital packets carried on the Net was impossible.

In fact, many of the concerned parties in the territory share the view that the Government has its priorities wrong. Despite extensive media reports on the issue, there is no empirical evidence to suggest Hong Kong youngsters spend time viewing cyber pornography. There is also no proof that students are seeking out chemical formulas on how to make bombs.

Instead, there is a growing consensus that the authorities should first focus resources on how to prepare the next generation for the

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onslaught of the information age.

Last Thursday, the Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups released a report entitled *Roads to the Future: a study on Internet and Young People*. The federation approached 659 young people aged between 15 and 29 last May. Of those approached, 113 were computer illiterate.

Among the remaining 546 computer users, 13 per cent said they had come across erotic material on the Net unintentionally or otherwise. Jacky Pang, senior research officer of the federation, said the figure was much lower than expected.

Mr Pang said he did not consider pornography on the Net a serious problem for local youngsters. He was far more frustrated by other disturbing findings emerging from the study.

About 40 per cent of these young computer users did have access to a personal computer at home. Meanwhile, only 18.5 per cent indicated they had experience of the Internet.

The federation has also drawn a comparison between the state of affairs between Hong Kong and its competitors in the region.

For instance, the Taiwanese Education Ministry promulgated a set of guidelines on information education at various levels in 1984. Since then, more than 10,000 teachers have already received special training and become "seeds" to help train their colleagues.

The most comprehensive survey on the supply of computer teachers in Hong Kong was conducted in 1991. At that time, only half of the computer teachers in

schools had received specialised training in computing.

In 1991, another study showed that two thirds of the 220 schools surveyed were using obsolete computers.

To date, teachers and students are still complaining about the lack of teaching facilities.

Although Hongkong Telecom has volunteered to provide secondary schools with free Internet access, educators are still worried that the schools would not be able to buy other related facilities.

A sum of $140 million has been earmarked for computing education for high schools for this financial year. This must cover not only the cost of software and hardware, but also remuneration for additional teachers.

A Chinese University lecturer estimated that the Government should pump at least $200 million a year into the system to equip all secondary schools to offer proper computer courses.

While Hong Kong society debates whether this would be money well spent, Singapore's Ministry of Education has made it a policy that all teachers should be connected to the Internet, not just at school but also at home.

Plans are also afoot to allow all primary and secondary schools to have access to the Net.

Elsewhere policy-makers are translating plans into action to ensure that their nations cannot only survive but thrive in the digital challenge of the next century.

The Netherlands, for instance, plans to invest $300 million to ensure that at least one million of its 15 million citizens can tap into the Net within the next two years.

The country's Minister of Economic Affairs Hans Wijers has been hailed as the Dutch answer to the United States' Vice-President Al Gore.

What we need now is probably not a second Lee Kwan Yew to take us through 1997, but an Al Gore to prepare our next generation for the 21st century and beyond.