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Subject: SPEECH BY MR DAVID T E LIM, 13 NOV 99, 1410 HRS

Singapore Government

PRESS RELEASE

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KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY MR DAVID T E LIM, MINISTER OF STATE FOR DEFENCE AND INFORMATION AND THE ARTS, AT "RAISING KIDS IN AN ONLINE WORLD: A NATIONAL SEMINAR FOR PARENTS" ON 13 NOV 99, 1410 HRS, RM 303-305, LEVEL 3, SINGAPORE INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION AND EXHIBITION CENTRE

1. Recently, Straits Times ran a story on the mother of a 14 year old boy who regretted putting a computer in the room of her son. She was afraid that her son would surf pornographic sites on the Internet instead of doing his homework (Long, Susan, "When Liberal Desires Meet Conservative Fears," The Straits Times, 25 Sep 99, pp 60). I can understand this mother's concern. She is not alone. Last week, a Channel NewsAsia Gallup Poll said that 82% of those surveyed feel that the Internet should be regulated.

2. Their concern is not unexpected. Already, more than half the homes in Singapore have PCs, and a high percentage of these have access to Internet. The growth of PC and Internet usage, especially by children, brings new challenges to today's parents.

3. I am happy to be here to speak to you on a subject that is important to all parents in this information age: how to raise kids in an online world.

4. The dilemma that parents face is this. On the one hand, the Internet is a invaluable educational resource. You can search through the world's best libraries or visit the world's most amazing museums all in the comfort of your home. But what makes it particularly promising and enticing is the ability to communicate with people from all over the world. Somewhere out there is someone who is interested in what you are interested in – everything from the Theory of Relativity to How to Clean Your Bicycle!

5. The Internet captures the imagination of young and old alike, because it is not confined to just words or pictures. It is not dry technology. It is an exciting medium, where you can see, hear, and interact.

6. But on the other hand, the Internet also poses serious dangers to unsuspecting children. There are people and companies peddling undesirable content such as pornography and Satanism. Kids can be influenced by people who push drugs, or be lured unsuspectingly into unwellcome sexual relationships.

7. Parents are therefore rightly concerned about the insidious and negative aspects of the Internet. In a recent straw poll done at 2 libraries, parents said that their top 2 concerns about the Internet were pornography and violence. Such concerns are not confined to Singapore. Another recent survey done by the Bertelsmann Foundation in June 1999 found a similarly high level of concern among parents in the US, Australia and other countries, on the risks of chat rooms and pornography.

8. This is a dilemma that we must resolve. Some parents say that they refrain from giving their children access to Internet because of its dangers. But this is not a realistic solution. For Singapore to prosper and succeed in the knowledge economy, our children cannot be unplugged from the rest of the world. Our schools will increasingly give pupils assignments that require them to use the Net. They have to stay connected to keep abreast of knowledge and technological advances.

9. We must therefore work out other ways to minimise or remove the dangers posed by the Internet. There are a number of things we have done, and can do, that will help us deal with this problem.

10. Firstly, the government has adopted practical measures to curtail the negative influences of the Internet. The Singapore Broadcasting Authority or SBA regulates Internet service and content providers through the Internet Class Licence Scheme and Code of Practice, which serve to protect public interest and safeguard the values of our society. This framework of minimum standards lays the ground rules for the safe use of the Internet. I am glad to say that service providers in Singapore have supported this Code of Practice, and I want to thank them for their support.

11. I am pleased that Internet Service Providers have done more than the requirements of this Code. They have taken the initiative to establish standards of good conduct, and taken steps to deal with Net abuses such as objectionable content,

viruses and junk mail. For the added protection of children and teenagers, our Internet Service Providers also offer special Family Access Network services. These services give parents the choice of an alternative Internet service that makes use of filtering software to prevent access to pornographic and some other objectionable sites. I would encourage more parents who have children at risk to consider such a service. I would also like to urge service providers to make these family access services more accessible, user-friendly and affordable.

12. Another practical measure that we can adopt is to encourage labelling of websites. SBA supports international efforts to label websites according to their content. This gives parents a tool to decide what sites are suitable for their children. SBA has encouraged local content providers to label their sites based on international standards. I hope that the internet industry in Singapore will also give its full support to this measure as standards develop.

13. The government will continue to track developments in the Internet world, to see what other practical measures we can adopt to regulate the net. But there is only so much that the government or service providers can do. The Internet is not a technology that can be easily regulated. It is a borderless medium and most of the sites with undesirable content are outside our legal jurisdiction. Furthermore, the dangers that children face on the Internet go beyond access to undesirable content. Children can also be tricked and hurt by "Cyber-predators" who prowl the Net, in various types of chat or discussion rooms, looking for unprepared and naïve children they can exploit.

14. Technology today has no fool-proof solution to sieve out unscrupulous people, and criminals such as paedophiles and con-men. The only effective protection is to inform, educate and prepare our children how to handle such people and situations. We need to teach our children to be street-smart in cyberspace and encourage them to use the Internet responsibly. Fundamental rules that have served us well in the real world can also protect our children on the Internet. For example, just as we teach our children not to meet strangers in isolated places we can also teach our children to apply these ground rules to the Internet.

15. Another thing we can do is to actively promote good sites that will appeal to children and teenagers - sites that are wholesome yet exciting and interesting.

16. This is where parents have a key role to play. I am glad to say that many parents in Singapore are willing to play a larger role. Our library poll also revealed that the vast majority of parents (more than 90% of the 200 polled) agree that children should be supervised when using the Net and that parents should have an active role in dealing with harmful online content.

17. But where parents may be willing to help, not all may know what to do. Some parents may not be comfortable or familiar with the use of computers and the Internet. They need to learn how the Internet works before they can guide their children on how to use it. And even parents who are computer savvy may not have the time and means to monitor all the developments on the Internet on their own.

18. I am therefore happy to announce the formation of The Parents Advisory Group for the Internet, or PAGi for short, which will provide parents with a support base to guide their children in the safe use of the Internet.

19. PAGi will work together with the Internet industry and government agencies to promote safe surfing and educate fellow parents about online safety. PAGi will comprise parents, of course, as well as educationists, community representatives and IT experts. I am glad to also announce that Mrs Carmee Lim, who has been such an effective Principal of Raffles Girls' Secondary School over the last 12 years, has agreed to chair this group. Carmee will, I am sure, bring the same level of dedication and enthusiasm that she has demonstrated in her career as an educator to this movement.

20. PAGi will develop and implement programmes to help parents supervise their children's online activities, and advise parents on how to guide children to be more discerning and responsible in the use of the Internet. The group has set up a website with useful information and tips for parents. The website features an online discussion forum for parents to exchange views. Over time, it will also endeavour to provide useful links to educational and interesting sites for young people.

21. PAGi is now on the look-out for concerned parents who would like to participate in its activities. This group is a good way for parents to get together to share ideas and support each other in managing their children's use of the Internet. Parents can also help by contributing reviews on sites that can be interesting and beneficial to children. I urge you to join the group and participate actively in its initiatives.

22. Ladies and gentlemen: raising kids in an online world has its challenges. But it is a challenge that we must rise to or be left behind. It is my hope that as a parent or a teacher, you will be willing to take-up this challenge. You can learn and grow with your children as you too tap into the wealth of information available on the Net.

23. The Internet world continues to develop rapidly. Today's seminar will, I'm sure, spark off debate on some issues. But the discussion on how we can better raise our kids in an Internet World will not end with this seminar. I hope you will continue your discussions on PAGi's online discussion forum or in your own groups. As parents, we can make the difference to prepare our children for a connected and digital world.

24. I wish you a rewarding seminar.