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Web sites could get film-style ratings

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LONDON (Reuters) - The kind of ratings used for films could be applied to Web sites in a bid to better police the Internet and protect children from harmful and offensive material, Britain's minister for culture has said.

Andy Burnham told The Daily Telegraph newspaper, published on Saturday, that the government was planning to negotiate with the administration of U.S. President-elect Barack Obama to draw up new international rules for English language Web sites.

"The more we seek international solutions to this stuff -- the UK and the U.S. working together -- the more that an international norm will set an industry norm," the newspaper reports the Culture Secretary as saying in an interview.

Giving Web sites film-style ratings would be one possibility.

"This is an area that is really now coming into full focus," Burnham told the paper.

Internet service providers could also be forced to offer services where the only sites accessible are those deemed suitable for children, the paper said.

Any moves to censor the Internet would go to the heart of a debate about freedom of speech on the World Wide Web.

"If you look back at the people who created the Internet they talked very deliberately about creating a space that governments couldn't reach," Burnham told The Telegraph. "I think we are having to revisit that stuff seriously now."

He said some content should not be available to be viewed.

"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."

Burnham, who has three young children, pointed to the example of a 9 p.m. television "watershed" in Britain before which certain material, like violence, cannot be broadcast, and said better controls were needed for the Internet.

The minister wants new industry-wide "take down times" so that Web sites like YouTube or Facebook would have to remove offensive or harmful content within a specified time once it is brought to their attention.

He also said Britain was considering changing libel laws to give people access to legal help if they are defamed online.

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