Social Ethics in the Electronic Community

Judy Hamilton

Kim looked at the message again:

"Is there a computer cluster somewhere where someone can be safe from pornography and harassment? I'm sick of this.

Judy Hamilton"

Kim, the University's Director of Academic Computing, knew from a conversation with the University Ombudswoman what Judy was complaining about: Judy had gone into a public computing cluster and sat down next to a male student whose screen was displaying a graphic image of a sexual act. Judy had asked the student to remove the image, since it was interfering with her ability to work comfortably, and he'd refused - loudly and contentiously. After a shouting match, Judy had left to find someplace else to work. She'd complained to friends, and to the University's Ombudswoman. The Ombudswoman had sent her to Kim. Judy's generic message was the first direct, formal complaint Academic Computing had received.

Kim knew that hard-core displays such as had offended Judy were relatively rare, but that other offending images - nudes, for example, and scanned-in pictures from the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue - were commonplace. Kim knew that many of them came over the network, sometimes from servers at other universities or in Denmark but sometimes from servers at the University, even one maintained by an outspoken faculty member. And Kim knew that many students would quietly remove offending images when someone else complained, but that others would refuse, citing their right to free speech. "I like this stuff and it helps me keep working," a male student had written Kim in another instance. "Why," the student had concluded, "is my work less important than hers?"

The University's policies did not forbid pornography, but they did forbid harassment. The harassment policy probably applied to Judy's case, Kim thought, but it fell short of what she wanted: for Kim and the University to forbid the display of pornographic images, and perhaps even to take technical steps to enforce the ban. In that case, Kim reflected, a student could be in trouble for displaying a pornographic image, even if it apparently offended no one. And Kim would need to define "pornographic," which was not necessary under the University's current policy. Then again, Kim needed to define "harassment," which didn't appear any easier.

Kim perceived two tasks: to respond to Judy's message, and to decide whether the University needed better or different policies to deal with her situation.