

## Web-Enabled Handsets Deliver a Squeaky-Clean Internet

Strict decency standards imposed by some cellular carriers on content may affect text and images sent between users.

**Tom Spring**

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Now playing on your Web-enabled cell phone: a PG-rated version of the Internet. As people increasingly listen to music, watch TV, and access the Web on their handsets, they notice significant content restrictions that don't exist on PCs.

Major U.S. wireless carriers have set strict decency guidelines for their content partners, restricting or banning potentially offensive language, ringtones, games, and videos--including, in some cases words, such as lesbian or pictures of women in swimsuits. In informal tests of text and multimedia messaging, we found that messages containing adult images and vulgar language did not always show up on the intended recipient's handset.

### Fear of the FCC

Why the restrictions? Wireless carriers want to ward off customer complaints--and regulation by the Federal Communications Commission, according to Julie Ask, an analyst with Jupiter Research.

"Are cell phones next on the feds' censorship wish list? You'd better believe it," said Adam Thierer, a senior fellow at the Progress & Freedom Foundation.

CTIA, the wireless industry trade group, has proposed wireless content guidelines that encourage network operators to label, filter, and limit access to words, images, and even sounds that some adults may consider inappropriate for children. But wireless carriers are imposing restrictions even stricter than the rules that the FCC imposes on broadcast TV and radio.

In content available through its handsets, Verizon Wireless prohibits the use of obscene language as well as images or videos that depict "passionate kissing." The carrier has specific rules for how much bare skin models may show and for what titles of digital files people can download.

"Anything you can access through your Verizon Wireless phone is appropriate for the entire family," says Verizon Wireless spokesperson Jeffrey Nelson.

Cingular Safe content guidelines, meanwhile, ban such words as words condom and lesbian along with images "depicting or insinuating nudity or partial nudity." The guidelines, which Cingular distributes to its content-provider partners, cite the Sports Illustrated swimsuit issue as an example of inappropriate material.

T-Mobile says that its standards for wireless content are on a par with those governing the covers of mainstream magazines displayed on newsstands.

Scott Roesch, general manager of Atom Entertainment's Atom Films, says that Verizon Wireless's VCast service has rejected a number of its short films, including one without dialogue that chronicled a woman's attempt to use prosthetic breasts to win the admiration of a housemate.

### Community Cops

Carriers that offer their customers mobile community services are particularly eager to avoid criticism that has dogged some community Web sites, including accusations that they give sexual predators easy access to young people. AirG, which runs mobile communities on Cingular and Sprint, uses filtering software and a 30-person staff of monitors to keep user communications free of profanity, personal contact information, and hate speech.

Are carriers also censoring messages that one user sends to another? We sent a slew of R- and NC-17-rated text and images to handsets, using a variety of carriers, and found that some messages sent over Cingular and U.S. Cellular's networks did not reach their destination, or were changed in transit.

Spokespersons for these carriers say that they don't censor text or multimedia messages.

"However, messages do travel across numerous other network components outside U.S. Cellular, some of which may filter messages based on content," says Jonathan Guerin, U.S. Cellular spokesperson.

Cingular did not respond to our requests for an explanation of why images with mature-themed file names were replaced by a red X when they reached Cingular handsets.

Rob Hyatt, Cingular's executive director of premium content, says that Cingular simply wants to avoid offending parents who buy cell phones for their kids.

Not all cell phone users are happy about content restrictions. Matt Privett, an investment banker from North Carolina, canceled his \$15-a-month Verizon Wireless VCast service because it was too bland. "I didn't know I was signing up for wireless equivalent of the Nickelodeon channel," Privett says.

-- Tom Spring