

# Reporters Without Borders

<http://www.rsf.org/russie-major-threat-to-news-coverage-from-01-09-2012,43314.html>

Europe/Ex-USSR - Russia

Internet puritanism

## Major threat to news coverage from law "protecting minors" online

1 September 2012

Reporters Without Borders reiterates its condemnation of the confusion resulting from a [new law intended to protect minors from "harmful" content](#), which takes effect today. Approved by the Duma in July, [it allows the authorities to compile a website blacklist](#).

"The law's vagueness and inconsistencies render its repressive provisions even more threatening and are encouraging journalists to censor themselves," Reporters Without Borders said. "The vague definition of 'harmful content' leaves too much room for interpretation and increases the probability of overblocking. How are the media to cover natural disasters, wars and sex crimes with these constraints?"

"As defined, the requirement to put age ban labels on content is absurd and dangerous. On the grounds of protecting minors, this law is likely to place serious obstacles on the media's ability to provide the public with general news coverage. We urge parliament to clarify this law and to strike out those provisions that violate the constitution and international agreements that Russia has ratified."

The law's imprecisions and contradictions have forced officials to provide explanations but unfortunately the explanations have also been contradictory. Questions are currently focusing on the nature of the content that is banned for minors.

Under the final version of the law, the media are supposed to prevent children from seeing content that contains violence, sex or rude words and content that encourages them to smoke or drink alcohol. To this end, every offending story, video or photo will have to be labelled "banned for minors under the age of" 6, 12, 16 or 18.

Successive comments by Vladimir Pikov, the spokesman of Roskomnadzor (the Federal Service for Supervision in the Sphere of Telecom, Information Technologies and Mass Communications), on 29 August were not reassuring.

Pikov said [all online media except news agencies were required to put age ban labels on their content](#) but [print media that cover politics and current affairs were not](#). Each individual article or item was supposed to be labelled, but "if that proves too complicated, the entire website must be labelled. "Media that are exempt from labelling are free to adopt it on their own initiative, if they want to," he added.

The Russian media are split between those that are panicking about the new provisions and those that are just perplexed. To avoid any risk, [many online media representatives have decided they may have to label their entire site as "banned to those under the age of 18"](#) even if this could have a big impact on their readership and could result in their site being blocked by some Internet Service Providers, public WiFi networks and public institutions such as schools.

The independent newspaper *Kommersant's* lawyers say its entire website will be labelled "banned to those under the age of 16" from today onwards. Although news agencies are

supposed to be exempt, *Interfax* has already decided [to label its website](#) "only for adults."

The fear has spread to the traditional media. [Alexei Venediktov](#), editor in chief of the independent radio station *Echo of Moscow*, announced on Twitter on 28 August that he is temporarily suspending "For adults, about adults," a programme that has been hosted since 2004 by the lawyer and family psychologist **Mikhail Labkovski**.

Lev Makarov, the CEO of the TV station 2x2, even announced that violent sequences would be removed from series such as "The Simpsons" and "South Park," and that these series would henceforth only be broadcast after 11 pm.

At same time, producers have protested that characters who smoke would be censored from very popular Soviet cartoons, while the media are abuzz with [rumours about lists of words or bodily postures that could be banned from the screen](#).

Some journalists have complained that foreign news websites, to which the law does not apply, will have an unfair commercial advantage.

In response to all the concerns being voiced by journalists, Roskomnadzor has promised that the law will be phased in gradually and that any initial problems will be resolved through consultation with the media concerned.

