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Librarians in Quandary Over Web Access

As libraries try to provide equal access to the World Wide Web, they face increasing pressure to block access to sexually oriented sites.

*By Pat Newcombe
Special to Government Technology*

Public librarians find themselves at a crossroads, thanks to the wide array of information available on the World Wide Web. Controversy clouds the role librarians should play in society and what are considered constitutionally appropriate library resources.

In communities across the country, the political and moral climate is becoming more conservative. Debate is heating up over allowing access to sexual material on the Net, particularly by minors. As more public libraries offer connections to the Internet, librarians must grapple with the concepts of intellectual freedom and censorship and worry about protecting themselves from the threat of criminal liability.

Already, President Clinton signed into law the Communications Decency Act, making it a felony punishable by fine and jail time to make available sexually offensive material which may be accessible to children. In June, a special three-judge appellate panel named to hear the case, ruled the act an unconstitutional violation of free speech. The court's ruling has been appealed to the Supreme Court.

The American Library Association (ALA) believes that a public library's mission is to provide patrons equal access to all library resources, and that library policies and procedures should not deny minors equal access. Equal access increasingly means allowing children to navigate the Web on their local library computer terminals.

Today, 45 percent of U.S. public libraries offer connections to the Internet, according to a survey conducted by the U.S. National Commission on Libraries and Information Sciences (NCLIS). This is a 113 percent increase since 1994, when a similar NCLIS survey found 21 percent of public libraries connected. Preliminary survey analysis indicates that this number could exceed 60 percent by 1997.

SOFTWARE CENSORS

While libraries can select specific books for their collections, they cannot do the same with Web sites. The Internet comes as a whole collection. Yet citizens who pay taxes for this access feel that libraries are responsible for holding this resource up to community standards. So, public



Judith F. Krug

librarians have come up with a variety of creative solutions that address the political concerns of offering Internet access.

In Michigan, Bev Papai, director of the Farmington Hills Community Library, purchased privacy screens to fit over the monitors of the Adult Department computers. (Computers in the children's room use filtering software.) The screens limit the observation of images on the computer monitors. Papai is pleased with the privacy screens, which make the monitor appear black from an angle, making it difficult for any passerby to see what the user is viewing. Only when a person stands directly behind the

**SurfWatch,
a filtering
software, blocked
access to the
White House
home page
over the word
"couple."**

monitor is the screen visible.

Some libraries use filtering software to circumvent complaints about children accessing inappropriate material on the Web. Several software companies have created programs that claim to police the Net, preventing access to graphic pornography. Cyber Patrol, SurfWatch and Net Nanny are among the more popular ones available. These programs filter out material the programs' publishers view as offensive by using a database of banned sites. Any request to visit a specific site is compared against the database. If there is a match, the computer blocks the user and fails the access.

The database also may contain a list of words that could lead a user to an objectionable site if entered into a search engine, or as part of a Uniform Resource Locator (URL). Some of these software tools can restrict access to only those sites rated acceptable by the Recreational Software Advisory Council and SafeSurf, two Internet rating groups.

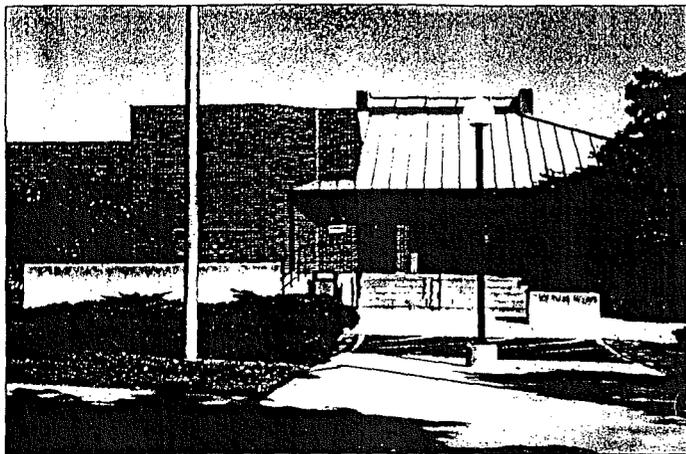
The programs work because search engines look at HTML tags describing origins of a home page in order to create abstracts of the sites. Pornographic Web pages usually advertise their addresses by using sexual terms in these tags. Filtering software can prevent much of the descriptive word searching used to locate this material.

However, these types of filtering programs are far from perfect. Software makers have a hard time keeping up with the 3,000+ new Internet sites posted daily. The programs are only updated on a monthly basis, so new sites will fall through the cracks. Nor are the databases of objectionable words perfect in catching the many synonyms for sexual terms which can link to an indecent site.

Other libraries are offering both filtered and unfiltered access to the Internet. Because of the "nature of the Internet and the World Wide Web, objectionable sites cannot be totally eliminated even through the use of filtering software," said Farmington Community Library Board of Trustee Clark G. Doughty.

The library installed Cyber Patrol, developed by Microsystems Software. Papai was concerned about eliminating access to useful information with the software, but she feels justified in using it. "It is simply a risk we are willing to take to assure the greatest level of comfort to all users of the building," she said. The software costs about \$50 and is available on a subscription basis. But Papai cautions that "filtering software will never replace a parent's guidance. Parents have to instill in children certain values."

Lesley Williams, head of Information



Schaumburg Township Public Library

Services at Evanston Public Library, feels that "by using filtering software, libraries are setting themselves up for liability, due to the presumed protection from graphic sites." Joyce Latham, director of library automation at the Chicago Public Library, agrees. "Libraries are vulnerable," she said. "We should not pursue strategies in the short-term that make us vulnerable in the long-term."

Other libraries are less discriminating about the use of blocking software. Michael Madden, director of Schaumburg Township District Library in Illinois, uses Cyber Patrol at all Internet stations in the library. He likes the software's flexibility. "You can unblock a specific site by overriding the program," he said.

There is concern among many librarians that blocking software will prevent access to valuable information, leading to a form of censorship. Certain words can be targeted and blocked, but it's a hit-or-miss proposition. Earlier this year, SurfWatch, a filtering software, blocked access to the White House home page over the word "couple." The term was used in talking about the Clinton and Gore families.

Meanwhile, Schaumburg's library has been using Cyber Patrol for a few months, and Madden mentioned that a few inappropriate sites have come through. "It's not perfect," he said.

VIEWER DISCRETION ADVISED

Certain libraries forego software tools and risk full Internet access. According to Judith Krug, director of ALA's Office of Intellectual Freedom, "the librarian's role is to bring people together with information, not keep it from them." She believes filtering software is "contrary to what a library stands for, and is definitely not appropriate for a public library."

In Evanston, the library's policy states, in part, that patrons use the Internet at their own discretion and that parents are expected to monitor its use by minors. Some libraries will not restrict access to any material based on the age of the borrower.

Libraries such as Evanston, and advocates of unfettered access to the Web, feel that the amount of indecent material on the Web is exaggerated. "For some reason, people believe the Internet is replete with pornographic and explicit sites," said Krug. "Only three percent of the material on the

may be sites you wouldn't want your child to view."

To retrieve much of this material, she feels a user would have to be looking for it, and is not likely to stumble across it. Also, much of the access to hardcore pornography requires a credit card to buy passwords. Libraries that do give full access to the Internet provide a warning statement that the library has no control over the contents of cyberspace. Oklahoma City's public library system uses the following disclaimer: "The Internet is an unregulated medium. It offers access to a wealth of material that is personally, professionally and culturally enriching. It also enables access to some material that may be offensive, disturbing and/or illegal."

Other libraries will not provide access to minors unless parental consent is obtained. At most libraries, when children receive permission to obtain a library card, parents are asked to take responsibility for materials the child reads. Similar policies regarding Internet use are springing up in libraries, requiring parents to be responsible for their child's Internet activity.

Other strategies include offering classes to both parents and children on searching the Internet. At Metropolitan Library Systems, serving Oklahoma City, Donna Morris, director of Public Services, said that because of legal concerns with Internet access the library requires all patrons to become certified either by taking an introductory Internet class or by completing a self-instruction program.

Some libraries try to provide useful listings of Web sites for searching specific types of information. The Simsbury, Conn., Public Library recommends and catalogs Web sites and takes full responsibility for these.

Selection is guided by the collection development policy of the library, according to Susan Bullock, director.

MAXIMUM CONTROL

Public pressure is mounting on libraries to find acceptable solutions that balance intellectual freedom with the community support that all public libraries need. With the Communication Decency Act's ruling appealed to the Supreme Court, the censorship controversy continues, placing libraries in a very difficult situation.

Karen Jo Gounaud, founder of Family Friendly Libraries — a national grassroots network of concerned citizens, librarians and library trustees — believes we need "a return to policies placing libraries under maximum local control with more acknowledgment of taxpayer authority and community standards."

ALA's Krug, however, counters that the Internet is a unique communications medium, echoing the words of District Judge Stewart Dalzell, who, in his supporting opinion against the Communications Decency Act, said: "As the most participatory form of mass speech yet developed, the Internet deserves the highest protection from governmental intrusion."

Krug also reiterated the ALA guidelines which state that "only parents and legal guardians have the right and responsibility to restrict the access of their children — and only their children — to library resources."

For more information call Bev Papai at 810/848-4301.

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