2000

Internet Filter Use In "ACL" Libraries

Diane Sullivan
Liberty University

The Christian Librarian is the official publication of the Association of Christian Librarians (ACL). To learn more about ACL and its products and services please visit //www.acl.org/

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/tcl

Part of the Library and Information Science Commons

INTERNET FILTER USE IN "ACL" LIBRARIES

Diane Sullivan,
External Services
Librarian,
Liberty University,
Lynchburg, Virginia

Will Internet filters deliver us from evil or are they a necessary evil? Are Christian colleges using Internet filters? If so, which filters? What roles are Christian librarians assuming in this decision-making process?

The decision facing many public libraries concerning the question of Internet filters does not have the same ramifications for Christian college libraries. The battle for Constitutional First Amendment rights does not concern private institutions in as much as the First Amendment does not guarantee the "right to free speech", but forbids the government from restricting the free speech of its citizens.[1] Yet Christian colleges have always maintained standards for conduct and behavior in keeping with the mission and cultural identity of the institution. The Internet, with all its treasures and snares, is merely the newest challenge facing Christian college and library administrators.

Emotions hinder the filter debate. Rhetoric flies in the face of reason – some champion the rights of individuals, others the protection of children. Many assume that the easy availability of pornography is the only danger on the Internet, yet the road to a wired wonderland is fraught with other pitfalls as well – hate sites, revisionist history, racism, copyright piracy, gambling, stalking, pedophilia, personal threats, consumer frauds, and the latest ailment, Internet addiction.

The American Library Association affirms that "the use of filtering software by libraries to block access to constitutionally protected speech violates the Library Bill of Rights."[2] ALA asserts that material on the Internet deserves the same Constitutional protections enjoyed by books on the shelves. This declaration has brought the ire of politicians, pro-family groups, and Dr. Laura Schlessinger, a nationally syndicated talk show host. David Burt and his organization, Filtering Facts, a small non-profit organization which promotes library filtering, have published articles on a website opposing this ALA policy.[3] Family-Friendly Libraries and the Family Research Council have also published a great deal of literature in favor of Internet filtering.

Just as behavior codes or dress codes prescribe behavior on Christian college campuses, libraries are faced with the task of upholding campus standards and serving the best interest of their clientele. To some that may involve selecting an Internet filter. Others may rely upon an acceptable use policy that is in alignment with campus policies. This article attempts to capture a glimpse of what Christian college libraries are doing to face the issues of campus Internet access.

BACKGROUND

There have always been "filters" in place to limit access to objectionable materials – an informal network of publishers, bookshop owners, newsstand proprietors, and librarians. Printing and publishing is an expensive endeavor. Publishers determine what will go into print and what will be promoted. Printed pornography or objectionable material was kept from children by a number of factors, not by just parental control or governmental prohibitions. The Internet has swept these barriers aside. It is now possible to publish anything online with minimal cost; so "with a couple of keystrokes, ubiquitous distribution is possible without the interference of gatekeepers like bookshop owners and librarians."[4]

Many libraries have had access to the Internet for years with no controversy. But one of the greatest advances on the Internet is the access and development of graphical interfaces on the World Wide Web. With the advent of "graphical user interface" (GUI) and the abundance of photographs and capability for audio and video, comes the attraction for pornographers to inundate the Web with pornographic images.[5]

Computer hardware, software, wiring, service and maintenance carry high price tags. And in the scurry to tap into the latest in technology, educators have seen the budget shifted from more mundane needs such as buildings, teachers, and textbooks.[6] On college campuses other problems and issues have arisen as Internet availability becomes more prevalent. As demand increases, college computer resources are stretched. As students demand access to all-night computer labs, they are subject to becoming addicted or otherwise engaging in non-academic pursuits.

Alfred University in New York found a direct connection between dropout rates of new freshman and Internet abuse. An in-house survey revealed that 43% of these dropouts had been staying up late at night logged on to the Internet.[7] Students at Ohio State University were restricted to six hours per day on the Internet because of the limited number of modems and the large number of students who stay on the Net for long stretches of time.[8]

At the urging of parents and others alarmed at the accessibility of sexually explicit material on the Internet, Congress passed the 1996 Communications Decency Act. The Act made it a crime to transmit or display to a minor any indecent material or communication. President Clinton signed the bill into law on February 8, 1996. Yet the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the Communications Decency Act in June 1997 as unconstitutional in a suit filed by a consortium, including the ALA and Microsoft.[9] Free speech advocates argued that the Internet should be self-regulated without government control.

The Internet now "stands shoulder to shoulder with print media in the full protection of the First Amendment."[10] With the defeat of the Communications Decency Act, the ultimate responsibility of protecting Internet-active young people is left in the hands of parents.[11] Or, we might add, in the hands of Christian college librarians and administrators.

TYPES OF FILTERS

The most basic type of filter identifies and blocks sites by keyword. Objectionable terms in a predetermined list almost always relate to sexuality, sexual orientation, or human reproduction. Cyber Patrol, Cybersitter and Bess block sites by keywords selected by their administrators.[12] Cybersitter includes "death" and Cyber Patrol includes "pain" in its list of forbidden words.[13] Probably the greatest complaint is that blocked keywords may be

USE OF INTERNET FILTERS IN CHRISTIAN COLLEGE LIBRARIES

Libraries With Internet Filters 41% (21)

Libraries Without Internet Filters 59% (30)

legitimate but also have unfortunate slang or vulgar uses. Simple text filters cannot distinguish between appropriate uses of the word and inappropriate uses of the same. Therefore sites containing the word "breast" may be blocked, thereby eliminating useful sites on breast cancer or chicken breast recipes. When blocking for "sex", some filters eliminate sextant, sexton, Sussex, or Essex.
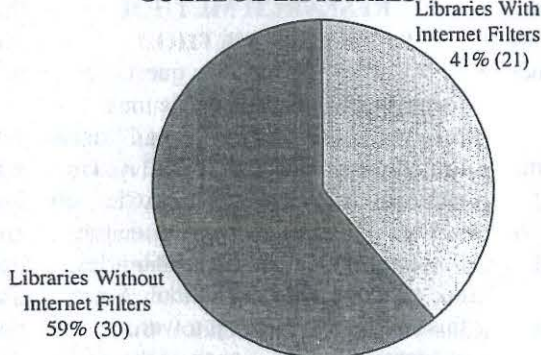
Keyword blocking may also be described by vendors as "content identification", "content analysis", "dynamic document review," and "phrase blocking". Experts recommend that librarians be able to view the list of keywords that are used in text blocking. This feature is offered by Net Nanny, a Windows software package, and Squid, a Unix-based proxy server.[14]

The newest type of filter, "content recognition technology", provides more sophisticated keyword screening by using trained neural networks to identify keywords in patterns to determine whether to block or allow the site to be viewed. This type of filter will find the word "breast" and will also search for qualifying words such as "mammogram."[15]

URL filtering blocks according to a database of "unacceptable" Web sites and domains. Categories include obscenity, sexual content, alternative lifestyles, illegal activity, drugs, violence, hate speech and crimes, sports and various forms of leisure. Smart Filter works in this manner, allowing an institution to choose the categories to be blocked. Cyber Patrol allows subscribers to select from a list of twelve categories which is reviewed and controlled by a board of administrators which meets monthly.[16] Users pay subscription fees for these services as lists must be updated frequently.[17] (America Online users have free access to Cyber Patrol as part of their membership.) Surfwatch has six categories; WebSENSE has twenty nine.[18] This format cannot keep up with the growth of the Web and requires constant attention by library and college administrators to monitor and report sites which slip through.
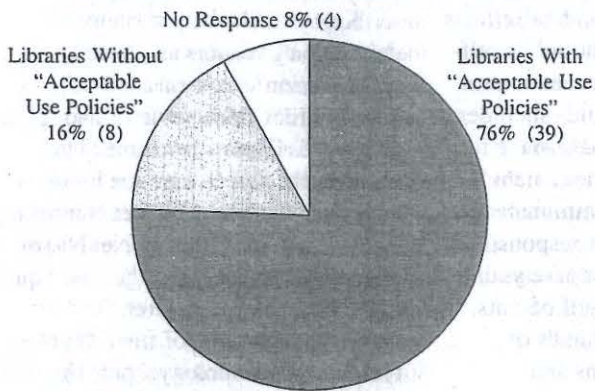
Some have complained that filter companies have political agendas. Net Nanny was criticized for blocking sites related to gay and lesbian issues. Cybersitter blocked access to the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission and the National

INTERNET "ACCEPTABLE USE POLICIES" IN CHRISTIAN COLLEGE LIBRARIES

No Response 8% (4)

Libraries Without "Acceptable Use Policies" 16% (8)

Libraries With "Acceptable Use Policies" 76% (39)

Organization for Women.[19]

Protocol blocking does not allow access to chat rooms, newsgroups, or email. Many libraries may block access to email and chat rooms in order to reserve computers for research and to better allocate scarce resources. Businesses are also increasingly concerned about this type of blocking. In a study done by Optimal Network of usage patterns of approximately 4,000 corporate users, researchers found that sex-related sites were not the most popular destinations. The leading categories were sites that "served up news, sports, and personal finance information."[20] Another vendor, SafeSurf, discovered that average employees wasted 1.5 hours a day on frivolous Web surfing. Some filters are able to limit access by time of day and may combine this with features for blocking other types of protocol.[21]

The World Wide Web Consortium, rather than approve a universal rating system, "created a technical framework that will permit an infinite number of ratings systems to be plugged in." Software that is Platform for Internet Content Selection (PICS) compliant, such as SurfWatch, allows parents to "substitute alternative lists of sites, whether they originate from the PTA, Consumer Reports, the Christian Coalition, or wherever".[22]

TIFAP, *The Internet Filter Assessment Project*, ran from April to September 1997. It was a librarian-led project managed by librarian and author Karen G. Schneider. She recommends checking for these features when choosing a filter product:

1. Ability to enable or disable blocking based on individual keywords and sites.
2. Ability to access the filter product's list of blocked Internet sites and keywords.
3. Ability to add and remove sites and keywords from the site list.
4. Ability to block based on developing ratings schemes, such as PICS.
5. Ability to block according to "time, place, manner."[23]

As administrators and university policy makers push to filter Internet content, Christian librarians would do well to be armed with information on types of filters, how they work, and which filters have satisfied customers in similar institutions. We must not be left out of the decision making process, especially as it concerns an increasingly valuable resource in our libraries.

RESEARCH METHOD

A survey of seventeen questions was posted on the Electronic mail listserve of the Association of Christian Librarians, which reaches 292 ACL members and represents approximately 253 institutions, including academic libraries, church and prison libraries, and students in library school. Since this survey was directed toward academic libraries, a scan of the ACL institution list contained in the 1998 ACL Membership Handbook found that approximately 201 libraries of institutions of Christian higher education are represented on the listserve.

Fifty three responses were received, for a response rate of 26%. Two were eliminated because the respondents indicated that they were employed by a public library and a state university library.

PARTICIPANTS

The fifty-one respondents were asked to classify themselves according to institutional size. Thirteen institutions had 500 or fewer students. Nineteen campuses ranged from 500 to 1,000 students. Eight colleges listed 1,000 to 2,000 students. Seven had between 2,000 and 3,000 students. And four institutions had student bodies numbering more than 3,000 students.

RESULTS

No filters

Of fifty-one qualified responses, thirty (59%) institutions indicated that they have not installed any type of Internet filter software or service.

In a set of follow up questions sent to these thirty respondents without Internet filters, twenty-one (70%) indicated that they do have an "acceptable use" policy or honor code in place; five (17%) indicated that they do not have an honor code or policy; and four did not respond.

Of the total fifty-one responses, thirty-nine (76%) institutions have an acceptable use policy; eight (16%) do not; and four did not respond.

Another follow up question which was answered by the thirty respondents who do not have Internet filters, indicated that other restrictions are enforced on at least some of the campus or library workstations. Ten institutions use time limits on student usage; eight restrict use of email; seven restrict use of chat rooms; and five restrict use of games. Twelve institutions have no restrictions of this type. Four institutions did not respond.

Of all fifty-one responses, fourteen institutions have no restrictions of this type. Twelve use time limits on student usage; sixteen restrict email use; twenty restrict the use of chat rooms; and fourteen restrict the use of games. Four institutions did not respond.

Filters

Of twenty-one respondents who indicated that they have some type of filtering software, fifteen said that the filter is located on the campus network. Ten institutions use filters that block material according to a predetermined list or categories/types of websites; eleven use filters that block by URL (website address); five use software which filters by context or keywords.

Of the types of material that is filtered, all twenty-one respondents indicated that they blocked access to "pornography/obscenity/ nudity." Fourteen blocked "violent or gory" material. Eleven block "weird/bizarre/ gross" material. Twelve block racist/hate sites. Four institutions block sites that are "heretical/controversial/derogative of campus policies or personalities."

Ten institutions (48%) said they were "satisfied" with their Internet filter. Three (14%) were "somewhat satisfied". Two (10%) were "neutral". Three (14%) were "somewhat dissatisfied". And three (14%) were "dissatisfied" with their Internet filter.

Seventeen (81%) of twenty-one institutions indicated that there is a procedure for alerting administrators to block sites that may inadvertently appear in spite of the filter. Seventeen (81%) of twenty-one institutions also said that there is a process for unblocking sites that the institution deems to be appropriate for student access.

In two rather subjective questions, respondents were asked to describe the attitude of their students and faculty to Internet filters. This, of course, could vary from day to day, as librarians may only hear complaints without any praise. Yet the results were interesting.

No one described the students' attitude as "enthusiastic". Eleven (53%) indicated that their students were "accepting". Four (19%) said they were "indifferent." Three (14%) institutions had "irritated or angry" students. And three (14%) institutions had received no response from their students.

Two (9.5%) institutions said that their faculty were "enthusiastic" about

their Internet filters. Ten (48%) indicated that their faculty were "accepting." Four (19%) had "indifferent" faculty. Three (14%) described their faculty as "irritated or angry" about filters. And two (9.5%) had no response from faculty.

CONCLUSION

The majority of Christian college libraries responding to the survey do not have Internet filters. The researcher expected to find the opposite to be true.

A chi-square analysis revealed no significant relationship between size of institution (enrollment under 1,000 versus enrollment over 1,000) and the presence of an Internet filter. Yet twice as many small institutions (21) do not have filters compared with those (11) which do. The reasons for not filtering the Internet at smaller institutions may be merely financial constraints or simply that a filter is unneccessary due to the amount of computers on campus. Several librarians commented that because their campuses had fewer than ten computers, and these were located in public view, filters were not "an

issue". Others were in the process of selecting a filter and would be installing one in the near future.

The presence of filters was evenly split among large institutions: ten have filters, nine do not.

Three libraries without filters commented that the institution monitors sites that are accessed by students using a proxy log or perl script. This information is monitored by computer staff for infringement of acceptable use policies. User names may be turned over to the administration for disciplinary measures in some cases.

It was surprising that many comments were received that indicated that librarians had been completely excluded from the decision making process and were often unpleasantly surprised to find an Internet filter had been installed on the computer network without their knowledge. Some said they did not know the brand of filter used by the campus. Others indicated that they did not know the procedure for unblocking acceptable sites, whether it means communicating with the campus system administrator or contacting the software vendor.

**TYPES OF MATERIAL BLOCKED BY
CHRISTIAN COLLEGE LIBRARIES WITH FILTERS**

Bar chart with y-axis from 0 to 25. Categories: Pornography/obscenity/nudity 100% (21 of 21); Violent/gore 67% (14 of 21); Weird/bizarre/gross 52% (11 of 21); Racist/hate 57% (12 of 21); Heretical/controversial/derogative of institution 19% (4 of 21).