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Access To The Site Has Been Blocked!

Doug Fruehling
Point Loma Nazarene University

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Doug Fruehling,
Instructional Services
Librarian,
Point Loma Nazarene
University,
San Diego, California

Nothing is an unmixed blessing.
Horace 65-8 BC

I approach the topic of Internet filters as a librarian at a Christian liberal arts institution of higher education, Point Loma Nazarene University (PLNU). The following should not be taken as an official statement regarding PLNU policy. No doubt Christian librarians at public libraries find they must address these issues differently from those encountered at Christian campuses.[1]

To some people the questioning of filter installation is tantamount to advocating access to pornography. Of course we are not advocating this. Addiction to pornography keeps the person from all they can be. Even the secular press admits the destructive results from its addiction.[2] Pornography creates sexual mirages. We are not asking whether pornography is bad, we are asking if filters perform as advertised. That said, what follows is a personal view of the filter at PLNU.

My introduction to the filter occurred while searching for information on the motion picture "The Apostle." The screen was filled with the message "We're Sorry! Access to this site has been blocked." It then told me that if I thought the site should be unblocked I should email the campus webmaster.

I was incredulous. I immediately went to a staff person in the computer labs and told them what I'd encountered. Their reaction? A smirk and the question, "What were you trying to see?"

The campus was not told our technicians were looking into filtering. No notice of the filter selection or installation was given. We don't know the cost of the filter or what maintenance fees are incurred. Input from the faculty and library was not requested regarding academic freedom. As in my instance a researcher can be blocked without knowledge as to why the site is "offensive". We have found through testing that legitimate studies are hindered by the filter. It's implementation has had a negative impact on service provided by Information Services and the Library.

Since the surprise debut of the filter PLNU Library has learned much about the ways of filters in general and specifically the software used on this campus. The filter used here is called X-STOP. The company web site is: <http://www.xstop.com/>.

As with any company website their product receives high praise on the site. For example the site has this to say: "X-Stop blocks porn and other offensive sites such as bomb-making, hate groups and drugs--without limiting access to legitimate sites. X-Stop generates reports on individual users, Internet usage, violations and sites visited." (http://www.xstop.com/solutions/, accessed 11/16/99)

However the Censorware Project <http://www.censorware.org/intro/> has a differing viewpoint. This group tests different filters and reports their findings via their website. The Censorware Project finds holes in the filters' blocking of sites, either permitting porn through and/or blocking legitimate sites. Censorware also lists schools that use filters. Of all the educational institutions listed, only two higher education schools are mentioned: PLNU and Taylor University in Fort Wayne, Ind. Both are Christian universities. According to the X-STOP Site Taylor uses the Websense filter.

X-STOP can be altered to permit sites that were originally blocked. This is great for academic freedom. It also permits the blocking of sites. This is great for the pornographic sites that may have slipped through the cracks. However, what if a site exists which offends someone but may not be considered pornographic? Who has the final say? Faculty, administration, pastors, the constituents? Political viewpoints, religious schisms, controversial literature, hate sites - all appear on the Internet. And what occurs when the status of a blocked/unblocked site is challenged? Library printed material is sometimes challenged. Just as with printed material, at the point when web content is challenged, the library policy regarding challenged print/audio-visual material should come into play. The library should make sure the administration is familiar with this same policy. Use the same process to determine if the status of a challenged site should change or remain unchanged.

June 1999, two years after the installation, Point Loma's President's Cabinet drafted a policy regarding the Internet filter. The policy "...is framed around two keys ideas: (1) unrestricted access to Internet resources is in keeping with the institution's stance regarding academic freedom and crucial for scholarship; and (2) the institution stands opposed to the use of its network for the access and/or dissemination of pornography by any member of the PLNU community." [note: Internet Filter Policy, PLNU President's Cabinet Draft, June 15, 1999] The proposal stated that all computers on campus would be filtered except for those in the library provided to the public. Faculty, using scholarly discretion, can have their computers unfiltered. Access regarding who among the faculty are filtered/unfiltered is confidential.

It is easy to be led to believe that X-STOP is tamper proof. However, if you are computer savvy you can bypass the filter by altering the PC's setup. Students showed a librarian at the Reference Desk computer how easy it is to override the filter. As proof they accessed the "Playboy" site. They immediately reconfigured the computer to the original setting.

The filter is installed on the campus network. Offices, classrooms and dorms are connected to the filter. But again, those who know how to override the system can access sites the filter is advertised to block. Some students have personal Internet accounts, they have access to all the Internet provides regardless of the campus' attempt to block them.

Two years after the installation of X-STOP adjustments are still being made. Summer 1999 saw the following sites blocked and then unblocked:

- <www.baptistuniverse.com> a site by Baptists for all Baptists
- <http://members.tripod.com/~SC_SAC/> a site aimed at breaking down stereotypes that promote size discrimination in our society
- <http://www.angelfire.com/ca/humanorigins/index.html> this site received a positive review in "Choice" April 1999 as a source on Ancient Meso-american Civilizations.
- <http://wwwsaa.gov/pubs/10045.html> a Social Security government site
- <http://www.acl.org/members> The Association of Christian Librarians

Even access to the purchased databases "ProQuest" and "Lexis-Nexis" was at times blocked. Some of the blocks were because the campus server wasn't working correctly.

This writer is not favorably impressed with the filter's performance. During research for this article I accessed several hard core pornographic sites 11/15/99. In addition to those I linked to a site for nudists. This Christian nudists site included a photo gallery.

Many issues come to light in the choice of installing a filter:

- There is the campus standard of rejecting pornography. Yet persons under the age of 18 may use the Internet. Community and campus related children may come to do research. Can the campus place notes on the terminals noting the stand on pornography and call the issue covered?

- Most students are over the age of 18, making them adults in the eyes of the law. Some students are married. They can be blocked from sites appropriate to their needs. Will the filter block them from sites on birth control information other than the rhythm method? And what of the students who pursue sexual relations outside of

marriage? I agree with Charlie W. Shedd: If they are going to do wrong I hope they do it in the right way.

- Promotion of the filter. Honesty is necessary when communicating with the campus and constituency. Avoid promoting a false sense of security. The filter isn't a panacea. No filter blocks all pornographic sites. None do. If we lead people to think otherwise, we are being dishonest.

What, if anything, are we teaching the campus with the installation of a filter? That such material should not be viewed? I think we merely teach that the users have access to the material. What do graduates take with them in regards to Internet discernment? What internalized filtering system have we nurtured? Can there be a renewing of the mind? Do we dare talk openly about the use of pornography in chapel as we do eating disorders and other addicting behaviors while pretending that it can be kept out of our sheltered campus communities? Instead we must provide counseling programs to aid students and yes, faculty, staff and administration, with pornography addiction.

Despite noble plans to the contrary, filter installation may result in unexpected situations. In keeping with their campus' effort to block Internet nudity, a Dean of Students contacted one ACL member and requested the removal from the library of all books containing nudes.

The debate concerning filter use will continue on all campuses, Christian and secular. Abdicating our free choice to a machine programmed by non-research oriented outside parties is not to be taken lightly.

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[1]Librarians at public libraries may want to access the following:

Filtering section under Internet Information at <http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/InternetIndex/>. Internet Filter Use and Policies: Local, Statewide and Global Views, by Gary White, <http://oii.org/il99/>
Porn Alley: Now at Your Public Library by Michael Schuyler in Computers in Libraries, vol.19. No.10, November/December 1999. Also available at <http://www.infotoday.com/cilmag/nov/schuyler.htm>

[2]The Sex Drive; Greg Gutfeld; AMen's Health, Emmaus; Oct 1999; Vol. 14, Is. 8; pg. 116-120+