Sensible Filtering

by Elena Stuart

The appearance of the Internet has resulted in the availability of massive amounts of all types of information. The Internet is a valuable resource, but together with good information it permits access to degrading, harmful and tremendously dangerous content as well as visual images that can affect psychological and moral development of children. To respond to this concern the government signed into law the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA) that mandated that public libraries install filtering software on their Internet computers. ALA declared that "The use of filtering software by libraries to block access to constitutionally protected speech violates the Library Bill of Rights" (Auld, p.197) and that it's not a library's mission to act as *loco parentis* and soon adopted "Resolution on Opposition to Federally Mandated Internet Filtering". Auld considers this resolution as "a colossal mistake" (p.197). The librarian world was divided.

The position of proponents is clear. They want to protect children and their souls and here I would like to be precise that we speak about filtering only in connection with protection of children. I share this vision as I am also a mother and some time ago this question also occupied my mind. I would hesitate to call morally destructive websites propagating pornography, violence, drug dealing, racial or ethnic hate as "information" that deserves to be protected and made available without restriction to children. In today's society it is impossible for parents to supervise all children's activities including accompanying a thirteen-year old child at the library with the purpose of protecting him from its content. We should maintain the status of a library as an educational institution. I can hardly imaging a person going to the library whose purpose is to enjoy pornography. To find this the person can go to a cyber-café. Everybody should know that a library serves higher purposes. We do not install gambling machines in a library to attract

more potential patrons. In a democratic society different institutions serve different purposes: a casino for gambling, a library for researches, and so on. I am convinced the level of trust in a library will only be enhanced through appropriate filtering. Every library must be trusted by its community to be effective.

The first point of the Library Bill of Rights specifies that library resources should be provided for "the enlightenment of all people of the community" (Rubin, p.389). This point notes that one of the duties of a librarian is to focus on the needs of the community. According to the survey conducted by Harris Interactive in 2009: "76% of U.S. adults disagree that viewing hardcore adult pornography on the Internet is morally acceptable." In doing collection development a librarian must determine the needs of the community and build the library's collection to properly serve the community. The Illinois Library Association says that "filtering, much like any acquisition choice or any aspect of collection development, is a decision best left to local officials" (Munroe, p.38). By having an absolute recommendation for unrestricted Internet access, librarians build their collection relying on other people who are not librarians and in this way the library collection does not respond properly to the library's community. A librarian should apply professional judgment to a collection no matter what the media. This commitment to unrestricted Internet access by children raises the question, if a librarian would not purchase print pornography for the collection, why would a librarian accept free pornography that can be printed or saved at the library? Collection standards should be the same no matter what the media.

Many authors think of filtering as censorship and take it as a large threat to democracy and to the fundamental right to open access to the information, but it is not. I would like to emphasize here that personally I am against any limitations of access except the limitation to protect children. I grew up during the Soviet time and know well what means censorship. It

meant that everything that threatened general line of the Communist Party was prohibited. Certain authors were banned from being published or staged. It was impossible to find their work any place within the country. It was forbidden to even to mention their names on TV or in newspapers. As a result many of them were forced to leave the country. This censorship was a criminal issue. As to filtering as used in the US it is only a limitation of an access in a specific place which has a very special purpose to protect children from harmful content. Censorship is a serious issue, but offending public library parents and users and placing children at risk by a policy that ignores the local community is not really dealing with the reality of government censorship.

Filtering is a suitable approach to protecting children and policies at public and school libraries can ensure that adults have unrestricted access. Since adults are the users of academic and special libraries no filtering is appropriate. Technology keeps evolving and software is continually improving. It is unfortunate that the ALA took such a strong position and now finds it difficult to change since they have made it a matter of principle. It means that parents now have to consider if the public library is a suitable place for children to visit. If not, rather than expanding the value of a library in the community, the library might be seen as a free version of the store that sells pornography. The stores prohibit children, but the local library does not.

> **Commented [k6]:** But stores are private entities and libraries are public entities

Libraries need to be respected by their community and work to address serious social issues as a part of their educational values rather than ignoring the consequences of the problems that the use of technology causes.

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Elena,

You present a clear set of reasons in favor of filters on library computers that children access.

As you note, providing information to children is different than providing information to adults.

Good use of statistics, examples, comparisons, and references to the readings (and other sources) to build your argument.

Karen   GRADE: 10 pts.