



Underage and wired. Safeguarding children in the age of Infobahn

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'Your children are no longer your children. They are sons and daughters of life's longing for itself. You may give them your love, but not your thoughts, for they have their own thoughts. Their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams' Khalil Gibran, *The Prophet*.

The question of whether Internet content should be screened by Internet service providers, schools and libraries has been the subject of hot debate since 1990, especially in the USA, Europe and the Antipodes. ISPs, content providers, legislators, politicians, librarians, schoolteachers and parents have all been part in this thorny debate. Issues involved were not only related to protecting young minds against objectionable content, but to the freedom of access to information, personal privacy and even defamation.

Many jurisdictions have either attempted or are considering legislation. Others have promoted labelling systems with nanny software to screen out undesirable sites, but their methods are crude, eliminating breast health together with sexually explicit sites, for instance. By the year 2000, the US had passed *The Children's Internet Protection Act*, forcing schools to have acceptable usage policies, despite the outcome of the *Reno v. ACLU* case, and the EU was implementing similar ventures. Australia has set up its *Net alert* government-sponsored community-based organization, while various states within the country put the responsibility squarely on the shoulders of the ISP providers, demanding the blocking of objectionable sites. Software companies and multi-national content providers (having offices all over the world and broadcasting in half a dozen languages) jumped on the wagon by releasing parental guidance software, filters and family-friendly Web sites.

Amid this entire hubbub about controlling access to Internet resources, the librarians have a long-standing and well-reasoned opinion that minors should have free access to Internet content in an atmosphere of intellectual freedom and free enquiry, since the Internet is, in effect, a huge library, for example, ALA (1991). As mentioned above, Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory have enacted legislation to impose penalties on those who make 'objectionable' (undefined) material available to minors via the Internet. Surprisingly, the Australian Library and Information Association has rejected such software not because it abrogates the human right of freedom of access to information, but because it 'cannot provide guarantees that all objectionable online information can be blocked...[because the Association] believes that the use of filtering technologies in libraries introduces a false sense of security for parents, guardians and internet users' (Australian Council of Libraries and Information Services 1997; Byrne 1998).

While the First World is worrying about the impact of filtered Internet access on student achievement and is trying to strike a balance between safe and smart Internet usage by children (NSBF 2000), developing and under-developed countries are nowhere to be seen. This is primarily because access to the Internet is pathetically limited and governments have taken it upon themselves to deal with the 'information problem' and practise severe censorship coupled with ownership of the only available ISP. Besides, who cares about 'objectionable sites' when real life is 'objectionable': HIV, homelessness, juvenile delinquency, domestic violence, drug abuse, illiteracy and grinding poverty are issues far more pressing than X-rated Web sites that no one dreams of accessing anyway. Nowadays, the information gap starts at an early age.

Benefits versus detriments

The majority of adults view the Internet as a positive new force, despite recent negative headlines about on-line isolation, violence, pornography, predators and commercialism. They believe the Internet is a powerful tool for learning and communicating. It can be an equally powerful tool for schools that want to increase public engagement and family involvement and help bridge the digital divide between students who have computers and Internet access at home and those who do not. Despite some concerns, parents generally believe that the Internet is a safe place for their children.

Parental involvement is an essential ingredient to student achievement. The Internet is a compelling vehicle for communicating with parents about school activities, classroom learning and individual student progress. Many parents would like to communicate with teachers and school board members and to view student work on the Internet.

Educate the educators

The US National School Boards Foundation (NSBF 2000) has a number of interesting strategies for safe Internet use that may allow children to benefit educationally and socially from the information superhighway. These include:

- Taking a balanced approach to policies and practices for children's use of the Internet. In other words, do not implement from above (interesting suggestion considering that the Acceptable Usage Policy came from 'above') and allow stakeholders participation in policy creation.
- Highlighting good content as much as you restrict bad content. (The issue with this would be reaching consent on what constitutes good content, and what borders on ethnic, religious, political and gender-based discrimination.)
- Developing a plan to help schools, teachers and parents educate children about safe, responsible uses of the Internet.
- Exposing pre-schoolers and other young children to the correct use of the Internet. (This helps children to master literacy and other cognitive skills and can also encourage the integration of these skills early in their development.)
- Helping teachers, parents and children to use the Internet more effectively for learning, such as providing education-related Web sites for parents and children to visit together, offering education-related help for students on-line; providing teachers with professional development opportunities to help model effective use of the Internet as a tool for students' learning, etc.
- Using the Internet to communicate more effectively with parents and students.

Laws and flows

In response to parental concerns, schools and public libraries should establish guidelines and have a policy for the appropriate use of computer networks. A written agreement signed by students, parents and teachers outlining the terms and conditions of Internet use, including rules for on-line behaviour and access privileges, would be ideal but, at the very least, there should be written, publicly available statements of official school policy. Guidelines should range from dealing with the education of students and their parents to the control of access to resources.

Schools and public libraries in the USA, UK and in Australia are now required to use 'filtering software' computer programs designed to prevent access to certain Web sites, but filters present problems ranging from inconsistency to human rights issues. Blocking software is usually built around a 'block list' of hundreds of thousands of Web sites representing millions of pages of Web content. Blocking programs are notoriously inaccurate, often preventing access to sites that should not be blocked while failing to block many that should. Examples of unhappy information providers and parents abound – the Cybersitter apparently edits the KJV Bible on-line by rendering the eighth commandment: 'Thou shalt not commit adultery' (Exodus 20:14) as: 'Thou shalt not commit ery'. This is because the term 'adult' is deemed 'inappropriate' by the product. It also blocks all pagan and Wicca URLs. Some alternative lifestyle groups even allege discrimination and defamation (GLAAD 2000).

Most packages that rely on a blacklist block access to the master list, thus disempowering the end-user from deciding what is appropriate. The Australian IT magazine *ZDnet* tested a number of these software packages in 2003 and decided that none passed the test (*Zdnet* 2003).

In 2002, the American Civil Liberties Union, when reporting on the new censorship developments

(ACLU 2002), saw the new trend towards content filtering and Web site rating as a breach of civil liberties. It will be interesting to follow future developments in this direction.

Students are now required to increasingly participate in an Internet curriculum whereas, until quite recently, voluntary initiative was the basis of educational involvement in the Internet. As a result there may be less personal choice available to students and perhaps our AUPs will need to be adjusted to this new reality.

How can one tell if students are ready for access to the Internet? Age-based restrictions ignore the maturity of the individual child. 'The Internet is exactly like real life in regards to the availability of information... . A student could, for instance, learn how to make a bomb from someone online – but he could gain the same knowledge from a chemistry book, so does that mean we have to ban books and stop teaching science, too? Of course not. It's just human nature to fear and protect against something we don't understand. It's too bad that there are still so many who distrust the Internet, rather than being open to comprehending the advantages' (Barovian 1995). The Internet has the same risks found daily on cable TV, in local newspapers or in mail boxes and libraries and telephones could be added to the list of comparable risks (McKenzie 1995).

We have to think of ways of protecting our children and our society from easy access to every kind of abhorrent information imaginable but the 'censor the Net' approach is not only morally misguided, it is also becoming technically impossible. As Net pioneer John Gilmore, a founding member of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, is often quoted as saying: 'The Net interprets censorship as damage and routes around it. The Net's technological foundation was built to withstand nuclear attack. The RAND Corporation designed the network to be a thoroughly decentralized command- and-control communications system, one that would be less vulnerable to intercontinental missiles than a system commanded by a centralized headquarters.'

'This decentralization of control means that the delivery system for salacious materials is the same worldwide one that delivers economic opportunity, educational resources, civic forums, and health advice. If a hacker in Helsinki or Los Angeles connects to the Internet and provides access to his digital pornography files, anybody anywhere else in the world, with the right kind of Internet connection, can download those steamy bits and bytes. This technological shock to our moral codes means that in the future, we are going to have to teach our children well. The locus of control is going to have to be in their heads and hearts, not in the laws or machines that make information so imperviously available. Before we let our kids loose on the Internet, they better have a solid moral grounding and some common sense' (Rheingold 1994).

Related Web sites (not exclusive)

American Library Association filters and filtering resources <http://www.ala.org/Template.cfm?Section=ifissues&Template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=56821>.

American Civil Liberties Union Web site on blocking software <http://www.aclu.org/Cyber-Liberties/Cyber-LibertiesList.cfm?c=55>).

Commission on Online Child Protection (COPA) - <http://www.copacommission.org/>.

Electronic Privacy Information Centre Web site on blocking software http://www.epic.org/free_speech/censorware/

NetAlert – the Australian Internet Safety Advisory Board <http://www.netalert.net.au/>.

Superhighway Safety – UK Government initiative promoting safe use of the Internet <http://safety.ngfl.gov.uk/>.

Yahoo directory for filtering software (http://dir.yahoo.com/Business_and_Economy/Shopping_and_Services/Communication_and_Information_Management/Internet_and_World_Wide_Web/Software/Blocking_and_Filtering/).

Bookshelf

Waltermann, J. and Machill, M. (eds.) (2000) *Protecting our children on the Internet; towards a new*

culture of responsibility. Washington DC: The Brookings Institution.

The Internet offers many new possibilities in communications, business, and entertainment. At the same time, the cross-cultural flow of data requires new responsibilities for media providers, users, and law enforcement authorities (in the case of criminal content). The Bertelsmann Foundation and renowned experts have developed a set of recommendations to effectively secure responsibility, and to protect children from illegal and harmful content. This self-regulatory system is based on four pillars: self-regulation, self-rating and filtering, hotlines and law enforcement as supplements to self-regulation. The publication also presents the results of a representative, tri-national (Australia, Germany, USA) Internet-user survey on self-regulation and protection of minors. In addition, it contains a detailed bibliography of important publications on Internet regulation, youth protection, and self-regulation. American Library Trustee Association, Association for Library Service to Children, and Public Library Association. 1998. *Children and the Internet: guidelines for developing public library policy*. Chicago (IL): American Library Association.

A thorough guide for librarians and board members wanting to create, and/or maintain a public library Internet policy focusing on children's access. Although the legal issues are based on American law, rights and content, the issues are very similar for Canadian public libraries and the recommendations for drawing up an Internet policy for children's access are straightforward and help clarify some very complex situations.

Calvert, S. 1999. *Children's journeys through the information age*. Boston: McGraw-Hill College. Combining psychological theories and quantitative data, Calvert analyses how media images affect children, whose lack of developmental awareness make them the most vulnerable target group. In the first half of the book, Calvert examines the main issues of media's influence on children: media violence, gender content, racial content and advertising's effect. The second half of the book focuses on current and future information technologies and government regulation of children's programming.

Sobel, D. (ed.) 1999. *Filters and freedom: free speech perspectives on Internet content controls*. Washington DC: Electronic Privacy Information Center. This is a good collection of relevant articles on the subject.

Heins, M. 2002. *Not in front of the children: 'indecent,' censorship, and the innocence of youth*. New York: Hill and Wang.

The first comprehensive history of the debate about censorship, designed to protect children, and winner of the ALA's 2002 Eli Oboler Award for best-published work in the area of intellectual freedom.

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McKenzie, J. 1995. *Protecting our children from the Internet (and the World)*. [Online] Available WWW: <http://optin.iserver.net/fromnow/fnojun95.html>.

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Rheingold, H. 1994. *Why censoring cyberspace is dangerous and futile*. [Online] Available WWW: <http://www.well.com/user/hlr/tomorrow/tomorrowcensor.html>.

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