INTERNET FILTERING IN THE PUBLIC LIBRARY: CENSORSHIP OR CUSTOMER SERVICE

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ABSTRACT

Internet access makes accessible to all diverse kinds of information on the computer screen including those that some people classify as not appropriate in a public place like library. The question that faces Librarians is whether to filter the internet in the library in order to remove those materials considered to be harmful or illegal or to say no to filter in order to preserve their traditional role of making information available to the public without reservation. To restrict access to some information is censorship and that is violation of fundamental right of people to information. This review looked at internet filtering in the public library. It explored into the rationale behind filtering, problems with the use of blocking or filtering software in libraries; and what library can do to promote access to the Internet and the steps the library can undertake in order to mitigate risk of exposure to inappropriate information to its customers and itself.
Keywords: Internet, Filtering, Library, Censorship

INTRODUCTION

The filtering of public access computers in public libraries is one of the controversial issues that the Librarian has been battling with over the years. The pressure to limit access to Internet contents dates back to 1990's when libraries began providing Internet access. Librarians have generally defended unfiltered access on intellectual freedom grounds. Some are of the opinion that public access computers in public libraries must be filtered to prevent individual exposure to visual images not appropriate in a general library setting thereby reducing the risk of unintentional exposure of customers to images, on computer screens in the library, that are not appropriate in a public place. Some argued that only the children section of the library should be filtered while that of adult should be left unfiltered. The library is now in a state of dilemma whether to follow intellectual freedom or to protect public morality.

INTERNET FILTERING

Internet Filtering is the act of controlling what contents on the internet a user of internet can read which determines what contents will be available to the

user. It is the control or suppression of the publishing or accessing of information on the Internet. It also involves the ability to restrict access to Internet content, based on an internal database of the product, or; restrict access to Internet content through a database maintained external to the product itself, restrict access to Internet content to certain ratings assigned to those sites by a third party; restrict access to Internet content by scanning content, based on a keyword, phrase or text string or; restrict access to Internet content based on the source of the information using blocking or filtering software (American Library Association, 1997).

Internet Filtering can be at various levels. A government can attempt to apply them nationwide or be applied by an Internet Service Provider to its clients, by an employer to its personnel, by a school to its students, by a library to its visitors, by a parent to a child's computer, or by an individual user to his or her own Personal Computer (PC). The rationale is often to prevent persons from viewing content, which the computer owner(s) or other authorities may consider objectionable, illegal or harmful. Gambling pornography and diverse forms of paedophilia now abound in the internet.

For instance, the Electronic Frontier Foundation reports that the Afghan Ministry of Communications mandated in June 2010 that all Internet Service Providers (ISPs) in Afghanistan should filter Facebook, Gmail, Twitter, YouTube and websites related to alcohol, gambling and sex. They are also trying or blocking websites which are "immoral" and against the traditions of the Afghan people. Also in Iran internet censorship is delegated to ISPs who attempt to filter contents critical of the government, pornographic websites, political blogs, and especially recently women's rights websites, weblogs, and online magazines. Belgian internet providers Belgacom, Telenet, Base, Scarlet, EDPnet, Dommel, Proximus, Mobistar, Mobile Vikings, Tele2 and Versatel have started filtering several websites on DNS level since April 2009.

Project Cleanfeed Canada (cybertip.ca) decides what sites are child pornographic in nature and transmits those lists to the voluntarily participating ISPs who can then block the pages for their users. The Chilean Government also block the access in their computers to blogs or electronic versions of the local newspapers with opinions against the Government or the ruling coalition, for example, during the first days of Transantiago or the 2006 Student Protests. On May 6, 2010, T-Mobile Czech Republic officially announced that it was starting to block web pages promoting child pornography, child prostitution, child trafficking, pedophilia and illegal sexual contact with children. T-Mobile revealed that its blocking was based on URLs from the Internet Watch Foundation list and on individual direct requests made by customers. On 23 December 2008, the list of 3,863 sites filtered in Denmark was released by Wikileaks.

In 2002 the government of Ghana censored internet media coverage of

tribal violence in Northern Ghana. The list is inexhaustible, but the commonly filtered sites are pornographic, pedophile, social network such as facebook, Myspace and Twitter etc. Politcal blog, YouTube, Religious websites, Nazi and similar websites especially in France and Germany. Google is also a target in mainland China and Cuba.

From the above it is clear that Internet filtering motivating factors are morals and religious factors, political views and cultural factor or community standard. Whether information is harmful often depends on cultural, religious, and social context of transmission. Standards vary both within and among nations (Witten, Bainbridge & Nicholas, 2010). Considering the global nature of the internet, it is difficult to monitor or guide the transfer of information. Also sustaining local legal and cultural standards is a big challenge facing society today. The challenge includes the dilemma of balancing freedom of expression with citizens' rights of protection from illegal or harmful material. We have a published example of different views on internet access concerned online sales of Nazi memorabilia on U,S. web sites accessed using the Yahoo Internet portal in 2000. A judge in Paris ruled that the sites are barred under French law and ordered them to be blocked.

However, U.S. web sites are governed by U. S. laws, and an America judge ruled that the first amendment protects contents generated in the United States by American companies from being regulated by authorities in countries that have laws more restrictive of freedom of expression. Suit and countersuit followed, and the matter lingered for six years, when a U.S. court decided that Yahoo was liable for a fine levied in France. Gambling is another challenging example. The laws that are relevant are restrictive in countries like Italy, China and United States. Some of the international gambling sites claim to comply with local laws by checking the geographical origin of the user and by turning down their services in countries where gambling is illegal. Checking the geographical origin of the user is a difficult and unreliable procedure, it can easily be circumvented.

INTERNET FILTERING IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES

Internet filtering in public libraries is a form of censorship. Censorship is supervision and control of the information and ideas that are circulated among the people within a society (Konvitz, 2008). It refers to examination of books, periodicals, films, reports and other communication media for the purpose of altering or suppressing information considered objectionable or offensive. The objectionable materials are information materials that are considered immoral, obscene, harmful, blasphemous, seditious, treasonable and injurious to national security. Customer service is an integral part of library service. The Library users are the library customers. The library provides information services such as loan transaction, reading facilities within the library, bookbinding and

photocopying, current awareness like selective dissemination of information and current content, internet connectivity, e-mail and a host of others. The mission of the library is to satisfy the information needs of the users. To enable the public library to achieve this goal, it has to provide all information needed unfiltered. Otherwise, the library cannot be considered rendering good customer services. The library user should be able to filter good information from the bad ones. The responsibility of filtering of information must not be shifted to the library.

If the library filtered all the information within their disposal, the library user can still access it somewhere else. Therefore, the issue of filtering of internet in the public library should be left to the library users. If at all, the library will be involved in internet filtering in public library; it should be limited to children section in the library. At the same time children's right of freedom of information should not be tampered with and the library should not take over the role of parents in ensuring that children access the right type of information on the internet. The library's answer to the filtering of public access computers in public libraries is quite simple: no filtering (Coyle, 1995). Blocking internet sites is antithetical to library missions and sets the stage for the erosion of important library values because it requires the library to limit information access. Libraries are responsible for serving a broad and diverse community with different preferences and views.

But what does "no filtering actually mean? "Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation. Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval. Libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment" (American Library Association, 1996).

A "no filtering" stand is, of course, complex. Some material in the internet is illegal and harmful. Those materials are inappropriate for public presentation. For example, a 1999 UNESCO Expert Meeting on Paedophilia on the internet noted "Violence and pornography have invaded the internet. Photo and videos of children and young teenagers engaged in sexual acts and various forms of paedophilia are readily available. A report of children being kidnapped beaten, raped and murdered abounds….The internet has in many cases replaced the media of paedophilia magazines, films and videos. It is practical, cheap, convenient and untraceable means for conducting business as well as for traficking in paedophilia and child pornography. The internet has also become the principal medium for dialogue about paedophilia and its perpetuation" (UNESCO Expert Meeting, 1999).

UNESCO has not been silent on this topic and has taken initiatives to provide safety nets for children online. There is always the issue of treating children as a special case, some materials such as pornography and diverse forms of paedophilia are not suitable for children moral and spiritual wellbeing. The question is if the library shielded children from information that are considered harmful to them, Is it not a violation of their fundamental human right. Human rights apply to all human beings without exception. `Children's rights are an integral part of human rights. The UN Declaration emphasises as a final basis for all law and justice, the inherent human dignity and the inalienable rights which every human being possesses by nature.

Article1

> *All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.*

The ultimate aim of the United Nations programme is the well-being of every individual including child in national as well as international society. The whole human rights endeavour may be said to be built on the foundation of care and love for children and respect for their rights. The special place of children in society is recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and pervades the whole framework of international human rights standards. Libraries and Librarians should not be exempted from obligations of human rights. They must show commitment to children's rights, as they are already committed to the UNESCO Manifesto, the IFLA and general international consensus on human rights: The Universal Declaration and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN convention on the rights of the child, 1989).

The role and activities of public libraries can be considered as part of this implementation of the Convention. Therefore, public library has a lot to do with children's rights. In fact, nobody can refrain from being concerned with the human rights of children. The child has the right of access to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources, especially those aimed at the promotion of his or her social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health. The library collections and activities should include material which are of social and cultural benefit to the child. It should also inxclude the aim of education such as: the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential; the development of respect for human rights, for other cultures and the natural environment.

The idea that information in the broad sense serves the upbringing and education of the child and aims at high human values is underlying the right to information. Libraries have a special role to play as they have an overview of the variety of sources of information. Libraries must protect this right of the child by providing a variety of services and a balanced programme for book reading and using information materials.

Children can be prevented from harm or injurious information by using information. A children's information centre can be established in the library in which all kinds of practical information is collected and made understandable for children. (Koren, 1998). This may be information in the field of health, technics, media, relationships, environment, and trips. Information about counseling, children's law shops, ombudsworkers, help-lines or contact persons should also be available. Therefore, the library must cooperate in a network of social institutions and provisions for children.

At the same time parents have the right and responsibility to restrict their own children's access to library resources, including the Internet. Librarians do not serve in loco parentis. The librarians are to advise and assist users in selecting information resources. Library has their technological limitations in blocking or filtering the internet. The laws prohibiting the production or distribution of child pornography and obscenity which is applied to the Internet also provide protection for libraries and their users.

PROBLEM WITH THE USE OF FILTERING SOFTWARE IN LIBRARIES

A lot of problems are associated with the use of blocking/filtering software in libraries. For example, imposition of internet filtering would limit access to information for research and study. Blocking/filtering software hinders access to both materials that are considered harmful or objectionable material and useful information. Majority of Internet sites are informative and useful. Blocking or filtering software often blocks access to materials it is not designed to block. Examples of sites that have been blocked by popular commercial blocking/filtering products include those on breast cancer, AIDS, women's rights, and animal rights.

Also, it can lead to imposition of the producer of blocking or filtering software viewpoint on the community. Producers do not generally reveal what is being blocked, or provide methods for users to reach sites that were inadvertently blocked. Requirement used to block content are vaguely defined and subjectively applied. Blocking Internet sites is antithetical to library missions because it requires the library to limit information access. Libraries are responsible for serving a broad and diverse community with different preferences and views. Most blocking or filtering software is designed for the home market. Filters are intended to respond to the preferences of parents making decisions for their own children. In a library setting, filtering today is a one-size-fits-all "solution," which cannot adapt to the varying ages and maturity levels of individual users.

Internet filtering can compromise intellectual freedom. Intellectual freedom is a fundamental human right which was articulated in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This fundamental right has

two aspects, the right to know and freedom of expression, both of which the library and information profession must promote and defend. In university libraries, the defence of intellectual freedom is expressed through the unabashed provision of all the resources needed to support study and scholarship to all clients. IFLA enjoined us to note that 'Libraries contribute to the development and maintenance of intellectual freedom and help to safeguard basic democratic values and universal civil rights' and that 'Libraries shall acquire, organize and disseminate freely and oppose any form of censorship'.

Filtering could be on moral or political issues. It could become support for propaganda. Many would also find it unacceptable that an ISP, whether by law or by the ISP's own choice, should deploy such software without allowing the users to disable the filtering for their own connections. In addition, some argue that using content-control software may violate sections 13 and 17 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Critics argue that content-filtering software allows private companies to censor as they please. Some people contrast content-control with censoring, claiming that limiting the content one can view is similar to how communist governments limit the content its citizens can view in order to promote one idea. They argue that there is a chance for the content-filtering software to be abused.

Many types of content-control software have been shown to block sites based on the religious and political leanings of the company owners. Examples include blocking several religious sites. The filtering software companies were blocking websites based on religious or other inappropriate bias.

WHAT CAN LIBRARY DO TO PROMOTE ACCESS TO THE INTERNET

The library staff, library board, governing bodies, community leaders, parents, elected officials etc. need internet education and how best to take advantage of the wealth of information available and knowledge of what other libraries have done. Guidelines and policies on internet use should be written, established and implemented in the library in keeping with the library's overall policies on access to library materials. Promote internet use by facilitating user access to web sites that satisfy user interest and needs. Create and promote library web pages designed both for general use and for use by children. These pages should point to sites that have been reviewed by library staff.

Also, user's confidentiality can be protected by arranging the terminals away from public view. Provide information and training for parents and minors that remind users of time, place and manner of restrictions on internet use. User behavior policies should be established and implemented.

CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, it has been established that Internet filtering in library is causing a degree of censorship. It is antithetical to library missions because it requires the library to limit information access. Libraries are responsible for serving a broad and diverse community with different preferences and views. To select or reject works because some people today find their ideas to be offensive would be to eliminate vast amounts of valuable human thought, and the very lack of access would preclude further study and use of that knowledge. If we can't share ideas freely, how will we ever go forward as a civilized nation?

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