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Blocked: Experiences of High School Students Conducting Term Paper Research Using Filtered Internet Access

by Lynn Sutton — November 23, 2005

This commentary suggests that a poorly administered filtering program can seriously hinder student Internet research in a high school library media center and cause significant frustration in students. Communication among students, teachers, librarians, and technology administrators is critically important to minimize the negative effects of Internet filters. Feedback needs to be continually sought from users of the technology. Overblocking needs to be kept to a bare minimum, with a disabling mechanism that is readily available, timely and effective. School districts need to exercise extreme caution that there is no content filtering based on viewpoint. In districts where a digital divide exists, school leaders need to recognize the role of the library in ensuring equal access to information.

FILTERS BLOCK LEGITIMATE SPEECH

Results of a study I recently conducted (Sutton, 2005) reveal that Internet filters in schools block content that high school students need for research papers. Filters are commonly installed on school computers to block access to Internet content that has been predetermined to be objectionable or inappropriate. The vast majority of content is intended to be blocked because it is sexually explicit, though socially controversial topics such as contraception, abortion, gay/lesbian issues, and smoking are also commonly blocked. Strong financial incentives for federal e-rate funding under the provisions of the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA) drive decisions in many school districts.

My findings indicate that filters used in high school media centers block legitimate, constitutionally-protected speech. Students experience frequent "overblocking"; that is, the filter blocks harmless sites that are appropriate for school use, such as ama-assn.org, ncaa.org, and mpaa.org. Students have become very adept at getting around the filter, utilizing a number of approaches including using an alternate search engine, clicking the "refresh" button, using page translators, changing terminology, and going home to use a personal

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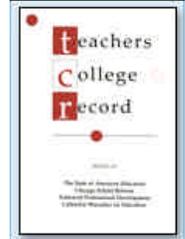
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computer without a filter. Students using filtered computers in schools also experience "underblocking" by the filter, meaning the filter fails to block Web sites with inappropriate content.

Students say they are frustrated, annoyed, and angry when blocked by the filter. They feel that the school's filter hinders their work in doing Internet research for their papers. Students do not feel permanently harmed when they come upon an occasional inappropriate Web site. They treat it fairly casually and move on with their work, although they sometimes feel there are other more immature students in the school who perhaps might be more affected.

Technology administrators who take the filter out of the box and install it at default settings may think that filtering causes no problems. However, filtering irritates students, teachers, and librarians alike. They are frustrated, annoyed, angered, and feel their time is being wasted. I saw an undercurrent of frustration and hopelessness at effecting change by those using the technology. Students get the distinct impression that they are not to be trusted with sensitive information, even though they say that what they see and hear every day in the halls is worse than what is blocked on the screen. All too often, when students, teachers or librarians request that the filter be adjusted, it does not happen or it takes so long that it becomes moot. This is not a healthy or productive attitude to engender in students who are about to become the decision makers in society. If they are taught to give up before they have ever tried to bring about change, democracy has a dismal future.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The decision to filter should be undertaken with care and planning in weighing the benefits and drawbacks. Consideration should be given to the question of whether a filter is necessary—or necessary at all grade levels. District administrators should consider mandatory instructional sessions on Internet safety before they resort to technology protection measures such as filters. Upper level high school students are capable of using the Internet wisely. Furthermore, when students do come across inappropriate sites, they show mature judgment in moving on. Throughout my study, I neither saw nor heard any evidence of harm to a student from the experience of viewing an inappropriate Web site.

Programs aimed at educating students in effective use of the Internet may be more effective in keeping them safe than technology devices such as filters. Students know this about themselves. They sense that the administrators in their school do not trust them to recognize and do the right thing. They do not dismiss lightly societal concern for sexually explicit materials on school premises. They understand that some, presumably younger, children may need guidance in sorting out "bad" materials on the Internet. But they resent a poorly conceived and disastrously implemented artificial device that prevents them from accessing needed information without any input into the decision or any effective way to redress inequity. There is ample evidence that filtering seriously and unnecessarily overblocks legitimate material, but too often there is no reliable, efficient way for this information to get

back to district administrators for modification (Electronic Frontier Foundation, 2003; Richardson, et al., 2002; Thornburgh & Lin, 2002).

The students at the high school in my study were not irreparably harmed by the presence of restrictive filters because they had other resources at their disposal. Their socioeconomic class allowed them to use computers at home when the computers at school failed them. Not all students in America have that luxury. While the digital divide was not an issue for the students in this study, it is a very real issue for thousands of students across America whose parents are not white, not rich, and not well-educated.

Libraries in publicly funded institutions can help bridge the digital divide, but not if they are mandated by law to use filters that restrict the flow of constitutionally protected information. If filters stopped at blocking true obscenity, child pornography, and materials legally harmful to minors, few in society would object. But they do not. This study demonstrates that unless careful attention is paid to filter settings and they are monitored closely for overblocking, even innocuous, harmless, and government-sponsored information can be blocked.

GUIDELINES FOR DECISION MAKING

When considering the filtering decision, the following guidelines should be considered by school district officials:

- Implement educational programming for students, parents, and teachers emphasizing safe and responsible use of the Internet.
- Consider whether a filter is necessary—or necessary at all grade levels. Teacher and librarian supervision may be sufficient.
- Make Internet instruction by librarians a prerequisite for Internet access in schools.
- Gather input from students, teachers, and librarians as well as parents before implementing filters.
- If the decision is made to filter, begin with settings at the lowest levels possible.
- Institute a procedure that is timely and effective to turn off the filter if it is hindering the teaching and learning process. Empower teachers and librarians with the ability to turn the filter off.
- Check back frequently with students, teachers, and librarians to make sure that the filter is not blocking legitimate and appropriate information. If so, adjust the filter settings.

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