

# Web Information Filtering Opinion Paper

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The Internet can be a wonderful educational tool where learners are exposed to a plethora of knowledge about virtually any topic. However, given the diversity of information carried on the Internet, students may and can be exposed to inappropriate material such as; violence/profanity, sexual acts, nudity, gross depictions in text or graphics, satanic cults, drugs, militant/extremist groups, questionable/illegal gambling, alcohol, tobacco, etc. How do we protect our students, our children, or patrons of a public library from inappropriate material? The following opinion paper will address these concerns. I will summarize the topic of web information filtering along with my position in support of the instillation of filtering software with the use of public computers.

## Summary

The generation of students in schools today are very computer literate and savvy. They know how to surf the Internet, find cool sites, and download information, movies, as well as songs; literally at the click of the mouse. They share their “cool” findings with their peers on a daily basis. The cyber world is at their fingers tips. This knowledge can pose a problem when students enter the classroom or computer lab with Internet access. Do to this situation; web-filtering software was developed to select appropriate Internet sites with educational content and wholesome information. Web filtering software helps to prevent the viewing of objectionable material. This filtering software also helps with the pop-up ads that can appear when searching the World Wide Web. Pop-ups are very distracting and can lead the viewer to questionable sites, such as gambling.

Web filtering helps make the most of Internet connections. For example, in a school setting radio and movie sites are blocked which consume a great percentage of bandwidth over a systems server causing it to slow down. Another benefit of web filtering is that it filters out chat rooms where students could give out personal information. Web filtering devices allows the Network Administrator for a school system to track inappropriate sites by a users name if necessary. It also aids in the prevention of viruses from entering school computers.

Parents, to protect their children from inappropriate material, can use at home filtering programs. A Directory of filtering programs can be found at: <http://www.safekids.com/filters.htm>. Most of the programs can be configured by parents to filter out sites that contain nudity, sexual content, hateful or violet material, or that advocate the use of drugs, tobacco or alcohol. Some can also be configured to prevent children from revealing information about themselves such as their name, address, or phone number. Educations, as well as monitoring, are the key to protect your child as they use the World Wide Web. I believe young children are trustworthy and innocent. Therefore, it is important to educate them about the positive and negatives of Internet use. Parents should set reasonable guidelines and rule for computer use.

Some believe that filtering software constitutes a prior restraint of the First Amendment's protection of freedom of speech. Public libraries exist to provide free information access to the public. The argument against web filtering devices poses a dilemma whether to provide or not to provide full information access to the patrons.

In a school setting, again some believe, that filters deny children access to a wide range of useful and appropriate materials ultimately diminishing the educational value of the Internet. The Internet Free Expression Alliance (<http://www.ifea.net/>) was established to protect the free flow of information on the Internet. Their contention is that content "filtering" techniques already have been implemented in ways inconsistent with free speech principles.

The Internet Free Expression Alliance mission is to work to: ensure the continuation of the Internet as a forum for open, diverse and unimpeded expression. It will also support the vital role the Internet plays in providing an efficient and democratic means of distributing information around the world. They will encourage public debate on web filtering. The organization will oppose any governmental effort to promote, coerce or mandate the rating or filtering of online content and identify new threats to free expression and First Amendment values on the Internet, whether legal or technological. Encourage approaches that highlight "recommended" Internet content, rather than those that restrict access to materials labeled as "harmful" or otherwise objectionable, and emphasize that any rating that exists solely to allow specific content to be blocked from view may inhibit the flow of free expression.

The debate surrounding filtering devices continues and will continue until both sides reach some balance and understanding about what is best for *all* in our cyber world.

### **Opinion**

The majority of people, adult or child, who access the Internet Super Highway, usually have a positive experience. But, like any endeavor, for example; cooking, traveling, or attending school, there are risks. The online world, like the rest of society, is made up of a wide array of people. In an ideal world, the information encountered online would be respectful and have a sound moral value and structure, but that isn't always the case.

The Internet expands the mind of the user with access to global information about any subject. However, uncontrolled access to the Web can have negative impacts: students can be at risk of viewing offensive material, teachers can mistakenly access inappropriate sites and children can become targets of exploitation. Adults can make their own decisions when searching the Web. My concern, as an educator, is the child who wanders innocently into an Internet site that is exploitative, mean, obnoxious or insulting. This can happen at school, home or the public library. I ask myself how do we control what is available to our students?

The answer to the above question lies in the use of Web filtering for public use in schools, universities as well as the public library. I believe that effective Web filtering helps to reduce risk while still empowering the user with information needed for success. The key here is to use an *effective* Web filtering device.

According to the U.S. Education Department's national center for Education Statistics Web Site (<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2002/internet/8.asp>): "Given the diversity of the information carried on the Internet, student access to inappropriate material is a major concern of many parents and teachers. Moreover, under the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA), no school may receive E-rate discounts unless it certifies that it is enforcing a policy of Internet safety that includes the use of filtering or blocking technology<sup>11</sup>."

It should be noted that the Education rate (E-rate) program was established in 1996 to make services, Internet access, and internal connections available to schools and libraries at discounted rates based upon the income level of the students in their community and whether their location is urban or rural. With that in mind, I believe more strongly in favor of schools to use an effective Web filtering device.

I believe it is important to balance protecting students with the need to utilize the technology to its full potential. Foremost, I believe that students need to be instructed about the benefits and dangers on the Internet. The knowledge surrounding the use of the Internet, whether at home or at school, will help to safeguard them against potentially dangerous situations. Teenagers in particular should be instructed in great detail about the risks they are taking while searching the World Wide Web. They can be exposed to inappropriate material, such as, violence, sex, nudity and even harassment. Teenagers are frequently entering chat rooms where they are exposed to crude language, perhaps misinformation, as well as demeaning comments. Instruction of proper use of the Internet is a major factor in safe use of the web. I believe that parents need to take a role as a supervisor of the time their child spends on-line. Clearly defined expectations of Internet use needs to be shared with their child.

I believe the risk is far too great to allow unaltered access to the Internet. On the other hand, I do realize that filters can block access to educational information. For example, an English teacher at my school could not access the site for Emily Dickinson. The Webmaster in our county can unblock sites for teachers. Since we are not in an ideal world, with an ideal filter system, it is imperative for the filtering device to be twiqued to unlock educational sites as well as block sites that teachers find offensive.

I would like to touch on the position of Acceptable Use Policies (AUP) affecting schools and even suggested for use in public libraries. An Acceptable Use policy clearly defines appropriate and inappropriate use of computers along with consequences for violations. It needs to be practically enforceable and must be supported with appropriate administrative procedures so that it can be effectively implemented. AUP's, used in school setting, are

sent home at the beginning of the school year for parents approval before students can access the computer. If the student does not return the form they are denied computer access. The Children's Internet Protection Act requires K-12 schools and public libraries that receive certain types of federal funding and provide Internet access to meet certain requirements. One of the requirements is the use of an Internet safety policy or AUP. While the AUP is a good idea it is not always fool proof. I believe it is better than nothing. Overall, I believe that the AUP hold students and patrons at a public library in check. There will always be those that abuse any privilege they are given. That is why the administrative aspect of the AUP's is vital for their success.

I believe that while AUP's are a good choice for schools, they can be very cumbersome for public libraries. How are the computers going to be monitored? Will there be a way to check the patron who uses a computer and enters a chat room or access a porn site? Privacy issues come into play also. Users may be uneasy about logging on to a computer with an identifiable password as they think that their subsequent use and sites they browse are being recorded. Can users access free e-mail such as Hot Mail? Will downloading be allowed? I believe there needs to be a clause in the public library AUP that states they are not liable for Internet content, accuracy or authenticity.

Like any policy, the AUP should be reviewed periodically. Due to the fact that the information highway is ever changing so must the AUP to address new concerns and technological developments.

Lastly, I would like to propose Internet safety for teachers and students. Educate yourself and your student about Internet safety. Teachers should learn as much as they can about the laws and rights, not only for themselves but also for their students. Make sure that each student has an AUP signed by a parent. Enforce inappropriate Internet use with a clear set of consequences for specific offenses. Keep abreast of the latest technological advances and make changes appropriately based on your school systems policies. Don't assume anything. Teachers need to be proactive and encourage proper internet use.