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Jackson County's compromise

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When we decided to make the Internet available to patrons of the Jackson County Library, one of the first questions we asked ourselves was whether filtering software might be needed or wanted on any of the workstations. We had a lot of practical concerns, as well as intellectual freedom issues to consider.

We intended that the Internet would be an important information resource for our library users, just as is our print collection. We knew that filters often filter out useful information as well as sites that many people consider "objectionable."

Jackson County's Compromise

by *Ronnie Lee Budge*
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Our library has adopted the Library Bill of Rights, the Freedom to Read Statement, and the Freedom to View Statement as official policies. We do not restrict children's or

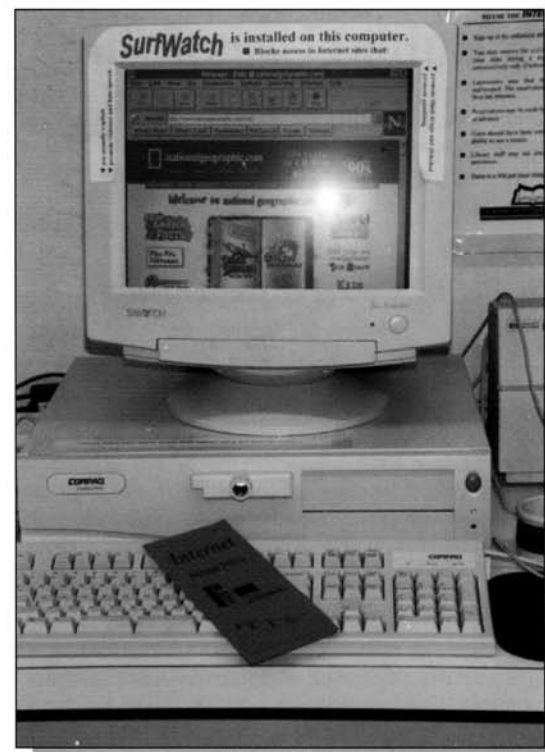
teens' access to print or AV materials in the adult department.

But we also knew that there was nothing in the library collection, and never will be, to match what can be found on the Internet when it comes to sexual explicitness, promotion of illegal activities, and just plain nonsense. And when we announced that our libraries had public Internet workstations we expected to be asked, "Are you letting children view all that awful stuff?"

So we decided to take a pragmatic approach. In our biggest libraries we'd put filters on workstations in the children's department, but not on the ones in the adult department. We wouldn't restrict children or teens to the filtered workstations, but we knew that young children were unlikely to venture outside the children's department unless their parents were with them. In our smaller libraries where there could be only one workstation, it would be unfiltered. And we put off a decision about whether to filter workstations in the teen library, where none has been installed to date, until we gained more experience with public Internet use.

Sure enough, I was asked about children's access to pornography on the Internet when I next spoke to a local service club. My answer, that concerned parents should direct their own children to the filtered workstation in the library, seemed to satisfy the questioner.

For those of you who are worried that the use of filtering software by libraries to block access to constitutionally protected speech violates the Library Bill of Rights, there's no problem when a choice is provided. I asked about this during the last ALA Council session in San Francisco. I was told by members



An Internet terminal at Jackson County Library with the filtering program "SurfWatch" installed.

of the Intellectual Freedom Committee that as long as there are a reasonable number of unfiltered stations, and they're available to kids as well as adults, and the filtered stations are so labeled, then there's no "violation."

The filter we chose is SurfWatch. It's far from perfect, but no filters are. (The best analysis of Internet filters in library settings that I know about is The Internet Filter Assessment Project at <http://www.bluehighways.com/tifap/>.)

We surrounded the monitor screen with a label that says "SurfWatch is installed on this computer. Blocks access to Internet sites that: are sexually explicit; promote violence and hate speech; promote illicit drugs and alcohol; promote gambling."

I recently tried some searches to see what was and was not blocked. When I searched for "breast" there was no trouble locating sites about breast cancer, but SurfWatch blocked "Access breasts Now! Come get the free XXX Pics Now!" It also blocked "Winning gambling football bets," "White Aryan Resistance Hate Page," and "Voice of White America." It did not block "American Whites," "Medicinal marijuana in the states," nor the Marijuana Grower's Handbook. SurfWatch blocking criteria are described in detail on its website.

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Policies Update

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use of the Internet Computers and that I am responsible for any damage that may occur.

The other way age restrictions are defined is in rules that state that a child may only use the Internet in the company of a parent, as does the Arlington Heights (IL) Public Library:

"Children age 7 or younger must be supervised by an adult while using the Online Room."

Some libraries combine both policies for children of different ages, as does the Rockbridge (VA) Public Library:

Users Under 14: Children under 12 will be permitted to use an Internet computer only if

accompanied by an adult 18 years or older. Twelve- and thirteen-year-olds may use an Internet computer by themselves only if a parent or guardian has come to the library and signed a permission slip.

When the number of libraries practicing either policy is combined and duplications subtracted, the totals for policies written in 1995 are 25%. For policies written in 1997, it is a striking 39%.

What seems clear to me is that as the publicity and political battles regarding Internet pornography in public libraries has increased, public library Internet access policies have become more restrictive in response. **Q**

Jackson County

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What has been the patron and staff reaction to the filtered workstation? Almost none. Patrons seem to consider it obvious that the children's workstation would be filtered. The filter doesn't keep children from finding answers to their reference questions. One adult who was browsing music sites was blocked from accessing a rock musician's homepage, but it wasn't pertinent to her research and she didn't care.

Teenagers have been overheard saying "Let's go upstairs and use the one up there. It's more fun, it doesn't have SurfWatch." But one father, obviously unfamiliar with the Internet and leery of it, was reluctant to let his daughter use the workstation until he realized it was filtered. Then he seemed relieved and permitted her to get acquainted with this new information resource. **Q**

Oregon Public Schools

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School librarians continue to wrestle with the issues of providing access to information on the Internet and of how district policies can limit that access. It's such an exciting advancement in the areas of international connections and idea sharing.

I like Alan H. MacDonald's comment, "The nature of the telecommunications stream is such that it would take the equivalent of a national telecommunications lobotomy to fully control the flow." **Q**

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Editor's note: Rebecca Macy was recently named OEMA Media Specialist of the Year.