

Intersecting on the internet

libraries, librarians and content regulation



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What do the topics of software development, pornography, youth suicide, and libraries all have in common? They all intersect on the internet. While Australia has been (at least until now) free of the vigorous debates which are occurring at all levels in the United States of America, we can be sure we will be hearing more about the topic of content regulation, and our responsibilities as the number of internet workstations in libraries increase.

Do we want content regulation? Can we get by without it? Is there another path we can take to the problems of open internet access — a more positive, proactive one?

Until recently, I felt fairly secure in my view on content and access regulation. It didn't really worry me if fifteen-year-old boys (or girls) were looking at 'dirty pictures' on my library service's public workstations. Much of what they look at is described by Joe Bloggs as 'the kind of show which gives pornography a bad name'.

For me, the regulation question took a more complex turn last week, during a radio discussion on youth suicide — the number-one killer of males aged between eighteen and thirty in Australia. The guest speaker was pointing out that this is the same age group who are also heavy internet users. In it itself, none of this was very surprising. What was surprising (and probably shouldn't have been) was the fact that there have been chat sites where participants have been actively encouraged to end their lives, and other sites giving advice on various suicide methods. For libraries who were concerned about how they handle their copy of *Final exit*, this will present a particular quandary.

So far technology (or the embryonic status of that technology) has been the libertarian's friend on the issue of censorship. From most, but not all, reports there have been sufficient problems with filtering software to enable libraries to demonstrate to their legal, political or administrative masters that filtering can actually introduce a new set of problems. On the practical front it has been shown that it is possible to get to 'unacceptable' sites with filtering software, and yet still to be unable to access valuable and innocuous sites.

On the legal front it has been argued that using filtering software which is less than perfect (and it is all less than perfect) may actually be more risky in the legal sense than not filtering at all, as the provider of the ac-

cess point has implied that they have filtered out 'unacceptable' material, yet it is still very likely to be available.

This state of affairs probably will not go on indefinitely, especially if PICs becomes a common standard. PICs is a self-administered internet content classification system — not dissimilar to that used by the television industry for its own programming. Should the use of the PICs system be widely adopted, and software technology be established to deal with it, the argument over filtering will become more ethically-based, and more politically charged.

Technology has threatened our control over the information we provide — until recently, this information was contained in printed and bound books — we had both subtle and obvious means of controlling access. These means varied from simply not selecting the item for purchase (often on the grounds that we cannot buy everything, and the item in question is low quality, or of limited interest), to special storage, such as behind the information or circulation desk.

Now the same technology which can deliver so much to the desk top has also made it very difficult to control what our users see. Has this effectively ended our claim of provision of a quality service? Can we still claim to deliver a quality service when we cannot control what is being delivered?

It seems to me that the way forward is one of a positive approach to internet-based information. We must educate our public on the good sites, make them aware of the existence of possibly offensive sites, and place them in perspective. The American Library Association site at <http://www.ala.org/parents/index.html> is a good start — it provides a list of 'kid-friendly' sites, and positive internet experiences. We must provide pointers to these positive sites, and add Australian equivalents. We need to counter the community perceptions that the internet is a dark and dangerous place. It is not only expeditious, and in our self-interest, to provide a counterpoint to media 'net hysteria, it is implicit to our roles as information professionals.

The questions aren't new — they have arisen with *The satanic verses*, *Lady Chatterley's lover*, *Uncle Tom's cabin* and the Irving book denying the Holocaust. The profession has risen to each of these challenges, and found a way to deal with the ethical questions they present. ■

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