

Filtering the Internet in American Public Libraries: Sliding Down the Slippery Slope

An article by Jeannette Allis Bastian available online at http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue2_10/bastian/.

Article Analysis #5

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Article Abstract

The American Library Association (ALA) issued its first Library Bill of Rights in 1939. The document's intention was to declare the Association's "basic policy on intellectual freedom." Using this document in tandem with the "moral and professional" support of the ALA, libraries "have generally been successful in defending their collections against censorship" while providing "equal and fair service to all users."

The Internet provides a very economical source of volumes of information that, for better or worse, has a "distinctly dark and dirty side." For the fifty-percent of libraries in the United States that have public Internet access in them, a professional dilemma has come to light: "whether to provide totally open access to the Internet thereby fully supporting the intellectual freedom principles and first amendment rights as described in the ALA Library Bill of Rights, or to limit access to the Internet by filtering out and effectively censoring undesirable information." In light of the 1997 ruling by the Supreme Court declaring the Communications Decency Act unconstitutional, librarians are now faced with the arduous task encouraging the freedom of expression in a democratic society.

Major Points of the Article

The major point of the article is that the Internet either needs to be defined as: a "new information media that does not affect basic library principles" and therefore should be governed by the free speech principles put forth in the ALA Library Bill of Rights; or it must be defined as a "fundamentally different type of information source" where the principles themselves must be examined.

The author argues that the Internet is a level playing field where all information is given equal weight and that none of the information is processed, cataloged, and classified in a manner consistent with traditional library practices. The human interaction found in a library when a librarian collects, analyzes, classifies and then displays books are noticeably absent

online. The most glaring regulatory absence here is the fact that there is no one to authenticate the information available online.

A major concern for libraries is whether or not the same principles that are applied to books should be applied to the information available on the Internet. Along with this point is the concern over whether or not the library has the "same responsibilities towards the potential information that may be received via the Internet that it assumes over all the other materials in its collection." Finally, how do public libraries, as government institutions, uphold the laws of the government while "safeguarding community standards in an Internet environment?" It is the author's opinion that these concerns must be resolved at the community level, regardless of court decisions.

The author goes on to propose that filtering of information can be beneficial to individuals in that it "eases access and use and merely extends technologically the natural and often unconscious processing of information." Internet filtering, however, is reactive rather than proactive in that it is designed to "prevent access to certain information rather than assisting in its use." The author warns, by using a quote from Declan McCullough, that by "setting [oneself] up as a kind of digital moral compass quickly finds themselves plunged into a kind of virtual Bermuda Triangle, where vertigo reigns and you hope to hell you pop out the other side still on course. Technology is never a substitute for conscience." This viewpoint is quickly balanced with the idea that "libraries are no longer book museums but community information centers. So they will remain at the center of a struggle to maintain freedom of speech and protect children."

The article is concluded with the idea that, even though the ALA refuses to take responsibility for information available on the Internet, they "can take no comfort in the rhetoric unless it comes with suggestions and solutions for realistic operation" of public Internet access. Since the ALA does not offer any of the suggestions or solutions requested, the author suggests

that librarians attempt to “fully [understand] what information the Internet offers, by accepting the new information paradigms, by acknowledging the right of the majority of that information to exist and to be disseminated and by not shunning their roles as Internet information mediators, and, yes, as gatekeepers.”

Article Analysis

I believe that this article was very well written. Most readers, including myself, probably have no idea the amount of power that librarians yield when it comes to the type of books and periodicals available at their local libraries. The fact that librarians have been filtering the information available to me for years is both comforting and disconcerting. However, as an adult I have the ability to self-filter information that many children lack and I believe that it is these children that must be protected.

I agree with the notion that the filtering dilemma should be handled on a local basis but I also believe that certain information should be filtered regardless of location. The fact that the publishing of certain information is *legal* does not mean that it is *appropriate* that it should be publicly available at the click of a mouse. The greater needs of society as a whole—namely the need to protect children relentlessly until they are of an age to make educated choices for themselves—should outweigh the needs of the civil libertarians that believe that Penthouse.com should be accessible from any public library.

I believe that actually surveying those people that are on the front lines of the debate could have better supported the article. A lot of space is dedicated to speaking to the tenants of the ALA, but very little space is used to present real-world examples and solutions. Companies offering filtering software are profiled and numbers are mentioned as to how many customers they have, but a real-life discussion with a librarian actually using the product was noticeably missing. This type of commentary and data would have allowed the author to present a fuller picture of the topic and make her case stronger.