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Do we want a perfectly filtered world? (Guest editorial)

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Do we want a perfectly filtered world?

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Editorial

The issue of internet filtering in public libraries continues to attract much attention and vigorous debate in the US, as evidenced by Gottschalk and Holt's work in the first issue of this journal. Clearly, the implementation of the CIPA legislation has had a part to play in this, although I would also suggest that librarians in the US (as opposed to here in the UK) have been more proactive in taking a stand on one side or other of this debate. On this side of the Atlantic, after a flurry of comment during the 1990s, filtering software in public libraries seems, in practice, to have "crept in through the back door" with little more than a murmur on the part of librarians¹.

Despite the low level of debate here in the UK, the most recent publicly available statistics with regard to the implementation of filtering software in UK public libraries indicate that in 1999 60 per cent of 111 public libraries across England, Scotland and Wales were using filtering or blocking software on at least some of their public access computers (Willson and Oulton, 2000). In some cases, this applied only to work stations provided solely for use by children, and in other cases there was provision of both filtered and non-filtered workstations for adult users. However, in a significant number of instances, library users

did not have access to any non-filtered computers. Decisions to implement filtering software were often taken at the local authority level, rather than by the libraries themselves. This situation prevails despite a lack of any legislative requirement in the UK to implement internet access control, and in contrast to the stated commitment of the professional body, CILIP, that

Access [to all publicly available information] should not be restricted on any grounds except that of the law. If publicly available material has not incurred legal penalties then it should not be excluded on moral, political, religious, racial or gender grounds, to satisfy the demands of sectional interest (CILIP, 2005).

The relatively passive acceptance by librarians of the use of filtering software in UK public libraries stands in stark contrast to such a statement and to the extensive international literature that discusses the inherent deficiencies of proprietary filtering software solutions. The lack of context sensitivity of such software, and the resultant likelihood of over- and under-blocking, has been well documented: Gottschalk's paper offers a succinct analysis of these issues. Furthermore, the disproportionate impact experienced by particular sections of the community when such software is installed on public access Internet points is well illustrated in the paper by Holt. The dangers of further marginalisation of already disadvantaged groups cannot be ignored. Thus, those with non-filtered and unmonitored home access may have full access to information, whilst those who perhaps are in greater need of such

access can only see that which the software architects design fit for them.

Perhaps key to the debate about the implementation of filtering or blocking software in public libraries is the overarching question of what the role of the public library should be. Are they intended to be elite institutions that act as "a bulwark against the lowering of standards" (Pors, 2001, p.311) or should they be fulfilling the democratic and inclusive ideal envisaged by President Eisenhower in 1953:

"The libraries of America are and must ever remain the home of free, inquiring minds. To them our citizens – of all ages and races, of all creeds and political persuasions – must be able to turn with clear confidence that there they can freely seek the whole truth, unvarnished by fashion and uncompromised by expediency." (cited in Holtze and Rader, p.57)

Is their primary purpose one of education or of recreation? Are they intended to reflect community standards or to change them? Are they the gatekeepers and protectors of our communal intellectual inheritance, or the creators of new knowledge? Or a combination of all of these things? Our answers to such questions must surely inform our own views on the desirability or otherwise of deploying filtering software on public access computers in our libraries.

Pors (2001) maintains that, by dint of their selection and de-selection functions, public libraries have always been "filtering institutions." This may be so, but I would argue that this alone does not justify the use of filtering software in public libraries. Firstly, I would argue this on the grounds that in the past it was librarians who made such selection decisions, usually with reference to clearly defined and transparent acquisitions or collection development policies. Such transparency is entirely absent with regard to filtering software, with companies claiming commercial confidentiality as a reason for non-disclosure of blocking decisions. Secondly, the context in which such decisions were made differed greatly from the current position: decisions could generally be justified in terms of priorities for

the use of scarce resources. The use of filtering software represents an additional drain on such resources, rather than a cost saving.

Such arguments, together with the technical limitations and inaccuracies of filtering products, contribute to the case against their use in public libraries. Moreover, even if it were possible for filtering software to make contextualised blocking decisions that accurately reflected the community standards of a particular public library service, it is questionable whether this would be desirable. As Lessig (1999, p.180) has noted, "perfect filtering" that enables us accurately to screen out "undesirable" content, may leave society the poorer, as we are not faced with having to "confront the unfiltered" such as issues of poverty and inequality elsewhere in the world. Shapiro (1999, p.109-111) comments that "total filtering" allows us to avoid information that leads to "cognitive dissonance" by confronting us with challenging or uncomfortable facts that might cause us to re-evaluate our beliefs and behaviours in the light of new evidence ("freedom from speech")². We may prefer not to be confronted with images of death and destruction in Iraq or Afghanistan when we open our newspapers or turn on our television, but can we honestly make wise and just political decisions if we choose to avoid such coverage? Thus, beyond the ideal of free expression and of the right freely to receive expression, I would support Holtze and Rader's notion of the duty to be open to views other than our own:

To have real intellectual freedom, individuals must open themselves up – not only to allow other perspectives to exist, not only to allow other "truths" to be expressed, but to allow themselves to take in those ideas, soak them up, accept or reject them, but truly "hear" them either way (2000, p.55).

To remain rigidly within the confines of current "community standards" (even assuming one could reach agreement as to what these are) would lead to a closed society that did not progress, and that further marginalised those who would

examine and challenge such standards. Thus, while it is unlikely that any of us would advocate that public libraries should become the "porn palaces" alluded to by the hyperbole of media coverage of the Ottawa Public Library dispute (see Deane, 2004), it is my belief that the use of filtering software represents an undesirable – and even dangerous, as suggested by Holt – constraint on our ability to gain access to the accumulated knowledge and ideas that can enrich and inform our daily lives. The intelligent deployment of user education, training, parental responsibility and ethical guidelines, together with a willingness on the part of librarians to challenge blatant instances of inappropriate public use, must surely offer a more satisfactory and sustainable solution to this difficult issue. As stated eloquently in a National Research Council report:

Swimming pools pose some threat to the safety and well-being of children... Technology – in the form of fences around pools, pool alarms, and locks – can help protect children from drowning in swimming pools. However, teaching a child to swim – and when to avoid pools – is a far safer approach than relying on locks, fences, and alarms to prevent him or her from drowning (NRC, 2001, cited in Kranich, 2004, p.17).

The same could be said of our approaches to adolescents and access to sexually explicit material – we may (possibly) be able to prevent them from accessing content that we deem unacceptable, but will this help to prepare them adequately for a mature adult sexual relationship? Surely it is better to channel our energies towards appropriate education and discussion that will encourage the formation of a sensible, considerate and safe approach towards sexual matters? Similarly, I would suggest that librarians might best channel their energies in the direction of user education and the development of user guidelines rather than in seeking simplistic technical solutions.

I am not suggesting here that the issue of whether to use filtering software in public libraries is an easy matter to resolve for

public librarians, and it is evident that librarians have little choice but to conform to legal requirements where these mandate a particular course of action. However, I believe that we should not sit on the fence with regard to our own views, but should actively engage in debate and defend, in whatever way we believe best, the cause of intellectual freedom that is the cornerstone and, some would even say, the *raison d'être*, of our profession. If we do believe in the public library as a democratic and inclusive institution, then we can do no less.

Endnotes

1: A quick search through LISA using the terms "public librar*" and "filtering" retrieved 87 hits – of these, the first article discussing filtering software in a UK context was record number 39, published in 2001.

2: I have also discussed this argument in a forthcoming article in *Journal of Information Science* entitled "Controlling the Net: European Approaches to Content Regulation."

3: See Sturges (2002) for useful advice on the drafting of Internet Use Policies. Similarly, the Council of Europe's *Guidelines on Public Access and Freedom of Expression in Networked Information* (<http://www.cilip.org.uk/professionalguidance/foi/intellfreedom.htm>) are also of potential use to policy makers in this area.

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