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# Internet filtering vs. unrestricted access in public libraries and school media centers in southern New Jersey

Elizabeth A. Sevast
*Rowan University*

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INTERNET FILTERING vs. UNRESTRICTED ACCESS IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES

AND SCHOOL MEDIA CENTERS IN SOUTHERN

IN NEW JERSEY

by
Elizabeth A. Sevast

A Thesis

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of
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# ABSTRACT

Elizabeth A. Sevast. Internet Filtering vs. Unrestricted Access in Public Libraries and School Media Centers in the Southern Eight Counties of New Jersey. 1999. (Under the direction of Dr. Holly G. Willett, Program in School and Public Librarianship.)

Where do we stand as educators on the debate involving Internet filtering vs. unrestricted access? The focus of this study was to examine Internet access privileges in local public libraries and kindergarten through twelfth grade school media centers. Data was collected using a survey questionnaire sent to 100 randomly selected public library directors and school media center specialists throughout the eight counties in southern New Jersey. They were asked if their libraries offered Internet access and if filtering software had been installed on their Internet terminals. Other questions involved the successes and/or failures of implementing (or in not implementing) filters, requiring Acceptable Use Policies, and providing Internet training for both staff and patrons. It is impossible to control the content on the Internet but not impossible to assist in developing informed users to use good judgment and become self-regulated when using the Internet. This study showed that librarians in all types of libraries have an ongoing mission to train their users to learn to find and assess reliable online information.

# MINI-ABSTRACT

Elizabeth A. Sevast. Internet Filtering vs. Unrestricted Access in Public Libraries and School Media Centers in the Southern Eight Counties of New Jersey. 1999. (Under the direction of Dr. Holly G. Willett, Program in School and Public Librarianship.)

To examine the debate concerning Internet filtering vs. free access, surveys were sent to 100 public librarians and school media specialists throughout the southern eight counties in New Jersey. Though impossible to control Internet content, the survey results indicated the importance of librarians to assist in developing informed online library users.

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# Chapter 1

## The Problem

### Introduction and Background

The Internet is a network of networks that connects millions of computer systems and people. It offers the benefits of exchanging messages using electronic mail (e-mail), searching a variety of databases and World Wide Web pages, downloading files, exchanging information using mailing lists, and logging into remote systems. OPACs in cyberspace offer a wide array of benefits as they open new avenues for global information access and increased accessibility to library collections (Meghabghab, 1997). The Internet's online library allows users to inquire about books, tapes, games, programs, to exchange information, and to connect with people all over the world. Online services are used by academics, by consumers, and by office workers to send text, photographs, sounds and video images. Libraries and school media centers are making advances to connect to the Internet and to provide a range of networked-based services and resources.

Many organizations in general, and public libraries in particular, have built significant networks and have connected to the Internet as part of the evolving National Information Infrastructure (NII). As of spring 1997, 72.3% of public library systems had some type of Internet connection, as compared to 20.9% in 1994 (McClure, Bertot, and Zweizig, 1996). With increased use of Web sites, libraries will need to take on increased responsibilities for providing access to the information. Although there is a great deal of electronic networking activity occurring in public library and K-12 environments, there is a range of policy issues currently being debated that affect libraries and school media

centers. These issues include censorship and First Amendment rights, privacy, encryption, and copyright and intellectual property rights.

**Statement of the Problem**

In recent years, the environment in school media centers and public libraries has been rapidly changing. Remarkable progress has been made, as the Internet becomes the foundation for accessing information. Materials needed can be accessed, shared, indexed, and received raising the issue of student privacy, rights, and protection from indecency on the Internet. But, what alternatives are opened to school media centers and children's public library departments in resolving the problem of safeguarding children when using the Internet? Does filtering or blocking of Internet sites by schools and/or libraries violate free speech? Should there be rules against viewing inappropriate or pornographic materials by children?

A major issue confronting school library media specialists and public librarians is the need for a balance between child protection and the issues of intellectual freedom concerning access to the Internet. The American Library Association (ALA) consistently challenges policies that limit access to any library materials or services, or that differentiate against any type of library user. ALA has taken the position that filtering of Internet sites by a school or library infringes upon free speech. ALA's role is to establish policies in support of the First Amendment and to which individual libraries can aspire (Tenopir, 1997). But many librarians argue that they would not be able to offer online services without policies that either limit use or provide fees to assist in the added costs of electronic access. Most often, library Internet policies are written to protect the

library from legal obligations if patrons experience Internet materials that may be offensive.

Though there are many educational advantages provided by the Internet, the National Commission on Libraries and information Science (NCLIS) recognizes the potential dangers of Internet use. They are currently in the process of examining important matters such as:

The problems arising from public access Internet terminals in libraries and the potential for predation by pedophiles;

The concerns of parents and caretakers for access to inappropriate materials, generally sexually explicit matter, but also hate language, cult messages, and other troublesome material;

The issue of privacy, especially in the case of marketing efforts that entice kids to provide a host of consumer information about themselves and their families; and The First Amendment freedom and the library community's aversion to censorship (Whiteleather, 1998).

## Purpose or Objective

An undisputed approach for keeping children from acquiring adult material on the Internet is not available. Unfortunately the Internet does not contain a foolproof watchdog to keep children from entering risqué sites. In his survey, "Librarians and Sex", contributing *American Libraries'* writer, Will Manley received 5,241 responses to the question regarding how librarians felt about Internet usage. Sixty-one percent of this group said that they would not put their jobs on the line to keep Madonna's book (*Sex*) on

the shelves; 42% said that they would not put their jobs on the line to keep *Daddy's Roommate* on the shelves; and 67% said that they would not put their jobs on the line to keep Internet access unfiltered (Manley, 1998). Even an informal poll of 3,000 patrons from Virginia's Prince William County Library, resulted in a mixture of feelings, with 25% of the respondents wanting filtered access in children's areas and 17% wanting unfiltered access throughout the library (St. Lifer & Rogers, 1998). As of August 1998, the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science (NCLIS) planned to look into guidelines that would safeguard children when using the Internet.

This study examined current Internet access privileges in school media centers and public libraries in the eight counties in southern New Jersey. The study examined how the various libraries deal with current Internet use. Survey questions included topics involving positions on unrestricted access, Acceptable Use Policies, age restrictions, and parental consent, e-mail use, viewing inappropriate or pornographic materials, disclaimers limiting the library's liability, limiting Internet access through commercial software, allowing children access that limits them to sites that have inquired about.

## Theoretical or Conceptual Framework

In order to research the question, Internet filtering vs. unrestricted access: Where do we as a profession stand? a questionnaire survey was distributed to 25 public library branches, 25 high school library media centers, 25 middle school media centers, and 25 elementary media centers, throughout the eight counties in southern New Jersey, requesting their positions on Internet filtering. The results of the data collected were analyzed according to the number of responses received, involving those favoring or

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opposing access rights. Percentages tabulated were gathered from the responses in order for comparisons (and differences) to be made.

Constructing the questionnaire/survey, preparing the mailings of the surveys, the gathering of the responses, and the formulating of results required an approximate time frame from January through March. A budget of $150 - $300 was set aside to include the cost of mailings (envelopes, stamps, paper, self-addressed stamped envelopes), duplicating, diskettes for computer back-up, mileage, and phone calls.

**Hypotheses/Questions to be Answered**

The focus of this study, regarding access to the Internet, involves a look at the conflicting arguments concerning the need to balance child safety and the issues of intellectual freedom. Many schools and public libraries are installing filtering software that block sexually explicit materials and sites condoning violence, illegal activities, bigotry, or drug abuse. But using filters may violate the Constitution. The American Library Association defines censorship as the change in the access status of material, made by a governing authority or its representatives. Such changes include exclusion, restriction, removal, or age/grade level changes (Books and Materials Challenge Terminology, ALA Intellectual Freedom Committee, 1986). Selection is seen as the addition of materials while censorship is seen as the removal of materials. Filtering, therefore, can be viewed as a removal of selected information from the Internet, or a form of censorship. Librarians that filter can be viewed as censors. But, there are those concerned about providing children with unrestricted opportunities to satisfy their

curiosity. How do schools and libraries ensure that children get the educational advantages without the possible dangers?

Networking on computers holds tremendous advantages, but it also raises difficult issues which need to be discussed openly. The publicity related to Internet use issues have mainly dealt with potential risks and with less focus on possible solutions. Can children be prevented from accessing materials that are controversial? Is preventing access even desirable? What alternatives could be provided? How are community standards set? The New Jersey Library Association (NJLA) has issued an alternative position that allows for some filtering. The NJLA statement affirms the right of all users to unrestricted Internet access. But it also says that librarians may legitimately accommodate individuals who wish to shield themselves or their children from unintentional exposure to text and images that they deem offensive. Libraries may make filtering software available for them to turn on at will (Oder, St. Lifer, & Evans, 1998).

**Definition of Terms**

**Acceptable Use Policy (AUP):** A parent permission form allowing a student to access the Internet.

**E-mail:** Electronic mail messages that are sent through a computer network. The messages are stored until the addressee accesses the system and retrieves them.

**Home Page:** The introductory page of a World Wide Web site.

**Hypertext Transfer Protocol (http):** A standard used for accessing sites, particularly World Wide Web sites, on the Internet. The abbreviation http appears at the beginning of a site address.

**Internet:** The Internet is a global network of networks that connects millions of computers called hosts. The Internet is the virtual space where users send and receive email, log on to remote computers (telnet), browse databases of information and send and receive programs.

**Internet Filters:** Hardware and software filters are designed to restrict, or block, a person's access to certain areas on the Internet. Filtering software is defined as software products published by commercial software publishers which do any of the following: block access to Internet sites listed in an internal database of the product; block access to Internet sites listed in a database maintained external to the product itself; block access to Internet sites which carry certain ratings assigned to those sites by a third party, or which are not rated under such a system; scan the contents of Internet sites which a user seeks to view and block access based on the occurrence of certain words or phrases on those sites (Wallace, 1997). Some Internet filtering software products include Cyber Patrol, CyberSitter, NetNanny Ltd., SurfWatch, just to name a few.

**Internet Service Provider (ISP):** A company providing accesses to the Internet through dial-up, SLIP/PPP, or direct connection. An example of an ISP is America Online (AOL).

**National Commission on Libraries and Information Science (NCLIS):** A permanent, independent agency of the federal government charged with advising the executive and legislative branches on national library and information policies and plans.

**Online:** Communication via a modem or network to a host computer system; the time the user is logged into the host.

**Uniform Resource Locator (URL)**: A standard for specifying an Internet address, especially for sites on the World Wide Web.

**Web Browser**: The software used on a computer to access and retrieve information from the World Wide Web.

**Web Site:** A collection of Web documents and a Web server that can be accessed through a Web browser.

**World Wide Web (www):** A browsing system that allows point-and-click navigation of the Internet. The www is a web-like interconnection of millions of pieces of information located on computers around the world.

## Organization of the Remainder of the Study

Libraries are finding themselves in the middle of a controversy over whether Internet access should be restricted to protect children or unrestricted to protect the rights of adults in search of information. This debate is currently taking place in public libraries where there are those who lean toward restricting access, while others support free access. School librarians have not felt as pressured in this matter since they are not as unsupervised or as unstructured as public libraries. The Internet, as a resource, can be viewed in a different light when compared to other library resources, since anyone can publish any type of material onto the Web for anyone to view. Ginnie Cooper, director of libraries at the Multmomah County Library in Portland, Oregon noted that anyone can publish on the Web with no review of the material. This leads to anxiety about the quality of information being presented (Balas, 1998).

A more in depth look at the pros and cons of public Internet access are examined further in the Chapter 2. Aspects such as the history of the Internet, controversial material, Acceptable Use Policies, filtering software, Internet use in education involving research and statistics, are provided in more detail. A description of the methodology selected, data collection, and procedures are explained in Chapter 3. The results and analysis of data from a survey questionnaire that was sent out to school library media centers and public libraries in the eight south New Jersey counties are presented in Chapter 4. Lastly, a summary, conclusion, and recommendations from the data are offered in Chapter 5.

# Chapter 2

## The Literature Review

### Introduction

The Internet can be a wonderful resource for adults and children to explore, examine, and retrieve an abundance of facts and information. Links can take users to many sites that they might not know about or not otherwise visit. Community and interest groups in chat rooms or news groups are mostly public forums exchanging useful ideas or places for like-minded individuals to talk to one another. Unfortunately, the content of information found on the Internet reflects that of society. Because unlimited information is made accessible to the user, the Internet also provides information considered by many to be offensive and inappropriate for viewing, especially by children. A patron can begin at a site that contains legitimate information and follow link after link, or hyperlink, to a page that contains questionable or misleading information. Sites containing materials that are sexually explicit, lurid, and violent in nature can be easily found. Pages can also be found that promote just about any cult, political group, or ideology.

Freedom of information principles is once again being challenged because of the ambiguous nature of the Internet. Information from a Web site can be carefully constructed with reliable information and with links that have been scrutinized. Equally, a Web site can be constructed of information that has been thrown together and expresses only one person's belief or attitude. No one oversees, chooses, or assesses the information on the Internet, it is simply a place where anyone can mount messages.

What one individual considers objectionable may be perfectly acceptable to another.

Solutions to these issues must be resolved in order for libraries to retain their integrity,

professional value, and reputation in the community. The effort to manage information

on the Internet has become one of confusion and controversy involving pro-filtering and

anti-filtering groups.


**Historical Context**

Libraries in the United States have been collectively battling against censorship

since the American Library Association (ALA) issued its first Library Bill of Rights in

1939, a document proclaiming the Association's basic policy on intellectual freedom

(Bastian, 1997). Libraries have been effective in defending their print collections against

censorship and in justifying their right to provide unrestricted access to information and

equal and fair service to all patrons. Though censorship in books has decreased, the

concerns have shifted from print to electronic information. Librarians that have obtained

Internet access are faced with a new obstacle. Should they provide a totally open Internet

approach (supporting intellectual freedom principles and First Amendment rights

described in the ALA Bill of Rights) or should they regulate access to the Internet by

filtering out undesirable information?

From earlier times, librarians have not only sought to raise public views and

ideas, but to also meet the needs of the public. The librarian has always been viewed as

the mediator of good social values and good reading as well as an allocator of mass

market material. ALA has revised its Bill of Rights six times and added interpretations

defining intellectual freedom principles in specific settings. The Internet has been

extremely challenging. Issues arising from the still-developing technology of computer-mediated information generation, distribution, and retrieval need to be approached and regularly reviewed from a context of constitutional principles and ALA policies so that fundamental and traditional tenets of librarianship are not swept away (AASL & AECT, 1998).

The term filtering is used to describe software that limits access to material on the Internet. Software can be filtered through keyword blocking, site blocking, and web rating systems. It has been found that filters are not always effective. They may block out useful information needed or they block out material considered to be inoffensive. The ALA has taken the stand that filtering of Internet sites by a school or library violates free speech. Freedom of expression is an inalienable human right and the foundation for self-government. Freedom of expression encompasses the freedom of speech and the corollary right to receive information. These rights extend to minors as well as adults (AASL & AECT, 1998) and electronic information, services, and networks provided directly or indirectly by the library should be equally, readily, and equitably accessible to all library users (AASL & AECT, 1998). Yet, many libraries and schools do filter Internet access.

## Assessment of Previous Studies

There has been an increase in the number of libraries offering public access to the Internet. In the 1998 National Commission on Libraries and Information Science study, it was found that of those libraries surveyed (2,500 of the nations 15,718 public libraries, including branches), 73% offered basic Internet access to the public. The survey also

found that nearly every public library has or is developing an acceptable-use Internet policy. Internet filtering-use was found in approximately 14% of the public libraries.

Designed to assist librarians in making informed decisions about filters and in recognition that many libraries may have to make such decisions, the Internet Filtering Assessment Project (TIFAP) was developed under the direction of library consultant Karen Schneider (Bastian, 1997). TIFAP was a volunteer library project that arose from questions and concerns librarians had about the use of filters in libraries (Schneider, 1997). The purpose of the project was to take a look at Internet filters from a librarian's point of view. The project provided useful information about what filtering is and how filtering works, discredited any myths, and offered articles and links to other sites on filtering and censorship.

TIFAP offers evaluations on filtering but does not promote filtering or filtering products. Questions were developed from issues and concerns librarians had about filtering performance in libraries. Librarians found what they were looking for 78% of the time, and when they could not, the filter was blocking the information. More than 35% of the time, filters blocked some type of information that was needed to answer a question. Nursery rhymes and government archives were blocked because of keywords such as pussycat and XXX. The filters also blocked sites with information similar to what would be found in libraries such as Web sites for hate groups, press releases on sex offenders, organizations for gay teens, and so on.

## Justification of Topic Selection

Can children be protected from improper matter on the Internet without giving up free speech? There are no guarantees that children will not come across inappropriate material on the Internet because there is no commonly accepted agreement as to what is considered proper viewing. Using no Internet filters leads to offended children (some might say, harm to children); but using filters may violate the Constitution. The American Library Association has taken a consistent stance against any form of Net censorship and has spent a considerable amount of resources to stop legislation such as the Communications Decency Act. Despite ALA policies, cities such as Boston, Austin, and even Seattle are installing filters of one sort or another either system-wide or in selected areas of the library (Schuyler, 1997).

As the Internet debate continues, some argue that problems are overblown and solutions to valid concerns are already here. The government should not patrol the Internet but the government does have a responsibility to protect the innocent. The Office for Information Technology Policy (OITP) promotes the development and utilization of electronic access to information as a means to ensure the public's right to a free and open information society (OIF, 1996).

But, who chooses what is to be filtered? There are filtering software packages that filter because of political content or those that unintentionally filter legitimate search words in spite of their implications (such as the word, breasts). This would be an overwhelming task for librarians to monitor. How do schools ensure that students get the educational advantages without the unnecessary downside? Educators are concerned

about giving students too much Internet freedom. Some advocate guiding students to educational treasures and engaging (or developing) their common sense along the way. Others believe that software or server-based controls are essential. The most effective approach may well be a combination of both (Mather, 1996). Schools worry about students accessing inappropriate text, images, and people on the Internet. As one teacher stated, "In our area, a school would be tarred and feathered if they risked having a child find something inappropriate on the Web at school" (Mather, 1996, p. 38).

Many schools are adopting Acceptable Use Policy (AUP), also called Responsible Use Policy, documents that explain their district's Internet usage plan, instructional strategies and rationales. The guidelines are written in language clear enough in order for students at all levels to understand what is and is not appropriate when online. Students learn to act responsibly and develop good judgment. Also included in the AUP are consequences if violations of the policy occur which protect schools from liability issues.

The public library may be the only facility where some patrons are able to gain access to the Internet. By filtering access to the Internet, public libraries can be considered safe environments for their users, but there are no guarantees that inappropriate material will not be viewed. The American Library Association (ALA) and its Office of Intellectual Freedom (OIF) are major players in the filtering debate. Concerns have developed as public libraries provide their users with access to the Internet. Libraries may be viewed as the providers of illegal material because of patrons who deliberately access and view pornography and children who gain access to offensive matter. A crucial dilemma for librarians is that some of the information on the Internet is not acceptable even by the United States Supreme Court standards.

Electronic Access to Resources in Libraries (EARL), a Networked Services Policy Task Group, was established in 1995 to develop the role of public libraries and information services over the network. They have investigated the pros and cons of using software filtering. The pros for filtering involve providing for the user's needs; addressing the concerns parents may have about their children accessing pornography or offensive material over the Internet; ensuring the safety of children; and providing selection policies guiding in selecting the best and suitable resources for their library users (Ormes, 1998, on behalf of EARL). The cons for filtering involve arguments from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the ALA that public libraries should provide unfiltered access to the Internet in order to uphold and maintain America's first amendment right to seek and receive all types of information from all points of view; that libraries should provide access to Internet with the same constitutional protections that apply to the books on library shelves; and that libraries are seen as passing over assessment of what is and is not suitable material for their users to an outside organization, where decisions are not made with the same awareness and expertise from professionally trained librarians (Ormes, 1998, on behalf of EARL).

**Research Design and Methodology**

The Internet is a relatively new addition to the resources offered by public libraries and school media centers. Policies are still being developed and the issue of what children can and can not access continues to be a hot topic of debate. During the months of February and March 1999 a total of 100 survey questionnaires were sent to

libraries and school media centers in the eight counties of southern New Jersey to record how they are handling patron access to the Internet.

Questions asked of public librarians and high school, middle school, and elementary school media specialists included the following: Is access to the Internet provided? Which utilities are supported (e-mail, etc.)? Have filters have been installed? Is training on the Internet provided? Is an Acceptable Use Policy employed? Has free access or filtering has been successful? The survey results were then tabulated and conclusions were drawn based on these responses.


**Theoretical Framework**

Libraries have always provided access to a wide variety of information in as many print and non-print formats as possible. Computer technology and the Internet are just one means of accessing information and helping patrons find that information. Public libraries are considered a branch of government and are subject to First Amendment rules, which prohibit content-based censorship of speech. These rules apply to the acquiring and removing of Internet content by a library.

In the past, the topics of censorship and access to information developed in a world where the spread of information was slower. At that time, censorship involved which books to select or remove from the curriculum or the shelves because they offended the standards of a community. Schools and libraries rallied against censorship and fought to hold onto the principles of their selection process to meet society's needs.

Though filtering software may be appropriate for home computers, using them in a public library conflicts with intellectual freedom principles. It has been widely reported

that these products go far beyond blocking pornography. In fact, most blocked sites containing speech are clearly First Amendment protected (Wallace, 1997). Filtering, or the blocking of a web site, is comparable to removing a book from a library shelf. Legal and useful information, including those on breast cancer, AIDS, women's rights, animal rights, etc., is unavoidably blocked. Schools and libraries are struggling with youth privacy rights, intellectual freedom, and child safety while trying to provide meaningful technology-based learning. In its Intellectual Freedom Manual, the Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) states that intellectual freedom can exist only where two essential conditions are met: first, that all individuals have the right to hold any belief on any subject and to convey their ideas in any form they deem appropriate; and second, that society makes an equal commitment to the right of unrestricted access to information and ideas regardless of the communication medium used, the content of the work, and the viewpoints of both the author and receiver of information (OIF, 1996).

# Chapter 3

## Methodology

## Introduction -- Review of the Study's Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate the debate concerning Internet filtering versus unrestricted access in public libraries and school media centers throughout the eight counties in the southern New Jersey area. The controversy between free speech and the need to protect children from controversial material on the Internet is endless. Libraries are state agencies required to provide equal access to information regardless of age. Arguments for Internet filtering and against Internet filtering have been suggested by many. Open access without filters, filters on all terminals used by children under 18, filters on all terminals unless the child has parental permission to use full Internet service, and filters on terminals that can be turned off and on by the patron are just a few of the possible solutions being considered. Public libraries in the United States are under a great deal of pressure from community groups and others to filter or otherwise supervise Internet access for children. This demand has led to librarians taking a variety of approaches, leading to the ALA's recently developed strong policy against filtering mechanisms (Minow, 1997).

## Description of Methodology Selected

According to Babbie in *The Practice of Social Research*, Survey research is probably the best method available in collecting original data for describing a population

too large to observe directly (Babbie, 1998). The self-administered survey questionnaire asks the same questions to all that participate making large samples possible. It measures attitudes of a sample group in order to make inferences about those of a larger group. Because of time limitations, it was agreed that 25 public librarians as well as 25 elementary school media specialists, 25 middle school media specialists, and 25 high school media specialists would be surveyed throughout the southern counties in the state of New Jersey. Random sampling was the technique selected to gather information from these librarians and media specialists.

**Sample and Population**

A total of 100 public library directors and school media specialists currently working in the eight southern counties of New Jersey were surveyed. These counties included Atlantic, Burlington, Camden, Cape May, Cumberland, Gloucester, Ocean, and Salem. Twenty-five public libraries and school media centers were randomly selected within these eight counties, using Appendix E of Babbie (1998). The population, number of libraries and schools, the population of the libraries and schools, and the overall square mileage differ among the eight counties. (The definition of elementary school varies from one school district to another. An elementary school will be considered kindergarten to grade five or six, for the purposes of this study.)

The results of the study were limited since only public libraries and school media centers in the eight counties were included in this study. The results, conclusions, and recommendations of this study may not represent the opinions of the majority of the public library directors and school media centers in the state of New Jersey.

**Instrumentation**

Using Earl Babbie's *The Practice of Social Research* as a guide, a self-administered survey questionnaire was developed to obtain data for analysis and interpretation. Clear instructions were supplied for getting appropriate responses. The survey format was spread out and uncluttered, containing questions that were short, clear, and concise to motivate the respondent to complete it.

The questionnaire contained nine close-ended questions to be answered by placing a check in the boxes of applicable, appropriate responses. These questions were exhaustive and included all possible responses that might be expected including a category labeled "Other" when applicable. The answer categories were mutually exclusive requiring the respondent to select only one appropriate response from a series, unless otherwise indicated. The questions were designed in order for respondents to read an item quickly, understand its intent, and select or provide an answer without difficulty (Babbie, 1998). These questions ranged from inquiring if Internet access was available in the library or school media center to providing input to an Internet software filter's success. One open-ended question was included for respondents to answer.

A draft of the survey was pre-tested with a small group of school media specialists and librarians who were not part of the study, for possible ambiguity, bias, or vagueness in language. The survey was then submitted to the thesis advisor for further suggestions and revisions.

A cover letter on Rowan University stationary was constructed explaining the purpose of the survey, basic instructions for completion, and the importance of a prompt

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response. Respondents were informed that they need not respond to all questions in the survey and that the data collected were anonymous and confidential. The survey results would be made available to those indicating an interest.

## Data Collection and Other Procedures

Survey questionnaires were mailed to the attention of the elementary school media specialists, middle school media specialists and high school media specialists as well as directors of public libraries throughout the eight counties in southern New Jersey. *The 1996 - 1997 Public School Directory* provided the names of the kindergarten through twelfth grade schools, locations, addresses, etc., per county in the state of New Jersey. Names and addresses of public and branch libraries were provided in *The New Jersey Municipal Data Book.*

A number of methods to strengthen the likelihood of a timely response from school media center specialists and public librarians were used. A cover letter explaining the purpose of the study along with an enclosed self-addressed stamped envelope accompanied the two-page survey questionnaire. The surveys were color-coded and numbered before mailing to assist with record-keeping and additional follow-up mailings. Surveys sent to public library directors were white, surveys sent to elementary school media specialists were pink, middle school media specialists received yellow surveys, and surveys received by high school media specialists were blue.

These items were mailed via first-class mail during the second week of February 1999. A second mailing of the survey was sent during the first week in March 1999 to non-responding school media specialists and librarians. A tally chart was prepared to

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indicate the dates the surveys were returned, to determine a pattern in the response rate, and to record the survey responses.

## Data Analysis Plan

The data obtained from the survey questionnaires was entered into a database to create charts and tables reflecting the results. The charts and tables depicted if libraries and school media centers utilized Internet filtering practices or offered patrons unrestricted access. The information was analyzed and theories and generalizations were developed. Interpretations were made, comparisons were observed, and conclusions drawn. The following two chapters discuss the results of the survey.

# Chapter 4

## Presentation and Analysis of the Data

**Survey Response Rates**

Twenty-five surveys consisting of ten questions were sent to four separate study groups: public libraries and high school, middle school, and elementary school media centers, respectively. A total of one hundred surveys were sent. The questionnaires were mailed to the randomly selected locations on February 15, 1999 with a requested return date of March 5, 1999. Sixty of the 100 original surveys were answered and returned in timely fashion as indicated in the table below:

**Table 1**

Survey Response Rates

| Date | Elementary School Media Center | Middle School Media Center | High School Media Center | Public Library |
|------|------|------|------|------|
| Feb. 17 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Feb. 18 | 2 | 3 | 6 | 4 |
| Feb. 19 | 3 | 3 | 5 | 1 |
| Feb. 20 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Feb. 22 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 |
| Feb. 23 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 0 |
| Feb. 24 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Feb. 25 | 1 | 3 | 0 | 1 |
| Feb. 26 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 0 |
| Mar. 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| Mar. 3 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Mar. 5 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| After Mar. 6 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| Total: | 14 | 17 | 20 | 14 |

Every effort was made to retrieve the remaining 40 surveys via written follow-up reminders and fax after March 6, 1999. A grand total of 65 surveys were received after the follow-up effort.

Of the 65 libraries and media centers responding, 64 facilities indicated connection to the Internet. One elementary media center was not connected to the Internet. Table 2 summarizes this information.

**Table 2**

Internet Access Summary

| Facility | n | Internet Connection | No Internet Connection |
|---|---|---|---|
| Public Library | 14 | 14 | 0 |
| High School Media Center | 20 | 20 | 0 |
| Middle School Media Center | 17 | 17 | 0 |
| Elementary School Media Center | 14 | 13 | 1 |

As seen in Table 3, all of the facilities connected to the Internet use it to access information. A majority of those same facilities also use the Internet to send and receive electronic mail messages. The Internet is also used for specific purposes within each group. For instance, public libraries may track circulation, interlibrary loans, or subscribe to online databases such as EBSCOHOST. School media centers provide instruction for student use of the Internet, and participate in on-line projects and teach lessons via chat rooms.

**Table 3**

Uses of Internet

| Groups | Access Information | E-mail | Other |
|---|---|---|---|
| Public Library | 14 | 10 | 4 |
| High School Media Center | 20 | 8 | 3 |
| Middle School Media Center | 17 | 13 | 2 |
| Elementary School Media Center | 13 | 11 | 1 |

Local taxes and state/federal taxes provide much of the funding in both public

libraries and public school media centers. Other funding for public schools is furnished

through grants and district money.

Most of the study groups indicated that their networking facilities provided an

Acceptable Use Policy for patrons who access information from the Internet. Internet

training for staff and patrons was also provided in a majority of these same facilities

containing Acceptable Use Policies. This interrelationship of training and Acceptable

Use Policies can be observed in Table 4 on the next page.

**Table 4**

Training Provisions and Acceptable Use Policies

| Groups | n | # Providing User Training | # With Acceptable Use Policies | # With Training and Policy |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Public Library | 14 | 13 | 11 | 11 |
| High School Centers | 20 | 18 | 17 | 17 |
| Middle School Centers | 17 | 13 | 16 | 13 |
| Elementary Centers | 13 | 11 | 12 | 11 |

Of the 64 libraries receiving access to the Internet, 31 facilities currently utilize

filtering software in their Internet terminals while 33 facilities do not. As seen in Table 5,

more than half of the respondents at the middle school level indicated that their media

center terminals contain filtering software. The span was not nearly as great in the high

school and elementary media centers. Of the public libraries responding, more indicated

free access on their terminals than filtering.

**Table 5**

Filtering / Non-Filtering of the Internet

| Group | n | Filtering | Non-Filtering |
|---|---|---|---|
| Public Library | 14 | 5 | 9 |
| High School Center | 20 | 9 | 11 |
| Middle School Center | 17 | 12 | 5 |
| Elementary Centers | 13 | 5 | 8 |
| Total: | 64 | 31 | 33 |

Of the filtering software systems in use, CyberPatrol was the popular choice

implemented in the majority of the public libraries and some school media centers.

SurfWatch dominated in the public school media centers only. Other filtering software

implemented in the media centers included WebSense, CyberProxy, Bess, and Fortress as

indicated in Table 6.

**Table 6**

Brands of Internet Software in Use

| Filters | n | CyberPatrol | NetNanny | CyberSitter | Surfwatch | Other |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Public Library | 5 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| High School Centers | 9 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 4 |
| Middle School Centers | 12 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 7 |
| Elementary Centers | 5 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 1 |

Sexually-related material was the category most blocked on filtered terminals in

28 public libraries and school media centers. Language was highly filtered as well (in 20

facilities) while political and religious content was blocked only in three school media

centers. Other areas filtered included violence, racism, drugs and alcohol, gambling and

assassination sites. Table 7 on the following page illustrates the results.

**Table 7**

Internet Categories That Are Filtered

| Filtering | n | Language | Sexual | Political | Religious | Other |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Public Library | 5 | 3 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| High School Centers | 9 | 6 | 8 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Middle School Centers | 12 | 7 | 11 | 1 | 1 | 3 |
| Elementary Centers | 5 | 4 | 5 | 1 | 0 | 1 |

The four study groups also shared their views on whether filtering or unrestricted

access has been successful in their facilities. Responses from the public libraries on

unrestricted access included:

> "Unrestricted access has been 90% successful. There have been a few instances where young adults log onto inappropriate sites and are asked to leave or lose the use of the computers."

> "Internet terminals are in plain view of the circulation desk which is a deterrent."

> "Unrestricted access has been working out. Patrons indicate that they prefer unrestricted access because they understand the limitations of filtering software."

> "...satisfied that not filtering has not created any great problems. We have had a few people object to seeing 'gross' things onscreen, but in over three years of open access, I would say we've had a minimum of problems."

> "...fine except for a few patrons who access pornographic sites."

Responses from public libraries on the implementation of filtering software included:

"With CyberPatrol we find that even though a computer is filtered, one can access objectionable material anyway. They are not perfect, but when a student specifically attempts to use inappropriate language terminology, he is blocked."

"We like the ability to provide either filtered or non-filtered access letting the customer decide what they want to use."
"WebSense is not foolproof but it's okay."

High school media specialists indicate that they have been reasonably successful implementing open access Internet terminals. Teachers are encouraged to have sites available that have been checked ahead of time and students have been taught that if they accidentally encounter inappropriate sites, they are to exit immediately (according to the school's Acceptable Use Policy) or face consequences. Comments from those high school media specialists that do implement filtering software share that "It doesn't work very well. [Using CyberPatrol] I got into a pornographic site by accident by misspelling a word" and "There are things we have been unable to block because they can be accessed in different ways. We are now experiencing difficulty with students accessing downloaded material from their webtvs." Others say they are mostly successful and "find it reassuring to know that while we are helping students research information, others are not getting into areas that are inappropriate for their age level."

Middle school media specialists have reported no major problems as students use open access Internet terminals. Monitors facing the circulation desk area seem to have a positive impact at these facilities. Other reports from those who do implement filtering software in the middle school media centers comment that "the filters [Fortress] are inconsistent and sometimes information is filtered at some sites but found on other sites." Others monitor student Internet use by assigning students to work stations, requiring students to sign in, and patrolling the Internet computers. "We are kind of at their mercy

[CyberPatrol]. They try to block but are not always successful. They sometimes deny access to appropriate useful sites."

Elementary school media specialists noted that they have been successful with their open access policy with and without supervision as students use the Internet. Those who did implement filtering software in their media centers volunteered that "a few times something unsuitable has gotten through [using Surfwatch]" and that "sites are researched first by the classroom teachers to prevent problems." For many at the elementary level, it has been too soon to tell since many elementary media centers have just recently begun using the Internet at their schools.

# Chapter 5

## Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

**Summary**

There has been a good deal of controversy about the use of the Internet in public libraries and school media centers. Policies are still evolving because the Internet is a relatively new resource. As more and more public libraries and school media centers obtain proficiency with the Internet, it is clear that a solution to the filtering issue must be found. The debate still persists concerning the use of filtering software products in public libraries and school environments. Do they assist students in selecting appropriate materials and managing access? Who decides which sites should be blocked? Will filters lead to an impression of mistrust and censorship?

During the months of February and March 1999, a survey was conducted in public libraries and school media centers in the southern eight counties in New Jersey. After receiving 65 responses from 100 surveys that were sent, more than half of the respondents shared that their facilities employ some type of filtering software. Most of these respondents shared that although the blocking of sites and information is not perfect, it is much easier to talk about supervising children's use of the Internet than it is to actually do it. Others shared that filters may deny students access to quality educational information. "The use of commercial software may inhibit access, deny fair use and gradually lead librarians away from the principles that have glued the profession together. If librarians eschew responsibility for the information on the Internet, their services will be less and less required" (Bastian, 1997, p. 12).

## Conclusions

There is a good deal of electronic networking taking place in public libraries and in the kindergarten through twelfth grade school environments. Federal, state, and local governments, community groups and private organizations are collaborating with schools and libraries, doing more with less, to achieve these goals. By providing access to the Internet, public libraries continue their role of providing local communities access to a wide variety of information. Librarians need to educate themselves and their staffs about the Internet. From there they need to educate their library governing bodies, patrons, and local officials. Unfortunately, while offering a wide range of benefits, the Internet also offers some potential risks that some would prefer children not be subjected to. The risks need to be resolved and decisions need to be made as to what (or all) materials should be made available.

Schools can be subjected to liability if district policy implies protection from certain information generally filtered and the filter fails to block the site that contains that information. School media centers should provide Acceptable Use policies that both students and parents sign. These documents are necessary to inform parents that their child may find objectionable materials on the Internet and give the parents an opportunity to restrict their child's use. Staff development opportunities should be provided for educators on the Internet.

Children need to be given the training and the freedom to make responsible and good decisions when accessing online information. They need to be taught what dangers exist and how to avoid them. Direct involvement is needed by librarians, teachers, and, especially by parents. The National Council for Educational Technology (NCET) offers

advice for schools concerned about Internet access to inappropriate materials. Online organizations are forming to address Internet safety issues, developing databases of sites that are unsafe for children and directories that are child-friendly.

**Recommendations**

The issues and concerns of content and the Internet will not be going away. "Libraries today 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" (Bastian, 1997, p.10). While filters have been suggested and (in many cases) implemented, their uses pose ethical and legal problems for libraries. Filters can block valuable information and much is constitutionally protected. There are various suggestions offered for public Internet use. Some of these include: placing filters on all terminals used by children under 18, placing filters on all terminals used by children under 18 unless the child has parental permission to use open access Internet terminals, placing filters on one or more terminals in the children's room, placing filters on terminals that can be turned on or off by the patron, and/or offering open access without filters, on all terminals.

There is no solution that that will satisfy all individuals, but proactive approaches should be taken. Other options include placing terminal screens away from public view so that one user isn't offended by what someone else is viewing or installing privacy screens. It is important for librarians to work with the public, train patrons on Internet use, and display warning signs about the limitations of filtering systems (if in use) and the possible dangers of the Internet. School media specialists can develop Acceptable Use

Policies with clear behavior guidelines, encourage students to act responsibly and use common courtesy while participating in networking activities, and teach children safe behavior on the Internet. Parents need to be reminded that they are responsible for guiding their children on the Internet in the same way that they are responsible for guiding them with other media. Librarians and libraries must work with their patrons in intelligent ways in using the Internet as an accepted resource.

The Internet is still an excellent place for children and adults to learn (and have fun), but the issue of child safety is an indication of our technologically evolving society. The controversy of restricting public access to protect children or having unrestricted access to protect the rights of adults seeking information will require continued research. No list of good sites, software filters, or government legislation can guarantee that children will not come across inappropriate material on the Internet because there are no mutual agreements about what is suitable. Internet selection, access, and restriction in schools and libraries are issues that continue to require further study.

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# Appendix

## Survey: The Status of Internet Filtering in Public Libraries and School Media Centers in Eight Southern New Jersey Counties

Please place a check next to your appropriate answer:

1. Is there access to the Internet in the school media center or public library?

   ❑ Yes             ❑ No

   If no, are there plans to have Internet access in your facility by 2000?

   ❑ Yes             ❑ No

2. For what purposes does your staff use Internet access?  (Check all that apply)

   ❑ To access information     ❑ To send & receive e-mail

   Other _____

3. Is Internet training provided for members of the library and/or school staff?

   ❑ Yes             ❑ No

4. How is funding provided for Internet use?  (check all that apply)

   ❑ State or federal government   ❑ Local taxes

   ❑ Industry or business        ❑ Community organization

   Other _____

5. How many terminals have Internet access?

   ❑ 4 or fewer  terminals    ❑ 5 to 9 terminals

   ❑ 10 to 14 terminals       ❑ 15 or more terminals

6. Is an Acceptable Use or Responsible Use Policy implemented?

   ❑ Yes*            ❑ No

   *(Please attach a copy of the policy, if possible)

7.  Does your library currently use filtering software?

    ❏ Yes                    ❏ No  (skip to Question # 10)

8.  If yes to number 7, which brand of filtering is used?

    ❏ CyberPatrol           ❏ NetNanny

    ❏ CyberSitter           ❏ SurfWatch

    Other: _____

9.  If yes to number 8, please check all appropriate categories that are filtered:

    ❏ Language              ❏ Sexually explicit material

    ❏ Political material    ❏ Religious material

    Other _____

10. Has your library's approach to Internet filtering or to unrestricted access been

    successful or unsuccessful?  Please explain briefly.

    _____

    _____

    _____

    _____

    _____

    _____

    _____

Thank you for your time!

Please return the survey in the enclosed envelope by March 5, 1999.

TO:      Survey Participants

FROM:    Liz Sevast, Principal Investigator

RE:      Internet Filtering vs. Unrestricted Access


I am a graduate student in the School and Public Librarianship Program at Rowan University. I am conducting a research project as part of my master's thesis concerning New Jersey public and school librarians and their positions on Internet restrictions and filtering vs. unrestricted access.

I am asking you to respond to the questions on the survey accompanying this letter. All responses are confidential and will be kept anonymous. Responding is strictly voluntary, but your experience and opinions will add valuable information to the research. A self-addressed stamped envelope has been provided in order for you to return the questionnaire. Any information that you can provide concerning this topical issue will be appreciated as I gather my findings. If you have any questions, please contact Liz Sevast, principal investigator at 235-1341, or Dr. Holly Willett, Faculty Advisor at 256-4759.

If interested, a summary of the survey results will be forwarded to you. Please indicate your preference on the survey form. I thank you in advance for your assistance.

Sincerely,

_____

Ms. Liz Sevast
1370 Hainesport Road
Mount Laurel, New Jersey 08054