Damming Education: Blocking the Flow of Information into Schools

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Under the banner of protecting minors from harmful material such as pornography, graphically violent images and hate propaganda, Internet content filtering software is being used in homes, libraries and schools (Meeder, 2005). Content filters can be purchased, downloaded, or provided by an Internet service provider and typically limit access to an "approved" list of sources or block "inappropriate" materials containing features that are identifiable and objectionable (Kaiser, 2000). Yet, it seems difficult to ascertain what is to be considered "inappropriate". According to Kean (2007) "In countries with Web censorship, scholars must circumvent government filters just to write papers on human rights or study HIV transmission" (p. A29).

Around the world, governments are making decisions about what online information students should be able to access. In the United States, the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA, 2000) has mandated that all schools and libraries receiving federal funding employ such filtering software. The Australian government has imposed mandatory content filtering in all schools at the Internet service provider level (Simpson, 2008). Xin (2009) noted that the Chinese government requires all personal computers in schools to use the controversial "Green Dam" content filtering software that blocks access to websites such as the Wall Street Journal. Officials from University of Toronto's Citizen Lab reported that 40 countries were using some sort of Internet filtering (Kean, 2007).

Governments are adopting filtering tools for use in educational institutions in spite of the fact that use of these tools has not yet been proven effective. The lack of effectiveness is largely due to the fact that filtering cannot accurately discriminate between allowed and forbidden content. Thus, both over-blocking (restricting relevant materials) and under-blocking (neglecting objectionable materials) occur (Resnick, Hansen, & Richardson, 2004). Sobel (1999) compared Internet search engines that use filters and found that 90% or more of relevant materials were blocked on searches for phrases such as "American Red Cross" "San Diego Zoo" or "Christianity". In some cases, 99% of materials that would normally be available without filters were prohibited.

The US-based National Coalition Against Censorship published a report detailing results of more than 70 studies on over- and under- blocking of websites. The report demonstrated relevant, blocked materials on HIV/AIDS, sexuality education, gay and lesbian issues, political topics, human rights, art and literary websites and, ironically,

websites about censorship (Cho & Heins, 2001). Palfrey and Zittrain (2008) noted that government-level filtering is easy to implement on a simple level, but very tricky (or perhaps impossible) to do thoroughly. They cautioned that it could be used by some governments because they are concerned that their citizens will learn what their state does not want them to learn. Yan (2009) found that the primary filtering strategy of CIPA in the United States did not have a significant positive effect on the Internet safety knowledge of high school students, even though there are mandated "awareness" strategies included in the act. Akcay (2008) argued that:

> Filters may help protect young students in elementary school settings, but filtering should be used less in middle and high schools. Instead, having educators available to guide students through the use of the Internet, answering their questions and addressing safety concerns, would be more meaningful than relying on a static software program. (p. 123)

Akcay's (2008) proposal that educators participate in student Internet activities and teach them about the dangers of the Internet is not unique. Schrader (1999) championed the adoption of acceptable use policies that explicitly state the rights and responsibilities for acceptable Internet behaviour. He argued that these policies combined with parental education and regular training for teachers and librarians would develop "net safe" communities of users. "If the goal is to produce adults who can think and decide for themselves what is appropriate, students need practice and guidance along the way to make decisions and learn about the possible choices they will face" (Perry, 2008, p.108).

Resnick, Hansen and Richardson (2004) asserted that, although the methodology of testing the over- and under-blocking of websites by filtering products has improved, significant concerns remain, and they suggest that other approaches such as student education, privacy screens, honour codes, and adult monitoring should perhaps be employed. Neumann and Weinstein (1999) discussed website self-rating as another popular alternative to government intervention. Sobel (1999) identified a concern that commercial media operations would dominate a self-rated Internet, thus homogenizing the environment.

Technical limitations, particularly over- and under-blocking, have been established as a chief criticism of content filtering (Hall & Carter, 2006). Another major problem with Internet filtering is that decisions must be made about what constitutes inappropriate content, and it is not clear on what basis such decisions will be made (Simpson, 2008). Brown (2008) asserted that restrictions on media and technology use in school inhibit learning. She suggested redirecting efforts from restricting access to educating youth to make safe, productive and informed choices. "Use of filters takes this choice away from

educators and puts it in the hands of people who have no relationship with the students, parents, or teachers" (Kaiser, 2000, p.10).

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