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Is it possible to say something posi­
tive about Internet filtering in libraries and 
not have everyone, including your mother, 
call you a wild-eyed, hidebound, neo-Nazi 
bashi-bazouk? No, of course not, but I'm 
going to try anyway.

Our story begins in the late 1930s, 
when the American Library Associa­
tion, working hand-in-glove with the 
American Civil Liberties Union, issued 
its Library Bill of Rights. In a word, the 
document said everyone had the right to 
read and no one, of course, disagreed with 
this. The innocuous document served well 
enough over the coming years because 
everyone remained agreeable and sensible 
about what reading is, and what constitu­
ted this right. But nestled in its midst, 
the document also heralded ALA's em­
brace of an absolutist view of the First 
Amendment, one shared by the ACLU and 
many others. The right to read came to 
mean, in absolutist terms, we must se­
lect everything for fear of censoring any­
thing. No one really did this but the ideal 
could not be easily gainsaid, except at the 
operational level, a minor, devilish detail.

Unfortunately, bad enough is seldom 
left alone. Later, during the turbulent six­
ties and early seventies, ALA issued its 
Intellectual Freedom Manual (hereinafter 
IFM). By now nearly everyone was 
activist-minded and IFM (and ALA) 
proved no exception. The IFM spelled 
out this right to read by adding prohibi­
tions to provisions: librarians should not 
sequester what they considered to be adult 
materials because this flew in the face of 
the absolutist view. Further, there were 
to be no adult shelves so labeled because 
this, too, smacked of even the faintest hint 
of restriction.

All of this came under the guise of pre­
venting our libraries from becoming bare, 
ruin'd choirs but there was more madness than 
method. Children, under this abso­
lutist view, had as much right to the 
Joy of Sex as anyone, and librarians were not 
to act in loco parentis. Fast-forward to 
2004 and it comes as no surprise that ALA 
has joined forces with the ACLU once 
more to issue a clarion call against Internet 
filtering and the protection of pornogra­
phy in the nations libraries.

What is curious about all this, how­
ever, is ALA's duplicity. ALA spokes­
persons dismiss, dismissively, the argu­
ment that young people would ever surf 
for porn. In an astounding admission of 
self-delusion, Leonard Kniffel, editor of 
ALA's official publication for librarians, 
American Libraries, wrote, "Kids don't 
have time to sit at library computers and 
troll for smut, nor do they wish to." (And 
the former President did not have sexual 
relations with that woman, Monica 
Levinsky, either.)

Further duplicity abounds. Librarians 
censor daily, rather restrict in such a 
way that the end result is as if censoring 
had taken place: this book is too expen­
tive; that database is too narrow; this CD-
ROM is too general. Moreover, while filter­
ing merely removed the chance that 
John Doe can surf for porn at the library's 
expense (he can still go home and surf 
until his heart's content, or until his wife 
gongs him with an iron skillet, whichever 
comes first). On the other hand, when 
library A chooses not to buy database B 
(probably owing to expense) it's that un­
likely that any individual can or will.

If truth be told, we even do a bit of the 
ideological censoring. For example, you'll 
not find many treatises by the John 
Birch Society in our nation's lib­
raries; nor will you find much of 
the KKK's hate-mongering. Nei­
ther will you find much, if any, in the way 
of anti-gay or anti-lesbian materials. When we 
librarians remove or omit mate­
rals, we call it selection. When the little, 
blue-haired old lady, toting a purse the size 
of a railcar wants to take from the library 
Madonna's book titled Sex, we excor­
iate it as censorship.

It's not that the material substance of 
the absolutist views of the First Amend­
ment arguments is disagreeable; it's the 
casuistry behind it that wreaks of ef­
fluvia. What distinguishes us from ani­
mais is our ability to make fine distinc­
tions. We do not, for example, call a 
monkey with a paintbrush, Picasso; his 
work may look like modern art, but we 
think we see a difference. Most people 
understand that while you may go native 
in your living room, you cannot do that at 
the local Wal-Mart. Or rather, you may, 
but only until the police arrive.

What puzzles me is that we cannot 
seem to make these same distinctions 
when it comes to pornography in the 
library. If one bare-bottomed shot is fil­
tered, so goes the ALA argument, well, 
then there goes the intellectual neighbor­
hood. In essence, librarians have been 
reduced to saying all words or pictures 
on a page or monitor are the same. All 
are potential information. The argument 
is akin to saying we should never arrest 
anyone for fear of arresting an innocent 
person. Yet, we know that words hurt, that 
ideas have consequences, and we know 
that pornographic materials, whether soft­
or hard-core, whether glossy or full color, high 
or low resolution, are bad for people. Report 
after report teaches us that Tom Schiro, 
Ted Bundy and thousands of others have 
confirmed it; and, the nearly three in five 
men addicted to some form of it undergoes 
how late the hour is. We know that vice, seen too often, familiar with its face, 
is something we first endure, then fondle, 
then embrace. This may not seem very 
open-minded to some people, but then, 
as Flannery O'Connor pointed out, 
some people are so open-minded their 
brains have fallen out.

Next Issue: The Tangled Web of the 
Web.

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mats — http://www.indiana.edu/~libsald/polices/ucal.html — Principles 
developed to guide librarians in the University of 
California Libraries in developing and reviewing proposals to and from, and 
in negotiating contracts with, providers of information in various digital formats. 
Covers issues in collection development, costs and pricing, licensing, functional­
ity, and archiving of information in digital 
formats.

Scholarly Electronic Publishing Bibli­
ography — http://info.lib.uh.edu/sepiblings.html — Developed and updated by 
Charles W. Bailey of the University of Houston Libraries, this bibliography 
presents selected English-language ar­
ticles, books, and other printed and elec­
tronic sources useful in understanding scholarly electronic publishing efforts on 
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