2004


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by Mark Y. Herring (Dean of Library Services, Dacus Library, Winthrop University) <herringm@winthrop.edu>

Is it possible to say something positive 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 to anyway.

Our story begins in the late 1930s, when the American Library Association, 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 constituted this right. But nestled in its midst, the document also heralded ALA's embrace 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 select everything for fear of censoring anything. 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 sixties 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 prohibitions to its absolutist terms, we must select everything for fear of censoring anything. No one really did this but the ideal could not be easily gainsaid, except at the operational level, a minor, devilish detail.

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