

The Librarian as Cyber-Nanny

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The role of today's librarian is fast changing. Even the name "librarian" is being phased out. Now, we have "information specialists" "research assistants" "knowledge specialists" and they are all... well, librarians. But do people know what a librarian really does?

The world has moved on from the image of the librarian behind a desk, smiling and stamping the back of their books with a due date stamp, and especially from the horribly stereotypical bunnetted hair cardiganed and bespectacled "shushing" librarian portrayed in popular culture. A librarian is to be available in the shelves recommending a good read, providing research assistance, helping with Internet queries, tracking down a book from a very vague recollection of details; keeping the library technologically updated and sophisticated without spending too much money, and maintaining the collection full of the latest bestsellers and up to date information while not losing its old world charm and "throwing away" classic or popular stories.

The groups that control libraries – be they government, education or business backed – see the librarian as something different again. Their librarian is to be first of all a manager, supervising staff and ensuring budgets are adhered to, accountable, judicious and wise.

Librarians of today are all that and more. They are proud to serve their community, whichever sort of library they work in. They keep up to date and are well read, subscribing to e-lists, newsletters, journals and more. They are usually involved in their communities in some way, whether personally or on behalf of their workplace.

Today's librarian needs to be a public speaker, a counsellor, a public service worker, adaptable to work with all ages and stages of life, flexible enough to confidently deal with all levels of the hierarchy in their hometown and the world. They need marketing skills, research skills, retail, IT, business management and human resource management abilities. Add to this the programming, networking, planning, evaluating and surveying which librarians need to administer and monitor, and basically there's not a lot a librarian can't do. They'll keep a confidence and they'll treat you with respect no matter what sort of material you borrow or what the subject matter is. They deserve all the respect that they gain and more. They aren't curing cancer, but a librarian probably found a document that's helping the research of the people who are.

There is, however, one area which some parts of the community feel is the librarian's responsibility, particularly in the public library sector, and there have been media reports and parental anecdotes supporting this. And what is it? It's the issue of the access to pornographic material on the public Internet terminals by minors. It's the role of the librarian as "child minder".

Let me categorically state that I abhor the practice of surfing for pornography, and I do not in any way condone the use of a public Internet terminal in this way. Many hundreds of thousands of patrons use this service in a public library every day and there are very few situations where discretion is required but these isolated incidents are the ones we hear about.

However, I am stunned at the attitude of many parents or other adults when confronted with this issue who seem to believe it is the task of this librarian - the one who does all the jobs listed above and more - to watch over little Johnny's shoulder to see what he is accessing. Many of these parents are less computer literate than their children and not aware that the only safe way for a child to surf the net is with a parent / caregiver (not their friendly, local but impartial librarian) nearby.

Better education for children on 'safe surfing' and compulsory education for parents on the dangers of the Internet would make more people more aware of the way the Internet works.

How does the Internet work? Basically?

The 'Net is a giant network of computers from around the world. You can access a computer on the other side of the world as easily as you can your next door neighbour's. When you are "surfing" (searching and browsing) the Internet, you are connecting into and viewing pages of information ("websites") that other people have created. Who are these people? We would like to think they are educated, well-intentioned and possessed of a good conscience. Well, we would like to think this, but it is not necessarily the case.

The Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA) describes it in this way:

"Publishing on the Internet is remarkably easy and inexpensive, in contrast to more traditional media such as newspapers, books and television.....Governments can easily regulate and control traditional media, but controlling the Internet is much harder because of its scale and global nature. In most parts of the world, anyone can easily publish on the Web, without having to have their material vetted or approved. Publishing is just a matter of copying files to a Web server, and this simple act makes them available to the world."

So, if we can access this information from any computer, reason tells us it is accessible from the computer at our local library as well. It is available to any person using any computer terminal anywhere in the world. So if that information is good clean fun, educational, or newsworthy, it is just as accessible as crass, crude, inciting or incorrect information. Which means that adults and children can access the information alike; the page being viewed is non-discriminatory as to which computer it is viewable on!

According to the Pew/Internet and American Life Project 'Teens and Technology' Study of 2005, which studied the way in which US teens are using

technology in communication, 87% of those aged 12 to 17 now use the Internet, around 51% (11 million) of teens in the US go “online” daily.

Fifty four percent of these online teens say they have used the Internet at a library, but the vast majority (87%) go online from a home based computer. When asked where they go online *most often*, 74% say at home, 17% from school, and 9% go online from somewhere else, such as a youth centre, a library or a friend’s house.

Protection

Is there a way to protect young children from viewing or accessing inappropriate or indecent websites? That is, in addition to parental control and/or having family agreements in place?

Filtering software is the option generally seen as the remedy to the problem, yet many libraries, families and corporations are finding this isn’t the complete solution. Filtering software, as we know, only works until someone can rewrite or use their own programming to allow images and information through the filtering software installed. There are many levels of filtering, which allow varying amounts of information through, depending on their design. And you can bet there are people setting up web sites and advertising who know ways to get around filters and create innocent sounding terminology.

Some filtering software works by comparing the requested domain name (website address) with the list created by the network as being deemed “inappropriate”. If the site name appears on the blocked list, it is inaccessible to the user. Computer system managers are able to add more addresses to the blocked list as they go along.

Other filtering systems work on blocking terms or words which are entered or encountered. This kind of system leaves the judgement on “inappropriateness” to human discretion, which of course can vary vastly depending on political, economic and other views. This method cuts out not only pornography but other terms or site addresses that can be considered contentious; racist, violent, subversive or in some other way offensive. The country of origin of the software and its moral code also affects the effectiveness of the software, and this doesn’t even begin to cover those same words and terms as they appear on German, Japanese or Yugoslavian websites!

This discounts the child looking to do an assignment on Middlesex in England. Or the child whose homework is to find out about Auschwitz and torture. Jennifer Cram, in an ALIA *Incite* report, stated that with some programs, words within other words were deemed unsuitable; for example, *title*, *Saturday* and also complete words, such as *submission*. A UK article mentions Emily *Dickinson* and John *Hancock* as inaccessible names, and some filters refused the word “high” (as in high school, the term being searched.) This also makes it very difficult for the worried teen with nowhere to go and no one to talk to who wants to look up information on STDs or unwanted pregnancies.

Yet other filtering systems work on the colours of images, and disallow a certain percentage of “flesh colours”. This would block pictures of a beige people mover or paving bricks! Many of these filters aren’t able to differentiate between pornographic images and classic works of art.

The Australian Broadcasting Authority’s (ABA’s) highly publicised report “Effectiveness of Internet Filtering Software Products”, September 2001, showed that there is no superior program or filtering method, and none of the programs surveyed were found to be 100% effective.

Unblocking the filtering which is in place for the few people or sites that legitimately need it is a time consuming and impractical choice. Not only do you need to remember to revert the filtering afterwards, but depending on the software used, it may not be as simple as a two click process.

In the USA, public libraries are mandated to comply with the Children’s Internet Protection Act. Certain government funds and technology grants and discounts can be discontinued to otherwise eligible libraries who do not apply Internet filtering to computers accessible to a child defined as a “minor” (including staff computers).

As the Internet becomes more and more an integral part of our children’s lives, assisting them with homework, hobbies and social information, it is imperative that parents become more aware of the inherent dangers which can increase with their children’s confidence and resulting indifference in using this tool.

The American Family Association (AFA) abhors the practice of local public libraries running the Internet without filtering. In a 2001 commentary, the local library was called “the only X rated shop in town”. I heartily sympathise with the author’s views and his thoughts, his shock that teens were deliberately surfing for pornography, and his correct pronouncement that any Internet savvy child or adult can type in a keyword to access pornography, and others can accidentally stumble across it by innocently searching for “*Britney*”, “*Disney*” or “*Pokemon*”. This Internet isn’t a safe place, nor is it discriminatory.

This same commentary asks why pornographers target children and suggests a consequent addiction to pornography as the answer. (*Like cigarette advertising or drugs, once they connect the young, they hope to have them for life?*) Indeed, a separate report claims that addiction to pornography is “the new crack cocaine”, a very difficult addiction to overcome: the images in one’s memory can’t be “kicked” like the physical symptoms of chemical addiction.

Is there any easy answer to the filtering debate? Unfortunately it seems the answer is “no”. The US filtering debate will wage for a long time, and it is too early to measure the success or otherwise of mandatory filtering in those libraries which have applied it. Most filtering software is actually designed for the home, rather than for the public use a library computer would receive. Yes, filters are getting better and better as time goes on, but as the pornography industry is huge, unregulated and commercially based, it is nearly impossible to cover.

If every computer in the library were filtered, and due to inherent and known problems with filters as discussed, an inappropriate site were accessed by a child, who would be to blame? A parent assuming their child was using a “safe” computer would possibly be angry and lack understanding of the situation, even though all available information emphasises that filtering does not provide a 100% guarantee.

Protection from what?

What are these dangers that are mentioned and addressed world wide? Why are US public libraries, and those in Australia, discussing censorship and filtering?

Access to online pornography isn't the only problem facing our younger users, and this is where we as librarians, the information literacy teachers, can provide information as a result of our knowledge of the online environment. Other sites which can be accessed which parents and caregivers should be concerned about come from violence and hate groups, extremist groups, online gambling, cults, online advertising and illegal activity operatives promoting their activities, views and thoughts via web pages.

Chat rooms are one of the most dangerous areas of the Internet, if only parents and children realised it. Sometimes you may be talking to a friend who you know well; other times you can be having a talk to a 60 year old in the next street who tells you he is a 14 year old from Melbourne who “loves Britney Spears too” and is so “like, over Beyonce” and will “C U L8R”. You don't need to prove who you are to get a sign on name for a chat room, and you'd actually be unwise to use any identifiable names.

Online gaming is another issue. Our children may be involved in ‘games’ of extreme violence, including graphics we would never allow them to view on the television screen. Some of these games are international; you simply give your player a name and join in. You can “ask” (by typing) questions of other players, generally play and tactics related, but...hey, why not get personal?

Cyber bullying is on the increase as well. Malicious emails can be circulated; Instant Messaging and chat rooms are places of inflamed and angry words, often anonymously sent. (As mentioned before, you would be unwise to use a real or identifiable name.) The intended victim is well aware, as are others able to read the text, that they are the target. While this is not the same as physical bullying, it has the degrading emotional backlash of the victim knowing peers have seen the often untrue statements and slander.

Any child (or adult) with an email address is open to SPAM mail, that is, unwanted advertising. When you receive it in your real life letterbox, you call it “junk” mail. It is the same thing, really. Some of this SPAM is just marketing; some is offensive or contains viruses or programs which embed themselves in your computer. These can track where you go, what you look at and send

messages back to the parent program. In the case of a virus, it can render your system unusable.

Children are not necessarily IT or world savvy enough to understand the implications of all of this, and are probably too embarrassed to tell their parents, who may have no idea what a “chat room” is. How do we arm our children to protect them from this potential harm?

Teaching parents about cyber bullying - whether online or via SMS messages on their mobile, about online grooming practices which can occur in chat rooms, and the security issues which can arise from children using computers, will provide the information they need to keep their child safe in this rapidly growing and increasingly popular yet sometimes dangerous form of communication.

If the Internet is such a bad place why do we go there?

In the right hands the Internet is a safe, entertaining and fun place to be; you can start by looking up a recipe for honey biscuits and end up reading someone’s travel diary by clicking on a few interesting looking links. It is a great place for kids to wander; there are so many safe sites for them to play on and so much of interest to them. The Internet is an invaluable learning tool, providing access to millions of pieces of information and images that can make life more relaxing and enjoyable. How do we effectively communicate both sides of the story?

Part of the answer is education. That is, the education of parents to alert them to the fact that the Internet isn’t just a big online encyclopaedia. The Internet can be so exciting, educational and fun, but there’s far more to it than that, and parents need to be aware of this.

No matter where you turn for advice on this matter, one claim is repeated time and again and that is “No filter is equal to a parent’s vigilance”

Most computer literate and aware parents have it right. The Pew/Internet report states:

“The majority of teens who use the Internet at home have a relatively public and monitored level of access Teenagers with at least one parent who is not an Internet user are also most likely to have a computer in a private space. Forty percent of teens with a parent who does not go online say their computer is in a private location compared to one quarter of teens with online parents.

Fifty four percent of parents use Internet filters.....62% of parents of online teens report that they check up on their child’s web surfing habits and 64% say they set rules for their child’s time online.”

American Family Filter, provided by BeSafe, with a Christian background, alerts parents to the fact that they:

"...are dedicated to making the Internet as safe as possible. Unfortunately there is much more to it than blocking pornographic and violent sites.....Never (even with protected Internet service) let your children browse the Internet without keeping close eye on where they are going. The best way to do this is to have the computer located in an area of the house which has a lot of traffic. If this is not an option, make sure the computer is where you can see the screen at a moment's notice. In other words, the moment you walk into the room you should be able to see the screen."

The sad fact is that a lot of parents simply don't know and don't understand the Internet. Laughing and saying "oh it's all too technical for me" or "I don't know if I can keep up", "They're so much faster at it than me" or "I just get the kids to do it for me" doesn't help the parent OR the child.

Where does the Australian library fit in? Are we part of the solution?

Library staff, as part of their role in providing information to the community, act not as censors, but as selectors, gauging the sensitivities of their local community with additions to the library's collection. Public libraries are run on behalf of, and with the money of the ratepayers and their families. Most librarians would not choose a sexually explicit book to place on their library shelves, and in the case of one being selected, certainly would not place such an item in full view or reach of a child.

In the same way, library staff *do not* want to harm the innocence of a child, by allowing them access to these sorts of images. No adult in such a position would condone or accept a child accessing this information, whether deliberately or by default. Sensitivity to all of our patrons, including children, is a vital part of our job description. Having said that, the library is a *tool* to finding information on the Internet, not the supplier of the information accessed, so staff are not in control of what appears on a screen at any time.

Maybe computer 'literacy' should be offered through libraries and supported by government funding. How many parents can afford to attend TAFE courses to learn these basics? Many parents either work or have children, so courses / classes run at a time to suit them, possibly at night or on weekends, would give them the opportunity to attend and result in more confidence to ask questions and be more aware of what their child is doing. Most library staff are well-equipped to deliver this type of training, be it in word processing or Internet searching and safety. Many libraries simply lack the resources, as in staff time and budgets, to prepare and deliver an effective training module.

Many parents can't afford a computer at home, and feel they are doing the best they can for their child by letting them use the computers at the library, and, in 99% of the cases, they are absolutely right. Imagine these same parents being able to sit with their child as they researched their information on the library computer knowing what their child was doing, why they were doing it and being

a part of the whole homework situation. This is the picture we as librarians should want to see: whole family learning.

While we're at it, why not consider "mobile" filters. Volunteer or paid adults who can wander through the computers assisting where necessary and monitoring what's being viewed. (Although this could be seen by some as a breach of privacy, and adults would have to meet child protection guidelines) Enforcing library Internet policies is another avenue - making sure every user has had a copy of your policy given to them and then enforcing penalties for infringements. This is happening in most public libraries, so we are on the way.

All of this, of course, relies on the parents being concerned and interested enough to pursue education and knowledge for themselves. Most parents who are concerned about what their children can access are those who use a computer at home in an open place with a filter. There are always going to be the parents who don't want to know until it affects their child. (In fact, in one instance, a library, after a complaint from a parent, organised an information night to discuss these matters; yet not one parent or caregiver- not even the original complainant – booked in or expressed interest.)

Having children's filtered computers away from the adult area eliminates a child accidentally accessing pornography as a leftover from a previous viewer, but brings its own problems such as what happens if the only computer vacant in the building is that one and an adult insists on using it? What if a child urgently needs a computer and there are no children's computers left? This is also a definite physical space and budget consideration for most libraries, particularly those in a rural area.

There is no short answer to the issue of filtering. There are extreme views on both sides, and some people are especially verbal or emotive. Trying to explain "freedom of information" to the parent of a child who has been bullied online or stumbled into an inappropriate website is a gut wrenching situation, and one can appear so ineffectual and cowardly to an outsider, but the truth is, the question is bigger than all of us.

Filtering and education should go hand in hand, and before a child is given permission to use the Internet in a library, these things need to be fully explained and assimilated, and the literature provided, including the Internet Policy, for example.. The legal ramifications of either side of this issue have not been sorted out, so where the responsibility lies is still debatable. In fact in the US, site owners are now suing libraries because potential patrons are unable to access their sites due to filtering. Where does it start and end?

In a perfect world, "adult" images and text would be controlled and password protected - in short, difficult to access accidentally, and cyber stalking and bullying would be non-existent; with chat rooms moderated by an outsider. In this perfect world, the Internet would be safe and educational for all users, and public libraries would be able to afford as many Internet enabled computers as their community required, and have no fear of harm coming to any user. In a perfect world, typing a phrase into a search engine would take you to

information relevant to your phrase, not a word slotted into a cleverly concealed description of porn.

In this perfect world, there would be no conflict. And then where would we be? Most of our library collection comes from the basis of conflict, be it personal angst, war or relationship troubles. Libraries and librarians have survived for centuries, through plagues, world wars, fires, floods, book burning and cyclones. This is one more battle we will be able to chalk up to the resilience of our staff and our users in the world of information and the written word.

Paraphrasing an oft touted phrase to close: "Will the Internet (filters) mean the death of libraries?" Heck no, not on our watch.

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