Just Give It To Me Straight: A Case Against Filtering The Internet

The authors cite four reasons why parents and schools should reconsider the use of Internet filters. First, and most simply, filters don’t work as advertised.

BY T. A. CALLISTER, JR., AND NICHOLAS C. BURBULES

ONE OF THE MOST controversial and contentious issues surrounding the use of new information and communication technologies, especially in schools and libraries, is whether or not authorities should filter students’ access to the Internet. On its face, the idea of filtering seems perfectly reasonable. Like other kinds of “filters,” Internet filters keep out “bad” content while allowing “good” content to pass through. However, we argue that filtering is neither simple nor benign and that, with very few exceptions, schools and libraries should not filter students’ access to the Internet.

We want to say up front that parents have every right to impose restrictions on what their own children view or do on the Internet at home, just as they have the right to limit what their children watch on television. Schools and libraries, on the other hand, have a wider educational responsibility to expose students to a broad range of ideas, experiences, and points of view, and what counts as educationally worthy is a matter for public deliberation. Some restrictions may be suitable in these contexts as well — young children, for example, can’t check out certain books from the library. But Internet filters work in a different way: they are indiscriminate and often arbitrary, and they bypass public deliberation about what should and should not be filtered. The decisions are placed in the hands of unknown and unaccountable programmers, who develop their own criteria and automated procedures. From the standpoint of pub-
lic education, this system inevitably leads to abuses and anti-educational effects.

WHAT WE MEAN BY ‘PROTECTION’ AND ‘HARM’

Filtering policies are frequently justified by the admirable goal of ‘protecting’ young people from ‘harm.’ Who could be against that? But such language is loaded, and the ideas of protection and harm need to be examined.

Because schools are generally thought to operate in loco parentis, it is easy to transfer parents’ impulse to use filters to protect their own children to the expectation that schools must do the same. But when we look at the situation through a different lens, it appears that protecting children may be less of a factor than protecting others in the educational realm. Filters are a way of protecting teachers from the up-setting nuisance of dealing with unpleasant or controversial topics in the classroom. They are also a way of protecting school administrators from angry phone calls (and even lawsuits) from parents concerned over occasional instances when students go to “bad” places on the Internet. Filters are a way for adults to avoid the hassle of dealing with instances of student misconduct, by attempting to forestall such acts. But in the process the vast majority of students, who would never abuse the system, are disadvantaged. Viewed in this light, the language of protection seems to refer most directly to the protection of adult interests.

The idea of filtering seems to imply protection from what may be harmful coming in. But filters are two-way operations: they block what comes in, but by that very action they also effectively block questions or inquiries from going out. Filters not only control the attempts of “dangerous” outsiders to reach an audience of young people, but they also restrict the attempts of young people to ask certain kinds of questions, to reach out and explore this new learning environment. How differently would we think about this issue if we said, “Filters are there to control students”?

Another loaded term is what students are being “protected” from — “harm.” Filters prevent students from encountering things that are judged to be bad for them. But what harms are we talking about? Emotional distress? Corrupting influences? Encounters with people who would exploit children? These are hypothetically plausible, but worst-case, scenarios.

More commonly, what is judged “harmful” is what makes adults uncomfortable or what adults simply consider “inappropriate” for students. These judgments may or may not be justified, but the language — “protecting the young from harm” — shields such judgments from scrutiny. We all agree that we should keep children from things that could hurt them, but this agreement assumes what needs to be demonstrated. Is that which adults consider distasteful, offensive, controversial, or upsetting necessarily harmful to kids? Or does our categorizing things in this way simply mask the implicit value judgments being made? Where is the opportunity to question the educational price that is paid by erring on the side of excising Internet material that someone might consider “harmful,” “offensive,” or “inappropriate”? And what else is excised, inadvertently perhaps, that no one ever intended to filter out?

Where is the opportunity to question the educational price that is paid by erring on the side of excising Internet material that someone might consider “harmful,” “offensive,” or “inappropriate”? And what else is excised, inadvertently perhaps, that no one ever intended to filter out?

REASON 1: FILTERING SOFTWARE DOES NOT WORK

Filtering software does not work in the way it is advertised. In one sense, we believe this consideration alone should end the debate. Filtering software too often blocks perfectly legitimate sites and often does not block the kinds of sites that it was intended to filter in the first place. There are hundreds of examples to be found on any number of anti-filtering sites on the Web.

1 (Not surprisingly, many of these anti-filtering sites are blocked by filters, so even the opportunity to access points of view that might allow students to intelligently question filtering policies is stymied; this shows the vicious cycle of censorship such policies commit us to. Here, as elsewhere, technological solutions to one problem become an end in themselves and so eventually generate new problems.)

The Utah Education Network (UEN) is, according to its
website, “a publicly funded consortium providing Internet access and supporting educational technology needs for Utah’s public and higher education institutions, public libraries, and state agencies.” The UEN is quite clear in stating that Utah schools must use filtering software. However, in a euphemism that should immediately make anyone more than a little wary, it refers to Internet filtering as “Internet Content Management.” The software originally used by the UEN was SmartFilter. Sites that were deemed unacceptable (apparently determined by both human and computer analysis) fell into five broad categories: criminal skills, hate speech, drugs, gambling, and, of course, sex. The software also kept a log of each rejected request that listed the name of the requested site and the objectionable category into which it fell.

In 1998, the Censorware Project Organization — “censorware,” not “content management,” is the term preferred by anti-filtering advocates — after much resistance from UEN, was able to obtain the SmartFilter logs for 10 September through 10 October 1998. Here, from the Censorware Project Organization’s report, are a few selected examples of items students and library patrons tried to get from the Internet but were blocked from seeing:

Under the category of criminal skills:
- the Krusty the Clown tribute page (from “The Simpsons”);
- an e-zine (electronic magazine) about “modern Marxism”;
- the Declaration of Independence; and
- the complete texts of famous works, including the Bible, Moby-Dick, The Book of Mormon, and The Complete Adventures of Sherlock Holmes.

Under the category of hate speech:

Under the category of drugs:
- many sites discussing the debate over legalizing marijuana; and
- the Earth First! environmental group’s website.

Under the category of gambling:
- the History of Nevada website; and
- the Instructional Systems Program at Florida State University (http://mailer.fsu.edu/~wwager/index_public.html).

Under the category of sex:
- the official “Baywatch” television show website;
- www.Birthcontrol.com;
- www.mormon.org; and
- dozens of news sites that included links to the Starr Report on President Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky.

In Broward County, Florida, this same commercial software banned any sites having to do with vegetarianism or information on breast cancer.

Certainly, legitimate questions can be asked about the educational value of some of these sites (e.g., “Baywatch”). But the issue here is about unintended consequences: we intend to block X, but inadvertently block Y as well. How does www.mormon.org get blocked for sex in Utah? How does the Declaration of Independence get blocked under the category of criminal skills?

In some cases, we can figure out what happened. The Florida State Web address happens to include the letters w-a-g-e-r. The Declaration of Independence? The Sherlock Holmes stories? They are on the site wiretap.area.com, which contains the text of hundreds of books that are out of copyright, government and civics materials, religious materials, and so on. But this entire site was blocked. As to the others, we just don’t know. SmartFilter, like most filtering software programs, keeps its lists of unacceptable sites — and its reasons for blocking them — private. This practice removes the judgments from public view and accountability. By the nature of the commercial (not educational) interests of these filters, they will always err on the side of blocking too much rather than too little.

Needless to say, a great deal is sacrificed when a young person cannot access information about Marx, anti-hate speech, Sherlock Holmes, or the Declaration of Independence. Moreover, the general pattern of what gets “accidentally” blocked tends to have a biased, ideological effect itself — it isn’t arbitrary or neutral. Sites that are in any way unconventional, controversial, or (by someone’s standard) “radical” or “extreme” are more likely to get picked up by filters. Recall, for example, that the Declaration of Independence (like Marx) calls for citizens to violently overthrow their government if need be. And vegetarianism is considered “weird” by some people. Earth First! provides valuable information about environmental issues, but the organization does also advocate civil disobedience and acts of vandalism to protect the environment. Admittedly, there are parents and members of other groups who are perfectly happy to see these sites filtered, but this is not what the filtering software was intended for. In other cases, completely innocent sites are filtered simply because of key words that happen to appear on them or because of links they may have to other sites.

The overall impact of the filtering effort is to restrict access almost solely to mainstream, bland content that can’t be construed as offensive to anyone. One starts out meaning to filter dangerous or harmful material and ends up filtering substantive ideas, information, and points of view. Is this really what we want our schools to be doing?
Although much of the discussion here and in the popular press has focused on examples of what is wrongly blocked, filters also fail in the other direction — that is, what doesn’t get blocked. Out of curiosity — and in the context of writing this article — one of the authors set his Web search engine to its “family-friendly” (i.e., filtering) mode and typed in a crude synonym for breasts. The first site listed had a picture of just that. Or consider another example from a project designed to test filters: “One filter, at full settings, blocked a government brochure on the dangers of cocaine and let through a site describing in full detail how to make cocaine.” Similar examples abound. Filters block too many things they should let through, and they let through things they are supposed to block. They simply don’t work as advertised.

We also want to note, in passing, that few arguments about filtering ever discuss filtering “pop-up” ads or commercial sites, even though they usually have little educational value. Why isn’t this an issue? Certainly, society realizes the tremendous power of marketing aimed at young people, but this is not seen as a serious potential “harm.” Yet the fact is that the typical young person is far more likely to be “exploited” by commercial marketing aimed at manipulating consumer desires than by an online pervert or pornographer. Does our society want to have a conversation about these competing dangers and likelihoods?

Still, in the end, filtering doesn’t work primarily because it is easy for savvy students to get around it. Especially when young people are pooling resources and sharing what they find, there is no technological trick that will prevent them from finding something if they are determined to seek it out. If you can get to www.peacefire.com (and if you can’t, your children or your students probably can), you can download a small bit of software that disables many popular filtering programs. As the Peacefire site used to state on the header of its Web page, “It’s not a crime to be smarter than your parents.” We need to be realistic: what we may not see going on is probably still going on.

Thinking we can keep young people from sites we don’t want them to see simply by installing filters is whistling in the dark. If it works, it works only for the very young or the technologically naive. For the very young, it may be reasonable to protect them from inadvertent exposure to things they are not able to understand. But the older the child, the more pointless and self-defeating this effort becomes. The nature of the Internet is to expand access to information of all sorts — “good” and “bad.” Because its basic ethos is one of openness, any attempts to filter, partition, or censor the Internet will be met aggressively by some skilled programmers and website developers, somewhere. For motivated young people, there will always be a way to get to what they are seeking. Ironically, filters could actually make the problem worse by lulling adults into a false sense of security, so that they supervise kids less (thinking that the filter is doing the job for them).

REASON 2: FILTERING IS ANTI-EDUCATIONAL

Schools are places in which the education of children and young people is accomplished both explicitly and implicitly. Filtering is anti-educational in its explicit manifestation because it prevents students from accessing certain materials that they might find important, interesting, and relevant to their learning. But perhaps even more important, filtering is anti-educational in its implicit messages about what adults think about education. That is, it promotes a notion of education steeped in the importance of obedience and acquiescence, while compromising opportunities for independent questioning and discovery. It manifests a distrust of students and in many cases an exaggerated sense of their vulnerability. As a result, filtering operates in opposition to what students need to learn in school: to discern, discriminate, synthesize, and evaluate. How can students learn to be responsible, to make good social and intellectual choices, if those choices are made for them by filtering the information they can access? It is difficult to teach young people self-control and judgment by denying them access to the very things about which they need to exercise critical judgment.

Moreover, many of filtering’s most fervent advocates aren’t drawing clear lines between children and adults — they don’t want the sites they find offensive available to anyone, including adults. In this regard, it is important to remember that a school’s Internet resources are usually filtered not just for students, but for teachers as well.

The debate over filtering reflects conflicting ideas about liberal democracy and the importance of open public spaces (including schools and the Internet). In this country, there is a widely held but not unanimous belief that, in a liberal democracy, people should be free to read pretty much whatever they want. And it follows from that belief that, if we err, it is better to err on the side of allowing too much latitude rather than too little. Most Americans mistrust delegating to authorities any judgments about what they may or may not read, think, say, or believe. They disapprove of the kind of censorship that enables individuals or small groups of like-minded people who judge themselves wiser or more pious or purer than the rest to claim to see dangers in literature and in educational materials that others cannot see and so try to have those materials withheld not only from
their own children (which may be their right) but also from everyone else's children. We are all probably familiar with the books censors usually target: *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, anything by Judy Blume, and now, of all things, the Harry Potter books. These groups are not the ones society should want adjudicating what Internet filters block as well.

For many young people in many parts of the U.S. (and elsewhere in the world), the Internet is the only window to wider horizons of belief and possibility that extend beyond the tastes and prejudices of their own local communities — which is exactly why there is such a struggle to limit, control, and censor it. Do we want the same kinds of restrictive policies in place for our schools that are imposed on schools in China? North Korea? Saudi Arabia?

For those individuals and groups of people who find sex or witchcraft or secular humanism hiding between the lines of every text or lurking within the illustrations in children's books, the advent of free and open access to the Internet is a nightmare. And as censors have always found, it is easy to begin with the examples that are most egregious, where the risks are most easily documented, and then gradually extend the criteria to include more and more that offends. On the Internet, as in any public space, there is certainly much to offend (although children can see obscene graffiti on the street corner, too). But the notion that the Internet is somehow awash in pornography, child molesters, and bomb-making directions is an alarmist characterization that has been foisted upon parents and the public, neither of whom typically has much direct understanding or experience with the Internet. Thus it tends to be regarded overall as strange and threatening.

The typical student turning on his or her computer and connecting to the World Wide Web isn't instantly bombarded with an enormous amount of unsolicited material. Rather, users typically search for what they want. Navigating the Internet is not like scrolling through the channels on a television set, where a change of channel may suddenly bring something unexpected or shocking. Navigating the Internet is more like walking down a long corridor where all the doors are usually quite well marked. According to OCLC (Online Computer Library Center), "adult content" exists on only an extremely small proportion of the Web (about 3% of free public sites, OCLC claims, contain sexually explicit material). So for those easily offended, a bit of free advice: if a link says, in large, flashing, red, capital letters: CLICK HERE TO SEE HOT SEX, and you don't want to see hot sex — don't click! The chances of a young person who is not looking for such material finding it by accident are negligible, and this small risk must be weighed against the demonstrable shortcomings of filters that we have already discussed.

In the end, we support the responsibility of educators to provide students access to the greatest possible amount of appropriate educational material. It's the idea John Stuart Mill had in advocating a free "marketplace of ideas." It's the idea that Marxism, radical environmentalism, and, yes, even vegetarianism are important topics for students to read about, think over, and argue about. And it's an idea that is under fundamental assault today. Censorship is the tool of indoctrination, small-mindedness, and ignorance; it is antithetical to the democratic values of educational opportunity, free expression, and intellectual inquiry that schools must defend, if anyone will. And computer filtering is the latest battleground in this struggle.

**REASON 3: FILTERING DAMAGES THE FABRIC OF KNOWLEDGE**

Filtering, we have tried to show, is often capricious and unpredictable. But even if it worked perfectly, in the sense that it filtered only what it was intended to filter (according to someone's definition), there would still be another educational problem that is intrinsic to the idea of filtering itself.

When filters do not let users know that material has been filtered or why it has been filtered, or when software companies refuse to release the list of sites they block or the criteria by which those sites are selected, the act of filtering itself gives a misleading view of the domain of knowledge.
to and consideration of a range of ideas. The deeper problem is that students may also be unaware of what it is they have been prevented from seeing. It is one thing to know that some information exists and that you have been denied access, as with the book you can see on the shelves but can’t check out of the library. It is quite another thing for information to be hidden. Filtering prevents students from knowing enough even to have the opportunity to ask questions about what they have been prevented from seeing, reading, or thinking.

Here is a variation of an example we’ve used elsewhere.2 A student searches the Internet for references to vegetarianism and finds none. What can this mean to the student? Does it leave the impression that vegetarianism is not of sufficient importance to warrant any entry? Or perhaps there are no vegetarians with websites? Perhaps she knows enough to know that there is such a thing as vegetarianism and to recognize that not finding it on the Web means that it has been filtered (goodness knows why). Does this leave an impression that there is something wrong with vegetarianism? Might this be why such sites have been blocked? Is vegetarianism “harmful”? The student may not even be able to find out enough to explore such questions. The very fact of filtering creates a perception about certain topics or questions: if it is filtered, there must be a good reason.

Those who advocate filtering often seem to have a very simplistic conception of the nature of knowledge and understanding. Each fact or belief is seen as something that can be evaluated as true or false, good or bad. Thus filters should sort out those items that are undesirable and leave the rest. But knowledge isn’t composed of discrete things that can be separated out and filtered; knowledge systems are linked, interdependent beliefs (just as the Internet is a hyperlinked system). When one site gets blocked, other sites may also be blocked because of their casual relationship with those subjects. In the course of blocking material of a sexual nature, for example, a filter might also block access to related information about gender, women’s health care, or issues of equality in women’s sports. (Not everyone searching for “swimsuits” is looking for pictures of scantily clad women.)3) Each actor in the process — the teachers, the administrators, the school board, the parents, and the filtering companies themselves — has particular concerns about what needs to be cut out, a little more of this, a little more of that. And each site that gets blocked is also a potential pathway to numerous other sites and resources.

Deep knowledge and understanding, creativity, critical thinking, discernment, wisdom, and judgment are not about the accumulation of facts; they are about grasping the relationships between ideas, information, ethics, and culture. When students search the Internet, the sites they go to are not simply destinations; they are also steps on the path to further discovery. It is not just that students go looking for “vegetarianism” as a topic; they also move through “vegetarianism” on their way to somewhere else: information about nutrition and healthy diets, about spirituality, about animal abuse in the cattle industry, about the chemistry of proteins and amino acids, and so on. If we close the door marked “vegetarianism,” we may close off access to all those other possibilities. Even a “bad” site — on Nazism, say — may be an invaluable resource that leads to “good” information: on history, perhaps, or on the music of Wagner.

REASON 4: THERE ARE BETTER SOLUTIONS

The solution to the problem, to the extent that there actually is a problem, of young people accessing objectionable material on the Internet is ultimately educational, not technological. Attempting to restrict access to the wider Internet because a student might see a dirty picture is like shutting down libraries because some pervert once exposed himself in the stacks. It is simply the wrong response to the problem it attempts to solve.

We have tried to argue that free and open access to the resources of the Internet will prove to be much less of a problem for schools and teachers than many people seem to fear. Children and young people using the Internet for educational purposes will not, typically, be flooded with pornography, nor will they usually be cyberstalked by child molesters, nor will they be sucked very easily into chat rooms on perversion. They will not learn how to build bombs or decide to become racist skinheads. (And if they do, it will be for reasons ultimately having little to do with the Internet.)

To put the point simply: good teachers in well-run classrooms know what their students are doing. Students in good classrooms are too busy and too involved in their education to have the time to be looking for dirty pictures. When supervision is judged to be necessary, placing computers in more visible locations and having teachers move around the classroom work perfectly well. But if students are spending large amounts of unsupervised time on computers, with little educational purpose in mind, there is a deeper problem at work than any filtering technology can help with.

Acceptable Use Policies (AUPs), although we are not generally fans of them, are another way of letting students
know the boundaries of acceptable computer use and the consequences of stepping outside those boundaries. The benefit of such policies is that they trust student choices and err on the side of allowing more, rather than less, access until something goes wrong that merits restricting access or punishment. AUPs can be written in an overly restrictive way too, and they can constitute their own brand of censorship. But, properly drafted, AUPs can become the reasonable “rules of the road” for navigating the highways and byways of the Internet.

Continuing this analogy, students need to learn “defensive driving” on the Internet. There are dangers and risks out there, and students need to learn how to recognize them and avoid them. But the paradox is that, as in driver’s education, the only way to learn how to recognize danger and avoid it is to be put in a situation where such danger is a real possibility. You need some supervision, but you also need to be left to make your own choices. You can’t learn to drive simply by watching a film, practicing with a simulator, or turning loops in a parking lot; you have to get out on the road, where all the wackos and bad drivers are.

The Internet is similar. Educationally, once students get to a certain age, they have to be given the chance to make mistakes and bad decisions. This is an indispensable aspect of learning to make good decisions.

Teaching students to navigate the Internet wisely and safely is just as important as teaching them to drive wisely and safely. There is an incredible wealth of educationally useful material available online; there is also a lot of junk and a certain amount of truly disturbing material. But, ultimately, learning to make good intellectual and ethical decisions about what to make of it all is itself one of the most important educational aims today and is becoming, if anything, even more important.

The Internet is now the primary way many teachers and students access information in their educational pursuits. For many young people, if they can’t access information in this way, they may not ever be able to discover it. To be honest, we must admit that the deeper issue is that many parents — and a few educators — do not want young people to be making these decisions for themselves, and they don’t mind if student experiences and knowledge are limited to the bland, the conventional, and the mainstream. They certainly don’t want their kids to become Nazi skinheads, but they also don’t want them to become vegetarians, atheists, tree-huggers, or free-thinking humanists.

Ultimately, then, we believe that the filtering debate is not about pornography or bomb-making directions; it is about the reluctance of some adults to allow their children — and other people’s children — to have the free access to information that will allow them to come to their own conclusions about the world and their place in it. Clearly, these pressures are already seen in fights over textbooks and curricula. But today’s latest battleground is filtering. It seems to be about keeping kids “safe,” but it has become an issue of intellectual freedom and responsibility in a larger sense. If educators don’t stand up for these values, who will?

1. See, for example, http://censorware.net and www.ifea.net.
2. See the UEN website at www.uen.org/ueninfo.
3. This euphemism can be found at www.uen.org/policy/html/filtering.html.
4. According to the UEN, the filter currently used is called N2H2.
5. According to the Censorware Project, the blocking of this last site was later manually overridden. Currently, mormon.com, which was a privately owned site with Mormon-related material, now redirects visitors to www.mormon.org, an official website of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.
8. OCLC is a nonprofit membership organization serving 41,000 libraries in 82 countries and territories around the world. Its mission is to further access to the world’s information and reduce library costs by offering services for libraries and their users. Specific data on this question can be found at http://wcp.oclc.org/stats/misc.html.
11. This apt analogy came from one of the students who read and discussed an earlier draft of this essay in “Ethical and Policy Issues in Educational Technology,” a course taught by Nicholas Burbules.