

Internet Filtering: Yay or Nay?

Internet filtering in schools is an issue that I believe will never be entirely resolved. With so much information available to our students, parents, educators and school administrators feel the need to ensure the safety of the students. While this is an excellent idea, at the same time it is going against the American Library Association which states that "...the American Library Association affirms that the use of filtering software by libraries to block access to constitutionally protected speech violates the *Library Bill of Rights*" (*Resolution on the Use of Filtering Software in Libraries*, 2010). Many school administrators will beg to differ with this idea, insisting that students need the protection that internet filtering allows. How do we decide on the correct protocol?

Until recently, internet safety was not an issue as we only had print media. Media Specialists, teachers and parents all played parts in making certain that the book collection in the school media center was appropriate for their students. Many times, parents would request a certain book be pulled from the shelf which then entailed a large group effort to read and discuss said book, after which a decision was made concerning its content. Transferring the same issues to the internet is a full-time job, at least. Internet filtering then came into play to safeguard children against the wilds of the World Wide Web. Internet filtering was a result of the Children's Internet Protection Act, which "is a federal law enacted by Congress to address concerns about access to offensive content over the Internet on school and library computers" (*Children's Internet Protection Act*, 2009). CIPA requires that if schools are to receive national funding for the discounting of technology, filters must be in place.

For many, the pros of internet filtering vastly outweigh any statements against filtering. Student safety tops the list, as well as an awareness that students will not attempt to look up suggestive or vulgar items. At the elementary level, filtering keeps the websites students can visit in check and does not allow for much "googling" which starts at an early age. Parents know that, while at school, their student is relatively safe on the internet. However, new sites appear daily and our current internet filters do not always filter out these newer threats to safety. Ultimately, filters will block these sites, at the same time blocking sites that are good and useful, which is one of the many issues with internet filtering.

The disadvantages of internet filtering are many. First and foremost, many good sites are blocked when internet filtering is in place. Standard 1 in *Information Power* states that "the student who is information literate accesses information efficiently and effectively" (*Information power; building partnerships for learning*, 1998). If we block access to websites, many of which are good, viable, informational sites, we are not teaching our students how to effectively filter information on their own. In blocking access to questionable or objectionable sites, we also remove our students' ability to filter information, based on their own morals and values. Additionally, I truly believe that filtering gives us all a false sense of security. In my own case, I have seen many a student attempt to go to one place (take www.whitehouse.gov, for example), and instead they end up at a similarly named website that is not at all related to the White House. Why was this site not filtered out? As it has the same name as the good one, it simply missed the mark. Internet filtering can cause these things to happen, over and over. Parents, teachers and students all believe that they are safe at school and yet, we have to continually remind them to visit the "correct" site. Internet filters cannot and will not catch all bad sites and at the same time, they will catch many good sites, leaving students with few choices to do their research.

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So, what are our choices? In many school systems, the School Library Media Specialist has the authority to peruse and decide if sites are good. S/he can then “un-block” bad sites so that students are able to use them. It is my understanding that this is done on a case by case basis and each school has its own set of unblocked sites. Cobb County does not have this option. We have our internet filter in place and we are not allowed to stray outside of it, nor are we allowed to petition for sites to be released. Cobb County rules state that they “...will provide an Internet filtering device which blocks access to a large percentage of inappropriate sites. It should not be assumed that users are completely prevented from accessing inappropriate materials or from sending or receiving objectionable communications”(Use of Technology Resources in Instruction, 2008). While this covers all aspects of filtering and liability, it does not cover the need for websites to be reviewed, which I personally think needs to change. I have begun to research exactly how our filters work and would like to continue research, leading to a potential change in our filtering system.

For all of us, internet filtering will be an on-going battle. As new sites appear daily, new filters are put in place and students have the need to access more and more online information. Our filters will need to change. Filters should remain in place; there is no denying that. Without them, students will find information to which they do not need to be exposed, information of which they do not need to be aware, and just generally some bad ideas. Social networking sites should not be available at school for students to access. While school is a social as well as educational setting, my belief is that websites should be available for educational purposes only. Some filtering is a good idea. Total filtering goes against everything I believe that children/students should be learning; to discern good information from bad, to be able to use their own filtering system, and to learn to process information accurately, effectively and efficiently. As a school library media specialist, one of my many jobs is to teach students to learn how to use information correctly, or to discard it if bad. With filtering in place, that job is taken away from me and students go into life thinking they have a safety net to protect them from many bad things. As we teach children to look both ways before crossing the street, we also need to be teaching them to discern good information from bad on their own.

References

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