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Online use policies and restrictions

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Date: July 1, 1997
From: Library Journal(Vol. 122, Issue 12)
Publisher: Library Journals, LLC
Document Type: Article
Length: 1,853 words

Abstract:
Many public libraries have been forced to adopt policies regarding Internet access, both because of potentially controversial sites and the costs of providing access. Rules on restricting the access of minors and other policies are discussed.

Full Text:
The American Library Association (ALA) consistently opposes policies that restrict access to any library materials or services, or that discriminate against any category of library user. Still, separate policies for electronic resources have a long tradition in all types of libraries, and many librarians argue that they would not be able to offer on-line services without policies that either restrict use or provide for fees to subsidize the added costs of electronic access.

In a survey I conducted in 1991, 95 percent of university libraries charged all or some patrons for mediated online searches, and over half charged end users who did their own online searches from the library. Those colleges and universities that didn't charge for online access often confined use to graduate students and faculty. Some public libraries charged a fee, or limited online searching to adults or only after print resources had been exhausted.

Restrictive policies became less common in the early 1990s as more libraries relied on networked CD-ROMs and subscription-based end user online systems rather than traditional intermediary online systems. However, as libraries have added Internet access, they have had to adopt new policies.

Library Internet policies are most often written to protect the library from legal liability if patrons encounter materials on the net that they find offensive. They also recognize the cost of hardware and Internet Service Provider fees when the net's popularity exceeds the library's capacity to provide access.

Public library dilemma

Nowhere is the debate over policies that govern use, the potential for legal liability, and the problems of funding more serious than in the public library. David Burt, information technology librarian, Lake Oswego Public Library, OR, runs a web site that collects public library Internet policies <http:// www.ci.oswego.or.us/library/poli.htm>. (Burt analyzed policies found on his site in "Policies for the Use of Public Internet Workstations in Public Libraries," Public Libraries, May/June 1997.)

As of May, Burt had identified and posted 116 public library Internet use policies. They are arranged by city, state, size of population served, and date written. The policies come from 36 states and include libraries of widely varying size.

"Inappropriate" materials

Examining policies from 1995, 1996, and 1997, Burt observed, "What seems clear is that public libraries are tightening up restrictions on Internet access." According to Burt in a listserv post, "The total number of libraries which have rules against viewing `inappropriate' or `pornographic' materials continues to increase." Twenty-five percent of the policies written in 1996 and 1997 contain such rules, up from only eight percent of those written in 1995. Overall, 19 percent of policies from 1995 to 1997 include rules against viewing inappropriate or pornographic materials.

One library system warns, "A patron found to be sending or receiving inappropriate materials will be disconnected from the Internet, and will not be allowed to use it at any future time." Another library does "not monitor an individual's use of any sites except when material displayed on the screen is not appropriate in a public environment. As all Internet workstations are in view of other patrons and staff, users are not permitted to display any visual images containing nudity, obscenity, or graphic violence."

The issue goes beyond public libraries. A librarian at the University of Houston told me she worries that if sexually explicit images are on a screen in a public area in clear view of other patrons, this could prompt not only public outcry but also a sexual harassment complaint: "If one patron complains about another viewing pornography, this is sufficient reason to ask them to stop."

Age restrictions

Burt reports that "the total number of [public] libraries with age restrictions continues to rise." A quarter of the policies written in 1995 restrict Internet use according to the age of the patron, while 39 percent of the policies written in 1997 include some age restrictions.

Overall, 19 percent of the policies require parental consent, and eight percent allow use only when a child is accompanied by a parent. Burt finds that "a few libraries have both of these policies, usually having `no unaccompanied use' for young children, and `parental consent' for older children." When duplication is subtracted, 23 percent of public libraries surveyed have some age restrictions on Internet use.

This statement from a small public library in Georgia is one of the most restrictive of those limiting use by age: "Any children under the age of 11 must have one of their parents with them at the Internet station before they will be allowed to use the station. Children under the age of 18 must have parental permission to use any Internet station."

Only three libraries say they use filtering software such as Net Nanny or Surf Watch, but more may, according to Burt. "I know that several libraries on my site do filter but don't say it in their policies. I only report what libraries say they do in their policies, not what they actually do."

Time and money

Even without censoring what materials a patron can access, a few libraries find it necessary to place other restrictions on Internet use. Placing time limits on workstation use (typically one hour) is practiced by 37 percent of the public libraries, barring E-mail is a policy at 13 percent, and fees for usage are charged at three libraries. A small public library in Wisconsin requires each user to receive instruction and get a certification card before going online. This library also charges a $1 per hour fee to cover online costs.

Time limits and restrictions on what a patron can do on the Internet are more common at academic and school libraries. Academic libraries often develop policies stemming from the instant popularity of Internet access without an adequate number of workstations. Signup sheets and time restrictions are necessities at certain times of the year. As described in "Internet Issues in Reference" (Online Databases, October 1, 1995, p. 28,30), much congestion at workstations arises from uses that may seem frivolous or inappropriate at an academic library.

Academic libraries may have policies that prohibit game playing, or entering MUDs or chat rooms; or sending and receiving E-mail. One college's policy tells users that by logging on, they agree to use the computer "only for Internet activities which support the institutional mission of education: teaching, learning, research, communication with colleagues."

Internet policies in academia may be extensions of campuswide restrictions that apply to computer labs outside the library as well. Many of these policies can be found on sites linked to the Lake Oswego site, including "Susan Brown's Collection of Academic Policies" and the "Rice University Collection of K-12 Policies." The LOEX Clearing House for Library Instruction (University Library, Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, MI 48197) has a small collection of academic library policies available for loan.

Responsible use

Universities often use their Internet policies to caution students about legal and responsible use of electronic resources. A reminder that down-loading information must comply with copyright laws is frequently included. Cautions against plagiarism, plus short tutorials on properly attributing ideas may be included.

Virginia Tech describes "acceptable use" in terms of requirements and prohibitions. Users are told to protect their user IDs, access only authorized files, and avoid monopolizing the system. They are cautioned not to try to circumvent security systems, employ E-mail for harassment, or use university resources for personal gain.

Disclaimers

Although restrictions and filtering are becoming more commonplace, a majority of Internet use policies champion unrestricted access. In these cases, the policy serves as a disclaimer to warn patrons and absolve the library from responsibility if patrons are offended by what they or other people find online. Sixty percent of the policies on Burt's web site warn users they may find objectionable materials on the net, and 86 percent say the library is not responsible for information found on the net.

Many include statements such as this from the Tucson Public Library, AZ, policy: "No one controls [the Internet's] contents. Anyone can write anything they like, so you may find information that is offensive to you." Walla Walla Public Library, WA, echoes this idea: "Since the Internet is a global electronic network, there is no local, state, or federal control over its users or contents. The Internet may contain inaccurate materials or materials of a controversial nature."

The Walla Walla statement shows that fear of offending users is not the only reason for a disclaimer. Libraries do not want their providing access to information to be seen as an endorsement of its accuracy. Danbury Public Library, CT, warns, "The Danbury Library does not monitor information accessed over the Internet and cannot guarantee the validity or accuracy of information found on

the Internet. Library customers are advised, as with all library materials, to exercise judgment and discrimination when evaluating... the usefulness and reliability of material found on the Internet."

Protection against censorship

Some libraries are using their Internet policies in much the same way they use collection development policies -- to protect against censorship challenges. Twenty-one public libraries (18 percent) use their policies to voice support for the ALA Bill of Rights. The Milford Township Library, MI, states that "Internet access shall be made reasonable, fair, and equitable to an users in accordance with the American Library Association's `Access to Electronic Information, Services, and Networks': An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights." New York Public Library's site provides links to ALA, the Library Bill of Rights, the Freedom To Read Statement, and related documents.

Danbury quotes its Materials Selection Policy in its Internet Use Policy, which states in part: "The library recognizes that tastes vary widely in a given community and an item which is pleasing to one customer may be unacceptable to another; however, no one person or group has the right to impose standards on other members of the public."

Many libraries remind parents that they, not the library, must monitor their children's Internet use. Several provide paper copies or link to the brochure "Child Safety on the Information Super-highway" <www.missingkids.org/ childsafety.html>.

Policy or restriction?

Is it a policy or a restriction to set guidelines on how the Internet can be used in a library setting? Many libraries have found it necessary to develop policies that describe acceptable Internet use, restrict access to children, or serve as a disclaimer to limit the library's liability. Some restrictions are imposed by overzealous city or county boards, others by legal counsel who are trying to avoid problems before they happen.

Instead of just restricting use, an electronic resources policy also can help patrons become good information consumers. The Fort Smith Public Library, AR, reminds users "when using the Internet, please remember that some material may be outdated, wrong, or biased. Please critically evaluate all information you find." Or it can be used to teach patrons about copyright and ethical behavior. It also can introduce a new group of users to the Library Bill of Rights and collection development policies.

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Source Citation (MLA 8th Edition)
Tenopir, Carol. "Online use policies and restrictions." *Library Journal*, July 1997, p. 33+. *Gale Academic Onefile*, https://link-gale-com.proxy.lib.utk.edu/apps/doc/A19654230/AONE?u=tel_a_utl&sid=AONE&xid=142d9d91. Accessed 20 Dec. 2019.
Gale Document Number: GALE|A19654230