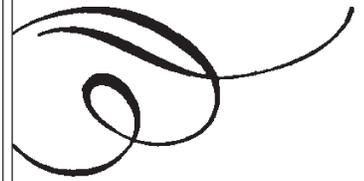


STUDYING INDIANA PUBLIC LIBRARIES' USAGE OF INTERNET FILTERS

by Alberta Davis Comer



A lot of literature from the past few years has discussed the importance of bridging the digital divide that exists between those with Internet access and those without. Public libraries have often declared themselves to be that bridge.

This article looks at how Indiana's public libraries allow the citizens they serve access to the Internet. With a grant from the University Research Committee of Indiana State University, I studied the use of filtering software and other restrictions that have been placed on patrons' computer usage.

To determine Internet policies and usage here, I mailed a survey to all 434 Indiana public libraries (239 main and 195 branches) in the autumn of 2003. Thirty-three percent (144 of the 434 mailed) of the surveys were returned.

MANAGING INTERNET USAGE

Estabrook and Lakner (2000) wrote of Internet access in libraries, "a substantial majority exert some kind of formal control, implementing one or more of the following measures: They filter access, require patrons to give their permission for children to use the Internet, or place computers in locations the staff can manage" (p. 60). The Indiana Survey on Internet Usage Policies at Public Libraries (PLs) shows that Hoosier libraries follow this national trend.

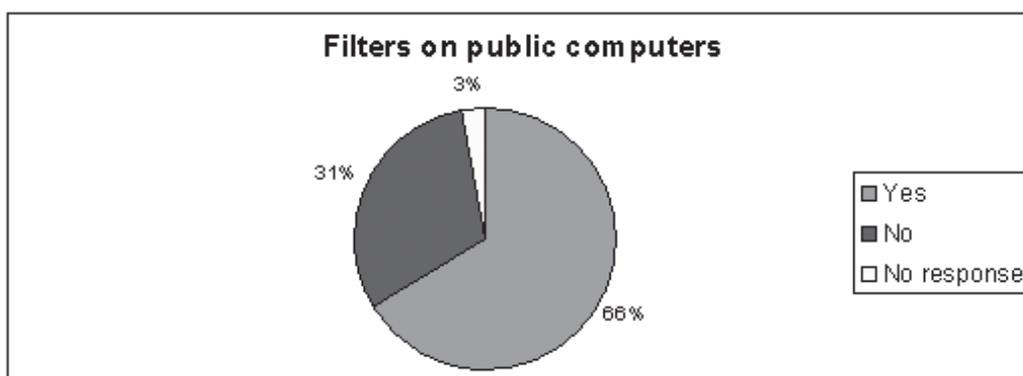
Oder reported in 2002 that 43 percent of public libraries in the U.S. use filtering software. In my 2003 survey of Indiana libraries, 66 percent (95 PLs) re-

ported that they have filters in place, 31 percent (45 PLs) said they do not have filters in place, and 3 percent (four PLs) gave no response. (See pie chart.) Another 22 percent (32 PLs) said they are planning to install filters in the future. Of the 8 percent (12 PLs) that said they do not intend to install filters, 3 percent (five PLs) are in areas that served a population of more than 25,000, while 5 percent (seven PLs) are in areas that had populations less than 10,000.

WHAT DROVE DECISIONS

Monitoring what patrons view is a relatively new function for library staff members, who are usually on the forefront of championing patron privacy. Although many librarians still claim to be First Amendment advocates, the issue of Internet privacy has caused a number of us to be more inquisitive about what information our patrons are accessing on library computers. This may be due in part to outside political pressures that are tied into library funding. One such pressure is from CIPA, the Children's Internet Protection Act, which Congress passed in 2000, and which went into effect in July 2004. CIPA mandates that schools and libraries install filtering software or they'll lose eligibility for some federal funding (usually the E-rate, which allows K-12 schools and public libraries to get discounts for Internet connections).

When I asked whether the libraries had modified their computer usage policies because of CIPA, 18 percent (26 PLs) replied "yes" and 10 percent (14 PLs) replied "not yet."¹ Many libraries may be caught in a



financial quandary. As one librarian asserted, “The \$10,000 T-1 line is simply not something we can afford without erate.” Another librarian agreed, saying that management was “concerned about the budgeting implications” of not following CIPA requirements.

WHAT WORKED, WHAT DIDN'T

Of the libraries that already had filters, CyberPatrol was the most popular, used by 11 percent of respondents (16 PLs). Next was Websense, used by 9 percent (13 PLs), and Web Balanced, used by 5 percent (7 PLs). According to the survey results, libraries were using more than 20 different filtering products.

In an almost-even split, 32 percent (46 PLs) reported no problems with their filtering software, while 35 percent (51 PLs) reported that they had experienced one or more types of problems. Twenty-two percent (31 PLs) said that patrons were unable to pull up needed information on the Internet. This is what Resnick, Hansen, and Richardson called over-blocking, “when content is blocked that should not have been restricted” (p. 67). Twenty-one percent (30 PLs) said that patrons are still pulling up “pornographic” sites, which is under-blocking, “when content is not blocked that should be restricted” (p. 67). Eight percent (12 PLs) reported other problems, including blocking of a patron’s name because it contained a word that the filter treated as “blockable.” One Indiana librarian admitted, “We previously had a filter that did not block enough, this one blocks too much. It’s not a large problem, but an annoyance.”

THOSE THAT DID FILTER

Passage of CIPA, however, may not be the only reason for using filtering software. Some Indiana libraries indicated that they would filter regardless of whether Congress had passed such a mandate. Here are a few sample comments:

“We would probably not offer Internet service to the public if we could not have some kind of filtering program. The public seems to appreciate the effort. ALA undermines its other objectives by seeming so obstinate on this issue.”

“We have had only three or four patrons violate the ‘porn’ policy. Our patrons understand that this is a family environment.”

“We decided years ago that our policies should reflect our community and staff needs. Our library, being tax-based, reflects the wants and needs of the educational and entertainment requests of our community, not those of national organizations out of touch with ‘day-to-day’ functions of community libraries. And, we have great regard for heavy doses of common sense.”

Another library stated that filtering has reduced problems with patrons accessing chat rooms or “pornographic”² sites. Some libraries use filtering but turn it off “if an adult needs to do research.”

THOSE THAT DIDN'T FILTER

On the other hand, some Hoosier libraries spoke out against filtering:

“Filtering does not work. It cannot discern between information and titillation. We have not had a problem with unacceptable use of the computers and I don’t see any future problems. I think filtering is intrusive and unnecessary. If parents are concerned about their children’s use of the Internet it is their responsibility to sit with their child and monitor their Internet use. Our community is small and rural. We have a large ‘Christian’ church base, yet I have not had a single person demand or even ask for our computers to be filtered.”

“We live in a small rural community. Patrons should be able to access whatever they want—if it doesn’t offend others around them. I think our community would be glad to just filter the computers used for children—but why limit access to everyone?”

THOSE THAT DO IT WITH NO TECHNOLOGY AT ALL

Following what Estabrook and Lakner (2000) found as a national trend, several Indiana libraries acknowledged that their staff monitors what patrons view on public computers. These were some survey comments:

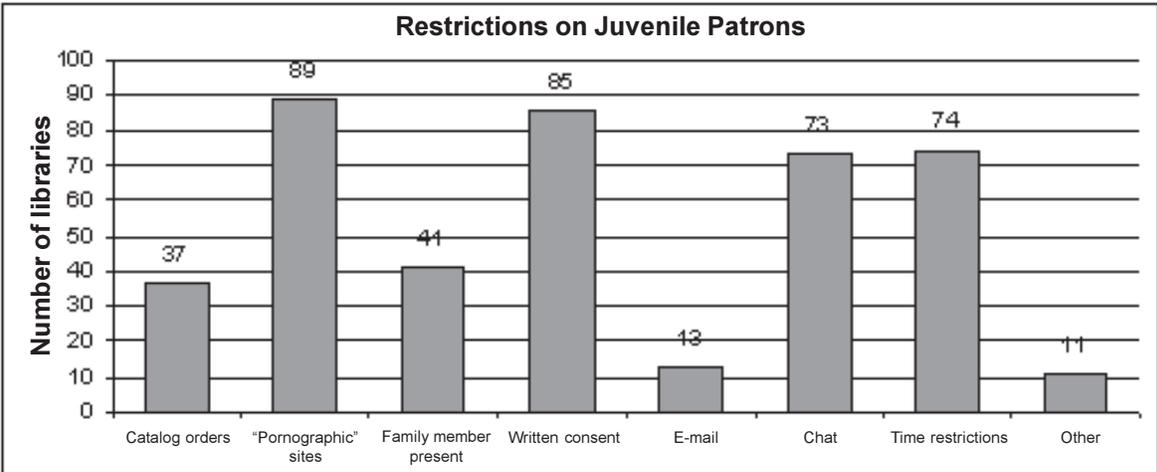
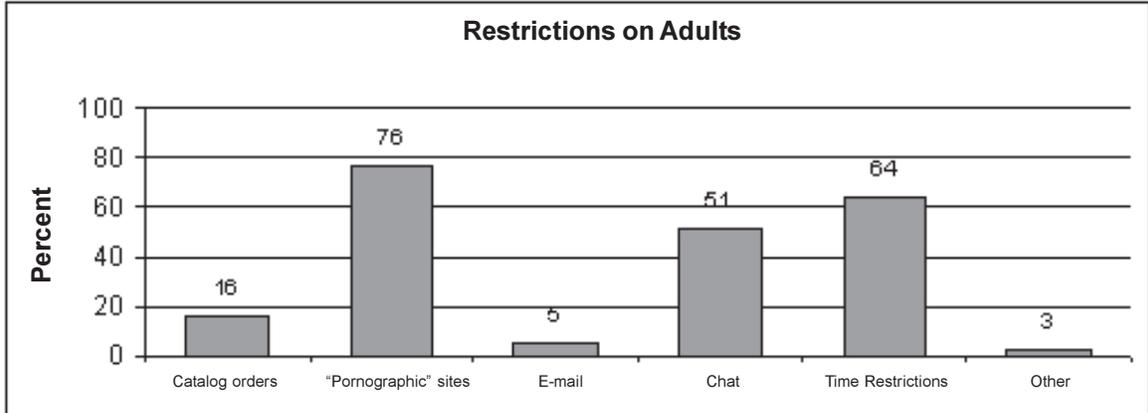
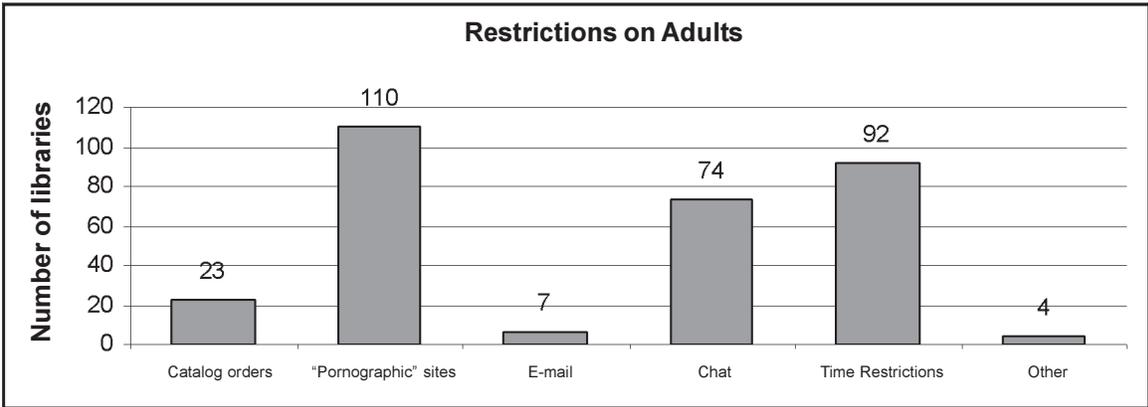
“We have 1 computer and it sits where both my assistant and I can see it, so we have never had a problem with any of the web sites...Subsequently we do not see a reason to spend money on filters for the Internet that are overpriced and unnecessary.”

“Computers are located in an environment that can be viewed by the front desks and patrons using the library. I feel that is an extra incentive for persons to check themselves and work only with sites that will not offend.”

“We are very small and public access computers are within sight of the reference and circulation areas so monitoring with one site has proved quite effective. We have had very little problems with patrons not following the rules.”

OTHER COMMON INTERNET ACCESS RESTRICTIONS

The survey indicated that many Indiana libraries—88 percent (127 PLs)—*do* place a number of restrictions on patrons’ usage of computers. (See charts on adult restrictions.) Although one of the most popular uses of the Internet is placing orders for catalog mer-



chandise, 16 percent (23 PLs) do not allow catalog orders. These are other restrictions that the survey found:

- 76 percent (109 PLs) restrict pornography.
- 51 percent (74 PLs) restrict use of chat.
- 64 percent (92 PLs) place time restrictions.
- 3 percent (four PLs) have other restrictions

One survey stated, “Many patrons (adult and children) use Instant Messaging. This causes the most problems [for both] behavior and [the] management of waiting lists. The staff is divided about the value of offering messaging.” Another librarian stated that their computers are “strictly used for information”; they do not allow games, e-mail, chat, or downloading.

When asked whether libraries place restrictions on juvenile patrons’ (those under 18 years of age) use of the Internet, 90 percent (130 PLs) told me they did, 7 percent (10 PLs) answered “no,” and 3 percent (four PLs) did not answer. The popular juvenile restrictions (see charts) and percentages of participants are as follows:

- 26 percent (37 PLs) restrict catalog orders.
- 62 percent (89 PLs) restrict viewing “pornographic” sites.
- 28 percent (41 PLs) insist that juveniles must have an adult family member or guardian present.
- 59 percent (85 PLs) say juveniles need a written consent from parents or guardians.
- 9 percent (13 PLs) restrict e-mail.
- 51 percent (73 PLs) restrict chat.
- 51 percent (74 PLs) place time restrictions.
- 8 percent (11 PLs) have other restrictions.

Some libraries indicated that they have more problems with teenagers than with other age groups:

“The few people that we have had to ban for life were usually young teenagers with pornographic sites.”

“95% of internet users are teenagers ‘chatting’.”

“Three occurrences of a violation of our Internet policy results in a loss of privileges for one year. Mostly teens are the offenders.”

“Some of the teens object not so much to the filters, but [to] our restrictions on downloading and installing software on our computers. They feel so much at ease they seem to think the computers [are] their own.”

CONSEQUENCES FOR NOT FOLLOWING LIBRARY POLICIES

When I asked Indiana librarians if they had problems with patrons not following their guidelines on Internet usage, 67 percent (96 PLs) responded “yes” while 30 percent (43 PLs) responded “no” and 3 percent (5 PLs) did not respond. Nine percent (13 PLs) indicated that they had only occasional problems with patrons not following Internet rules. Some gave examples: “Patron[s] access pornography. Patron[s] leave icons on the desktop, change settings.”

Several libraries reported that patrons who are not following library Internet policies are given a verbal warning followed by loss of Internet privileges, for 1 day or permanently. Another said, “We use the tap on the shoulder...next time [they are] off computers for a day, month, or 3 to 6 months.”

RESULTS ARE INTERESTING, BUT THEY’RE NOT SURPRISING

From the survey responses, it is clear that many Indiana libraries follow the national trend in restricting patrons on their use of public computers. However, a few of the responding libraries hold different perspectives. While some library managers feel it’s within their purview to set limitations, others insist that patrons be responsible for themselves. Some librarians believe they must uphold their community’s conservative values and use filtering software, others view filtering as “intrusive and unnecessary.”

Staff members at public libraries contend with First Amendment issues on a daily basis. To help them deal with these difficult issues, it is important to provide up-to-date information on new filtering software and to discuss what software can and cannot do. It is also important to determine the Internet usage needs of library patrons and to discuss ways to facilitate their needs while preserving library policies.

While it is apparent that no single policy could possibly serve all the needs of the varied public libraries in Indiana, further research and discussion about which policies work and why would benefit both libraries and patrons.

FOOTNOTES

1. Forty-four percent (63 PLs) replied “no,” but 14 percent (9 of 63 PLs) of those saying “no” went on to state that they already had filters in place; 11 percent (16 PLs) did not respond to this question; the rest of the libraries gave other responses.

2. On the survey, the term “pornographic” was not defined instead, if respondents checked any answer

that used the word “pornographic” they were asked how their library defined the term. One defined pornographic as “likely to cause a disturbance to others around them or make other patrons uncomfortable.” Another library said it is “visual depictions of pornographic materials or other sites deemed offensive to other patrons.” One library said it prefers the term “inappropriate uses” and that “if you wouldn’t view it in your grandmother’s living room, don’t view it in ours.”

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