# Internet Policies & Standards in Indiana Public Libraries

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## Introduction

This paper was a result of the author's search for information about issues of intellectual freedom, particularly as it relates to public libraries in Indiana and the Internet. Recent articles in library journals and newspapers have pointed out the need for librarians to be aware of community concerns regarding the availability of "pornography" or "obscenity" on the Internet.

According to the Information Technology Association of America's *(ITAA) State Laws on Obscenity, Child Pornography and Harassment*, "'Obscenity' is typically defined as material which, to the average person, applying contemporary community standards, and taken as a whole: 1) predominantly appeals to prurient interests, 2) lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value, and 3) depicts or describes nudity, sex, or excretion in a patently offensive way."

This definition, of course, has several problems. How do we define the "average" person? Also, what are contemporary community standards? Are contemporary standards different from standards of the past and future, for all people? How do community standards differ from one another? And, as questioned in the document, "what constitutes the relevant "community" in on-line environments without geographic boundaries?"[1]

If one believes the press, there appears to be a perception on the part of many members of the public that pornography is readily available on the Internet and that libraries need to do more to monitor what children can access. Many libraries evidently do believe the press. It was recently stated, "In the past few months, a mix of patron complaints, staff concerns, and press coverage has focused on library patrons' access to what has been indiscriminately labeled "net smut."[2] "The total number of libraries which

have rules against viewing 'inappropriate' or 'pornographic' materials continues to increase."[3]

This author recently resigned from her position as library director at a library that served a population of about 40,000 individuals in a predominantly rural setting. Her reasons for resigning were closely related to this topic. It is normally expected that any standards determined by the library Board of Trustees should be based on the needs of the entire community, not just one vocal segment. But, in some cases, a small segment of the community is allowed to take control of a library and its policies. In recent years, it had seemed to the author as if library policies were being established for a small minority of her community because the library board was no longer taking measures to represent all of the public.

It is this author's main concern that very wrong assumptions are being made about the tastes and values of the general public. Libraries are in danger of setting policies for a conservative minority to the detriment of the majority of our citizens. As a recent example, two patrons had complained about access to nudity on the Internet at the author's hometown library (after her resignation). The library's Board of Trustees assigned the interim director to formulate a new policy, rather than adhere to the approved Acceptable Use Policy. She chose a policy she borrowed from another library and recommended to the board. Her reason was, "There are four rules, in bold, that everyone can see." Her reasons for choosing bold print can be understood, as can any librarian's reasons for borrowing instead of recommending policies unique to his or her own community. After all, libraries can be busy places. But, is the public being well served when it is being viewed in such a condescending manner? Surely, some of the reading public could understand more than four rules.

Freedom of Speech is a concept that most librarians seem to feel very strongly about. The Internet may be today's preferred delivery of free speech, just as underground publications flourished in the Sixties. The main reason for choosing to survey public libraries that use the Internet, is because the Internet has had the potential to be a forum for free thinking, and because many librarians have been concerned about Internet issues. The author hoped to learn if concerns about public libraries, the Internet, and intellectual freedom, were legitimate.

In recent years, the author has been monitoring many different sites on the Internet, and had been surprised that people seemed so tolerant of others. In recent months, when she was employed in a library, from time-to-time a

concerned reference assistant would bring to her attention that young patrons had been viewing inappropriate materials. However, library policy stated clearly that the Internet contained questionable sites. Children needed signed permission from a parent or guardian in order to use the Internet at the library. To determine the ease of access to pornography some random searches using terms such as "nudity" and "xxx" were completed. In all cases, it was found impossible to view hard pornography without first being notified that the site was for adults only. Admittedly, it would have been easy for a young person to bypass the warning simply by claiming to be an adult. However, it was difficult to believe that a child could "accidentally" view hard-core pornography.

That being stated, the library staff at the same library was concerned when a group of young men pointed out to a staff member that soft pornography could be viewed by simply double clicking on photographs of a television actress. No warning was given in this case, except a note at the bottom of the "page" that indicated the photographs were "nude pics".

But, very recently the ready access to many different kinds of materials on the Internet has caused some alarm in communities and within the library profession. During the Spring and Summer, articles appeared in *Library Journal*, and later, in the local Shelbyville newspaper.[4] It has been disquieting to note that some institutions, professions, and publications that once took a firm stand against censorship, seem to be jumping on the Concerned Citizens Bandwagon. (Note that as of yet, to this writer's knowledge, no such organization exists.) And yet, few standards do seem to exist at this time. Librarians can choose not to buy a book or a video because it lacks any literary merit. But, the Internet shares many qualities with television. On the Internet, offensive materials are just "there" — one has to deal with them, like it or not.

## Method

A survey method was chosen in order to learn what experiences librarians, especially public library directors, and public libraries are actually having with the Internet, and how librarians feel about the information provided on the Internet. Although libraries have done much to promote freedom of information in recent years, including access to non-print materials such as videos, the Internet appears to be set apart in such discussions. Pornography seems to be especially bothersome to the public and librarians. The success of the Internet as a research tool for the public does not seem to be in question.

It was also determined that a survey would help to see how public library directors help the library board members set policy. In theory, board of trustees members are given the responsibility of determining policies, based on the desires of the communities they serve. Library directors have the role of suggesting such policies to their boards, possibly with input from staff members and the community. It is also up to the library director to implement the policies determined by the board of trustees. By using the survey method, it should be possible to determine how frequently the policy of each library is actually decided by the desires of the entire community.

Not all public libraries in Indiana were surveyed since several still do not have Internet access. To decide which libraries to survey, the author checked to see which libraries have Web pages, assuming that those libraries with Web pages would be most likely to have public Internet access. Many of those libraries have published the library's Internet policy on their sites. Also surveyed were libraries with dial-in access or e-mail addresses, assuming that they would also be likely to have public Internet access. Lastly chosen were several libraries at random. A total of 109 surveys were sent. Seventy surveys were mailed and thirty-nine were sent by e-mail or fax.

## Survey Results

Thirty-six libraries responded to the survey. The Internet was also searched to determine how many libraries published Internet policies on their Web pages. Survey questions and responses follow:

1) *Do you have an Acceptable (Computer) Use Policy or an Internet Policy?*
     Of the thirty-six libraries that responded, thirty-three had such policies. An additional thirteen libraries have published Internet policies on the library Web pages, but did not respond to the survey. All of the three libraries that responded negatively are not yet on the Internet, and one of the three stated that "our board does not want public accessible Internet."

2) *How did your board of trustees members determine your policy?*
     *a) Public input through a survey*
     No library that responded to the survey solicited public input through a survey.

     *b) Staff input*
     Twenty-nine libraries determined policy through staff input.

c) *Public input through comments to staff or board members*
Nine libraries used public comments to determine policy.

d) *Board member(s) preference*
Seventeen libraries determined policy based on the preference of
board of trustees members.

e) *Other (please explain)*
Fifteen libraries used other means to determine policy. Two libraries
used committee input, four libraries borrowed from school policy or
guidelines, seven libraries researched policies from other libraries,
two referred to other unspecified institution policies, and one library
used vendor input.

3) *Do you prohibit patrons from looking at, or reading, pornography on the
Internet? If yes, have you defined pornography within your policy statement?*
Twenty-three of the surveyed libraries forbid the display of pornogra-
phy. Of libraries that have posted Internet policies on library Web sites but
did not respond to the survey, six specifically forbid accessing pornography
(sexually explicit material). Six forbid illegal activities or have a disclaimer,
and two state that a more detailed policy is posted at the library. Most of the
libraries that replied yes to this question were careful to state that they
defined pornography legally. Only two libraries actually provided a definition.
Both were very similar. "Accessing, transmitting, uploading, downloading, or
distributing pornographic, obscene, abusive, or sexually explicit material or
language" was one of the definitions. Similar wording was used by the
second library whose director stated, "(Pornography) is a reflection of
community standards but ... it is not a black and white issue ... but grey and
really not possible to enforce." "Policy prohibits illegal activity," was another
statement used to define what patrons cannot do on the Internet.

According to an Internet article, "All fifty states and the District of
Columbia have laws governing obscenity, child pornography, and harass-
ment."[5] Indiana's statute prohibits distribution of electrical reproductions of
obscene material.[6]

Of those libraries that chose not to define the term in the policy, a
typical justification was that "'Pornography' is an extremely loose term and
what is (illicit) for one person is not...for another...Legally determined
pornography will be forbidden." Most librarians appeared to be uncomfort-
able playing the role of censor, and seemed to hope that the patron would
"self-censor".

4a) *Do you use software to block certain topics?*
Seven libraries use filtering devices.

*4b) What software do you use?*
Surfwatch 2, Net Nanny 1, Cyber Patrol 3 (one library stated that it was only used on the children's computer), Webtrack 1, Not specified 1

A concern was expressed by a few libraries that felt use of such filtering devices would incur responsibility on the part of libraries when filters are not totally effective.

A second part to this question dealt with the level of satisfaction felt by the public, staff members, and board members with the library's policy regarding use of filtering devices.

|  | All respondents | | | Respondents with filtering devices | | |
|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Public | Yes 13 | No 1 | | Public | Yes 5 | No 2 |
| Staff | Yes 9 | No 3 | | Public | Yes 3 | No 3 |
| Board | Yes 9 | | | Board | Yes 3 | No 1 |

Comments:
"Parents like the software, but sometimes other patrons complain it blocks sites it shouldn't."

"No. Recent Supreme Court ruling has made it unlawful to filter adult use of the Internet ... We feel juvenile use is the concern of the parent. We do plan to use our Web site to direct parents and children to recommended sites..."

"We used Cyberpatrol for several months, but it didn't work."

A concern was stated by one library that does not use a filter that the "public seems to think that porn is readily available and regularly used, when it is not."

5) *Are you satisfied with the quality of information provided on the Internet?*
Twenty-one respondents seemed to be generally satisfied with the quality of information. This was a difficult response to measure since many people chose to answer with qualifications, rather than a simple yes or no.

Some typical responses follow:
"Seems to be popular with the public."
"Some of the information is excellent. Some is not..."
"We cannot afford to keep the (breadth) and depth of material found on the Internet."
"We have had very good success with information about health topics..."
"...There are many treasures on the Internet, but sometimes you really have to dig to find them."
"The volume of information sources is outstanding, even though much is less useful and even distasteful."
"Much of the information is not high quality."
"Some information sites are marvelous, others are outdated or even contain errors..."

6) *How do you help patrons determine the reliability of sources? Of those libraries who assist patrons to determine reliability the following statements are typical responses:*
"We can check other sources for credentials, accreditation, factual content, verification of source material, etc."
"We provide workshops and offer reference assistance..."
"We (have) Internet classes the third Wednesday of every month..."
"We encourage our patrons to use reputable sources."
"The reliability of Internet sources is a problem addressed by training librarians how to validate and research Web sites for credibility."
"...By providing guides, counseling, informing..."
"A part of (basic Internet training classes) includes discussing the indicators of the reliability of a particular source..."
"(Our) use policy states that some sites might be inaccurate."
"Checking in print sources whenever possible."

7a) *Do you feel Internet "authors" should sign articles and cite information sources?*
Twenty-seven respondents felt that Internet "authors" should sign articles.

7b) *Should the method of citation be standardized?*
Twenty-two librarians felt there should be a standardized method of citation for Internet articles. Respondents were less sure about having sources cited than signed. There was some concern about the loss of freedom when authors are "required" to follow standards.

8) *Do you see a need for other standards? (This question was asked only of e-mail survey participants.)*

One participant stated, "It would be extremely useful if all information providers put dates on the information added to their Web site."

## Policies and Web Pages

In preparation for this article, the author viewed acceptable use and computer policies on public library Web pages, on the Internet. As with paper published policies, there is little consistency from one library to another. Some libraries publish a complete policy. Others publish only the computer (acceptable) use policy. And, some libraries make only a reference to the complete policy's availability at the library. In general, larger libraries have published more thorough policies on the Internet, which might serve well as models for others.

Some libraries that have noticeably attractive, well-written policies are Allen County Public Library (Ft. Wayne) and St. Joseph County Public Library (South Bend). The information on their pages is logically arranged and the pages are easy to use. The Web sites of the above libraries are kept up-to date. Many libraries have very attractive, up-to-date Web pages. But, oddly, some libraries appear to have never updated the Web pages once they were designed and published. This would seem to make poor use of the advantages of publishing information for the public, and other libraries, on the Internet. As an example, the author's hometown library had not updated program listings since March or April 1997. The page was being viewed on August 11th, 1997. On September 24th the library's server was down, so perhaps it has been recently updated.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the survey seems to indicate that many librarians are concerned about keeping the Internet freely accessible, at least to adults. Of the seven libraries that use filtering devices, five indicated satisfaction with the results. Two of the seven libraries use filtering devices for the children's area only.

In general, the public, staff, and board members seem to be satisfied with the solutions librarians have devised, although each library has had to determine the desires of the community with, seemingly, little input. Survey results show that few, only nine, libraries used public input to determine policy. Of those libraries using public input, *none* used a survey method, but

two did mention that committee input was solicited.

Of the thirty-six respondents to the survey, at least twenty-seven felt some standards should be encouraged. Twenty-seven felt authors should sign articles. Twenty-two librarians felt there should be a standardized method of citation. Another suggestion was that all articles should be dated to avoid use of outdated materials. Since outdated materials are of some concern, perhaps Web pages produced by libraries should be dated and kept as current as possible. Some respondents mentioned concerns about having requirements — such standards should be voluntary.

Perhaps the words of the American abstract expressionist artist, Robert Motherwell, can bring some wisdom to our modern defense of personal freedom. In 1948, in *Tiger's Eye,* he wrote, "Indeed, without trying to present a paradox ... one might say that it is only the most inhumane professions in modern society that permit the agent to behave nicely in everyday life and to regard the world with a merry and well-glassed eye."

## Endnotes

1. *State Laws on Obscenity, Child Pornography and Harassment.* Information Technology Association of America. [no date]. 12 par. 1 chart. http://www.itaa.org/porn1.htm. October 1997.
2. Norman Oder, "Krug's Toughest Fight?" *Library Journal* 122 (May 1, 1997): 38-41.
3. Carol Tenopir, "Online Use Policies and Restrictions," *Library Journal* 122 (July 1997): 33-34.
4. "Library Keeps Internet Access, Adds Limits," *Shelbyville (Indiana) News, 5* August, 1997.
5. *State Laws on Obscenity, Child Pornography and Harassment.*
6. Ibid

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