

**CELEBRATING THE FREEDOM TO READ,
LEARN, CONNECT@THE LIBRARY
OR
KIDS, SEX AND THE INTERNET --
ARE THEY SYNONYMOUS?**

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In the spring of 1997, the members of the American Library Association (ALA) elected me President. It did not take but a minute to know that the focus of my year, 1998-99, would be intellectual freedom. I had spent a year in my home community fighting the *Daddy's Roommate* battle, co-authored a book, *Protecting the Right to Read*, and I was well-versed in the intellectual freedom "lingo". All I needed was a platform to take my message on the road - and there is no better platform from which to advocate for people's rights (including children) than the ALA. From Maine to Michigan, Arizona to Arkansas, and to Indiana, I spoke wherever people would listen.

I have been a librarian for over thirty years. I once thought that I became a librarian because I love to read. I do. But that is not why I love being a librarian. Former Senator Wendell Ford said, "[i]f information is the currency of democracy, then libraries are the banks." For me, being a librarian is like being president of a bank! My job is to share the wealth - the wealth of knowledge, information and pleasure that libraries offer.

As a child, my parents took me to the library so I could read, check out books and just browse. The freedom to make my own choices from what seemed like endless shelves of books awed me as a child - it still does!

As my term as ALA President ended, I took the opportunity to jot down some thoughts about libraries, children, and the Internet and what we as librarians, parents and concerned adults should know. The Internet has raised some tough issues for all of us. The shootings in Littleton, Colorado, last year raised even more questions and fears for parents about how to juggle "the dream and the nightmare" of the Internet at the same time.

Children are fearless about trying new things on the computer; they are often more technologically proficient than their parents. From the moment we had computers in our school, I learned more from the students than from my staff development training days. I also learned that we do not help children when we simply wall them off from information and ideas that are controversial or disturbing. If they are to succeed in the Information Age, they must learn to be discerning users of information. I fear that in our haste to find Internet solutions, we may be in danger of selling our children and their First Amendment rights down the river.

The Internet is an exciting new tool to use, explore, and enjoy as we see fit. It is unique in that it literally puts a whole world of information at our fingertips. The Internet is neither good nor evil. We use it to communicate, to publish and to find information and we, as a society, are still learning to use it. This cyberworld mirrors our virtual world - the good, the bad and the ugly. Like most tools, its effectiveness depends greatly on the skills of the user. Time, experience and new advances in technology will address many of the concerns that have been raised. We have all seen the media, including newspapers, magazines, radio and television, feeding into parents' fears because these are the stories that "sell." It is not news to say that millions of children had a safe, rewarding experience online today.

Like radio, movies and television before it, the Internet has raised concerns about its possible negative impact on children. These concerns focus on how much free speech should be allowed in cyberspace and where to draw the line when it comes to children. This is not a new issue for libraries. In fact, there is a long history of materials that have been challenged or

removed from library shelves because some people found them dangerous or distasteful. These include *Huckleberry Finn* (not only did he itch, he scratched), *The Grapes of Wrath*, considered profane by some, even today, and *Little Red Riding Hood*, because she was portrayed carrying a flask of wine to her grandmother.

Books dealing with topics like divorce, drugs, violence and sexuality are frequent targets for parents and others who believe children should be protected from such material. We see the same concerns about the Internet.

To state the obvious, as society changes, so do libraries. Many of the books once banned, such as works by Oscar Wilde, Upton Sinclair and Thomas Hardy, are now considered classics. Today, libraries are often the focus of debate about public access to the Internet and what library users, particularly children, should and should not be allowed to see.

I understand why some people are fearful of a medium often portrayed as riddled with pornography – or worse. Ten million children use the Internet every day. One search goes bad and that is the one you hear about.

Many of the people perpetuating these negative messages are the same folks who would remove books from schools and libraries that do not agree with their own personal social values agenda. Like a mother quoted in *The New York Times*, they claim it is not their own children that they are worried about, but it is those other children, the ones whose parents cannot or do not supervise them. “Protect children,” they say. What does that really mean? What does it mean in law? What does it mean in public policy? What does it mean in public libraries?

Generally, it means government imposing laws or policies that govern how we adults communicate with each other. The Supreme Court struck down one such law, the Communications Decency Act, because it would have banned all communication on the Internet considered unsuitable for children under 18, a clear violation of free speech for adults, according to the justices.

Local courts have made similar rulings in cases involving the use of software filters in public libraries. As librarians, we know filters are an imperfect tool, one that blocks useful and legal information, as well as the “bad stuff.”

One of the key concerns I have is that filters can give parents a false sense that their children are protected when, in fact, they are not. Of the millions of sites on the Internet, there are some that all of us would agree are undesirable for children. One recent

software filter only blocked 50% of sites defined as pornographic. Even the manufacturers admit there is no filter that only filters illegal material. Let me give you a RL (Real Life) example, not from my own library, because we do not use filters, but from a friend who works in a school library with filters. Students were trying to look up the cast and credits for the movie *Good Will Hunting*, but found they could not access it because it was blocked. They were, however, able to find a site on penis piercing!

Filters cannot protect children from the potentially far more dangerous activities of online pedophiles, exploitative advertising and violent, interactive games.

Software filters are often seen as a quick fix, especially by politicians and others who are not familiar with the Internet and how it works. It is interesting to note that a recent Annenberg Public Policy Center publication titled “The Internet and the Family: The View from Parents, The View from the Press” (Turow, 1999, <http://appcpenn.org/internet/>) confirms what other studies have found -- that the majority of parents are not using Internet filters at home. They prefer to rely on parental guidance!

ALA believes that filters are fine for parents to use in their homes, provided they understand the limitations of filtering products. ALA does not endorse their use in libraries because filters are known to block access to constitutionally protected materials.

There are some who choose to interpret this as ALA allowing children to access pornography. I would like to think that anyone who knows and uses libraries knows better. The fact is there are groups who seek to promote their own agendas at the expense of libraries and their users. As publicly funded government agencies, libraries have a responsibility to uphold public access to legal information as defined by the constitution and federal, state and local laws.

Does this mean ALA believes children do not need protection? Absolutely not. Children do need to be protected. Many librarians are also parents. We care deeply about children. As information professionals, we are committed to addressing these concerns. I make frequent use of the Internet in my work and for my own personal use. I also have concerns about what children might be exposed to online, including my own child. All of us need to step up to this role by providing children with quality Internet sites in the same way we recommend good books, videos and other resources. Librarians are also playing a leadership role by providing classes for children, parents and other adults about how to use the Internet. However, parents, teachers and librarians cannot do it all.

We need law enforcement agencies to enforce all laws governing child pornography, obscenity and child molestation online and off. We need the media to portray the Internet in all its complexity, the good and the bad, and to educate parents about the support available to them from schools, libraries and other institutions. We need legislators who will take the time to learn about the Internet and craft thoughtful solutions, not rush to judgment.

The best way to protect children when it comes to the Internet, and just about anything else, is for parents to supervise their children and to teach them basic safety rules and how to make positive choices. This means taking a few precautions, using common sense and practicing some good old-fashioned family values, like taking responsibility for our own children and teaching them to live responsibly. As the tragic events in Littleton, Colorado, show, that goes for older as well as younger children.

What can parents do? First, take the time to learn about the Internet and how it works. The more people know and understand this medium, the less frightening it will be. Many libraries, schools and community groups offer classes and materials to teach parents what they need to know in order to guide their children. ALA provides a wealth of resources for librarians and parents on its website, <http://www.ala.org>.

Second, set rules. The Annenberg report shows that parents are already setting rules as one of the methods to protect their children online, because parents know it works. We do not let children play in the street. Neither should we let them play unsupervised on the Internet. Children should be taught not to give their names to strangers, online as well as offline. There are many other common sense tips that can ensure children have a positive experience online. Is your family computer in a central place where you can keep an eye on it? My computer is the kitchen.

Three, parents must teach their children values and guidelines to use in selecting what they read and view. It is up to parents to let their children know what subjects and Internet sites are off limits and to explain why. Introduce your child to the children's librarian and encourage your child to ask for help when seeking information on the Internet.

As librarians and information professionals, I believe we are committed to the following:

- We protect the constitutional rights of everyone who uses libraries.
- We respect and value our nation's diversity and strive to provide a full spectrum of resources and services to the communities we serve.

- We affirm the responsibility and the right of all parents and guardians to guide their own children's library use.

These are the highest ideals of the library profession. They are often challenged. Living up to them can be a challenge.

The freedom to select for ourselves and for our children what we read, hear and view is one of the most precious rights in a democracy. Each day millions of people of all ages and backgrounds walk into libraries expecting to find and receive information on almost any conceivable topic. Free of charge, no questions asked.

The truth is that libraries have always contained material that some people object to. Internet or no Internet, the vast majority of children and adults continue to use the library responsibly. Let people in your community see for themselves. Encourage them to go to your local library and see how people of all ages are using this exciting resource for school, for home and for work.

Children today are growing up in a highly technological, global information society. Some of us grew up in a world without television, microwaves or pantyhose. Today's three-year olds will not remember a time without the Internet and e-mail.

If our children are to succeed as adults, they must learn to make good judgments about the information they encounter, both positive and negative. Teaching and trusting children to make good decisions about where they go and what they do is what being a parent is all about. Fortunately, there are librarians, teachers and others to help.

Libraries are part of the solution to how families deal with the Internet and librarians help by pointing children and adults to good and useful information. Remember that protecting children should not have to mean sacrificing First Amendment rights. Rather, we must prepare our children to live in an imperfect world and to respect one of our most precious rights in a democratic society - the freedom to choose for ourselves and our children what we read, hear and view.