
Mark Y. Herring

Winthrop University, herringm@winthrop.edu

Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.4393
by Mark Y. Herring (Dean of Library Services, Dacus Library, Winthrop University) 
<herrinmg@winthrop.edu>

Is it possible to say something positi-

tive about Internet filtering in libraries and

not have everyone, including your mother,
call you a wild-eyed, hidebound, neo-Nazi
basho-bazook? No, of course not, but I’m
going to try to anyway.

Our story begins in the late 1930s,
when the American Library Associ-
ation, working hand-in-glove with the
American Civil Liberties Union, issued
its Library Bill of Rights. In a word, the
document said everyone had the right to
read and no one, of course, disagreed with
this. The innocuous document served well
enough over the coming years because
everyone remained agreeable and sensible
about what reading is, and what constit-
tuted this right. But nestled in its midst,
the document also heralded ALA’s em-
brace of an absolutist view of the First
Amendment, one shared by the ACLU
and many others. The right to read came
to mean, in absolutist terms, we must se-
lect everything for fear of censoring any-
thing. No one really did this but the ideal
could not be easily gainsaid, except at the
operational level, a minor, devilish detail.

Unfortunately, bad enough is seldom
left alone. Later, during the turbulent six-
ties and early seventies, ALA issued its
Intellectual Freedom Manual (hereinafter
IFM). By now nearly everyone was
activist-minded and IFM (and ALA)
proved no exception. The IFM spelled
out this right to read by adding prohibi-
tions to prohibitions: librarians should not
sequester what they considered to be adult
materials because this flew in the face of
the absolutist view. Further, there were
to be no adult shelves so labeled because
this, too, smacked of the faintest hint of
restriction.

All of this came under the guise of pre-
venting our libraries from becoming bare,
ruin’d choirs but there was more madness
than method. Children, under this abso-
lutist view, had as much right to the Joy
of Sex as anyone, and librarians were not
to act in loco parentis. Fast-forward to
2004 and it comes as no surprise that ALA
has joined forces with the ACLU once
more to issue a clarion call against Internet
filtering and the protection of pornog-
raphy in the nations libraries.

What is curious about all this, how-
ever, is ALA’s duplicity. ALA spokes-
persons dismiss, dismissively, the argu-
ment that young people would ever sur-
face for porn. In an astounding admission of
self-delusion, Leonard Kniffel, editor of
ALA’s official publication for librarians,
American Libraries, wrote, “Kids don’t
have time to sit at library computers and
troll for smut, nor do they wish to.” (And
the former President did not have sexual
relations with that woman, Monica
Lewinsky, either.)

Further duplicity abounds. Librarians
censor daily, or rather restrict in such a
way that the end result is as if censoring
had taken place: this book is too expen-
sive; that database is too narrow; this CD-
ROM is too general. Moreover, while fil-
tering merely removed the chance that
John Doe can surf for porn at the library’s
discretion (he can still go home and surf
until his heart’s content, or until his wife
gongs him with an iron skillet, whichever
comes first). On the other hand, when
library A chooses not to buy database B
(probably owing to expense) it’s that un-
likely that any individual can or will.

If truth be told, we even do a bit of the
ideological censoring. For example, you’ll
not find many treatises by the John
Birch Society in our nation’s li-
braries; nor will you find much of the
KKK’s hate-
mongering. Nei-
ther will you find much, if any, in the way
of anti-gay or anti-Anglo American materi-
als. When we librarians remove or omit
materials, we call it selection. When the little,
blue-haired old lady, toting a purse the size
of a railroad car wants to take from the library
Madonna’s book titled Sex, we exorci-
ate it as censorship.

It’s not that the material substance of
the absolutist views of the First Amend-
ment arguments is disgraceful; it’s the
inconsistency behind it that wrecks our el-
finna. What distinguishes us from ani-
mals is our ability to make fine distinc-
tions. We do not, for example, call a
monkey with a paintbrush, Picasso; his
work may look like modern art, but we
think we see a difference. Most people
understand that while you may go native
in your living room, you cannot do it at
the local Wal-Mart. Or rather, you may,
but only until the police arrive.

What puzzles me is that we cannot seem
to make these same distinctions when it
comes to pornography in the li-
brary. If one bare-bottomed shot is fil-
tered, so goes the ALA argument, well,
then there goes the intellectual neighbor-
hood. In essence, librarians have been
reduced to saying all words or pictures
on a page or monitor are the same. All
are potential information. The argument
is akin to saying we should never arrest
anyone for fear of arresting an innocent
person. Yet, we know that words hurt, that
ideas have consequences; and we know
that pornographic materials, whether soft-
or hard-core; whether glossy or low res-
olution, are bad for people. Report
after report teaches us that Tom Schiro,
Ted Bundy and thousands of others have
confirmed it: and, the nearly three in five
men addicted to some form of it under-
scores how late the hour is. We know that
vice, seen too often, familiar with its face,
is something we first endure, then fonde,
then embrace. This may not seem very
open-minded to some people, but then,
with Flannery O’Connor pointed out,
many people are so open-minded their
brains have fallen out.

Next Issue: The Tangled Web of the
Web.

Long Island Library ...
(from page 61)

mats — http://www.indiana.edu/~libsoc/mats — Principals developed to guide librarians in the University of California Libraries in developing and reviewing proposals to and from, and in negotiating contracts with, providers of information in various digital formats. Covers issues in collection development, costs and pricing, licensing, functional-
ity, and archiving of information in digital formats.

Scholarly Electronic Publishing Bibliography — http://info.lib.uh.edu/sepb/

<http://www.against-the-grain.com>