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Issues in Vendor-Library Relations

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Fear and Loathing on the Internet
by Barry Fast

While librarians and vendors enthusiastically embrace the Internet, with its seemingly limitless possibilities, our own government may be quietly working to stifle this global village before it gets anywhere near its marvelous potential. Buried in the new telecommunications legislation that will create much more competitive and flexible system are Republican-sponsored regulations that are aimed at censoring the Net. Briefly, these regulations will hold Internet providers and users responsible for any "indecent" material transmitted over the Internet. The restrictions are aimed at protecting children from pornography. If convicted of violating these regulations, users and providers could face jail terms of two years and fines of $100,000. Beyond that, once a precedent has been set for holding providers responsible for the content of materials that pass through their networks, a door is opened for all sorts of intimidation, from lawsuits to all the excesses of politically correct lockstep speaking.

Proponents argue that the Web, and especially many of the newsgroups, are so horrendously pornographic now that we must act soon to protect our children. They use censorship of the broadcast media as justification, stating that we can establish standards of decency for TV and radio, so we should similarly be able to establish standards for the Internet. The prospect of thousands of teenage boys downloading Naked Asian Girls photos or teenage girls flirting on an alt.sex newsgroup is seen as a real threat to our rapidly eroding American culture. By holding providers responsible, even if they have no knowledge of who is communicating with whom, or what they are transmitting to each other, it will provide the chilling effect that proponents hope will end pornography on the Internet.

They have already been proven right in this tactic. Responding to potential prosecution from the German government, Compuserve blocked access to two hundred so-called sex sites on the Web. But less than a week later, Compuserve restored access, thanks to protests from civil libertarians and competition from other providers who did not bow so quickly to the threats from a foreign government aimed at the American free speech tradition. Lost in all this was the ultimate irony: Germany is among the most pornography-ridden countries in the world. With TV game shows where contestants undress while the live audience ridicules them, the sex shops and blue movie houses within the confines of Frankfurt Airport, Germany has some nerve telling an American company it is indecent. But Compuserve caved in a heartbeat; early evidence of the power of Internet censors.

The issue, of course, is not protecting pornography. It is protecting the Internet, the freedom it represents, and indeed the First Amendment. The Internet is not a broadcasting medium. It is a telephone, on a grand and dazzling scale. To censor the Net is to censor conversations, ideas, communications among scholars and ordinary folks. To censor insidiously, by punishing the people who lay the "wires," is worse because it scares people into cheating. That is exactly what the government would be doing by punishing providers and users. Yes, even libraries are providers and users. And so are vendors.

Entrepreneurs are already worried, and the proposed restrictions are restricting not just pornography but the very future of the Internet as a platform for commerce and ideas. Quoting from an interview in The New York Times, Katherine Fulton of the Institute for Alternative Journalism said: "This proposal (to punish providers for indecent content) will have more than a chilling effect. It may well mean a cold death for everyone (who is creating content) except very rich and very cautious media companies." Scott Kemer, president of MCI/New Corp Internet Ventures (a very rich company) said, "... such a law would significantly diminish what we could offer — it would be a very small version, sanitized for the lowest common denominator audience." Donna Hoffman, a Vanderbilt business professor, stated "... this legislation scares them (the new, small company Internet entrepreneurs). They are saying, 'I could go to jail if someone thinks (my content) is indecent, and I don't even know what words I'm allowed to use'."

Warnings like these from respected professors, journalists and large company presidents should be heeded. Does anyone really think that MCI is objecting to this legislation because they want to create content that will be pornographic? Let's remember that WWW stands for World Wide Web. World is the operative word here. Instead of trying to restrict the Internet, our government should be protecting us, and our freedoms, from German prosecutors, or Iranian judges, or Chinese censors, or Jesse Helms. If we allow users and providers to be punished by our own government for making it possible for any of us to say anything we want, what happens when a foreign government, with no value system about free speech, decides to go after a provider? We can't condemn a corporation for being cautious with its content

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Colleagues Remembered...

Column Editor: Jack G. Montgomery, Technical Services Librarian, Law Library, University of Missouri-Columbia

Profiles Encouraged:

Karen Schmidt

Born when and where: I was born on December 10, 1951, 100 years to the day after Melville Dewey. This scares me, somewhat. I was born in Niagara Falls, NY, and grew up in southeastern Ohio in a small "hill-billy" community.

Current residence: I live in the prairies of central Illinois.

Education: I received my BA and MLS from Indiana University and my PhD from University of Illinois.

Family: One husband, one son, and (at last count) 4 stray cats.

Most recent goal: I took a run for the Illinois state house - a lone Democrat running in a heavily Republican district. My 100 days of campaigning were exhausting, exhilarating, and a lot more fun than I imagined. Maybe Schmidt in '98 will be a future goal, too.

Favorite pastime/hobbies: Politics and religion, the two things my mama told me never to discuss in polite society.

Literary tastes: I will read anything: cereal boxes, calendars, ingredients. But I prefer mysteries, women's diaries, and books of photography from a century ago.

Pet peeve: Republicans. No, not really, just sometimes. What drives me wild are people who are arrogant and quarrelsome as a life style. We all need to help one another get along and these folks just get in the way.

Single most irritating piece of advice: My mother is always saying, "It's a great life if you don't weaken." Actually, sometimes it's a pretty stinky life even if you don't weaken, it's not necessarily a great life if you're strong, and occasionally indulging in some weakness is good for your soul. In over 40 years, I have never understood this maxim.

Biggest surprise: How incredibly long it takes to grow up! It's always over the horizon. When I was little, I thought 18-year-olds were wise as Solomon. When I was 18, I figured everything would be clear by 30. In my 40s, I think maybe it will clear up at 60.

People would be surprised to know: 1 lift weights. Racquetball killed my knees, and weight-lifting is the best outlet I have for stress these days. I love to be in the weight room at 5:30 a.m. with Melissa Etheridge on the headphones and almost no one else around.

Behind my back, people say: She's too quiet. After some rough-and-tumble meeting, I am always amazed when people tell me how composed I was when the facts are that Hurricane Aaron just swept through my inards.

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creation if it feels vulnerable to the whims of every petty dictator or religious fanatic. But we will certainly be affected, and the Internet, with all its remarkable promise, will be diminished in actuality and potential.

All governments are worried about free and unconstrained communication among its citizenry. Besides protecting life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, government also has a great motivation to protect itself. The Internet belongs to the people. In the electronic age, the Net is our free press, our right to gather and petition, our freedom of association. It is the fin de siecle town meeting.

Those of us who are in the business or profession of making information available to as many people as possible have a special trust. Let's do what we can to keep the Internet free of fear.