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Study: Overzealous filters hinder research

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The internet-content filters most commonly used by schools block needed, legitimate content more often than not, according to a study by a university librarian. Her report was presented at the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) conference in Pittsburgh last week.

Better communication between technology staff and classroom teachers is the key to ensuring that school and library internet filters, installed as part of a federal effort to protect children from inappropriate online content, do not preclude students from accessing legitimate educational materials, the new study found.

Presented Oct. 8, the study chronicles the difficulties confronted by two educationally diverse groups of English students assigned to conduct term-paper research with filtered internet access in a high school media center.

Using the experiences of this school as a typical example, the study's author, Lynn Sutton, director of the Z. Smith Reynolds Library at Wake Forest University in North Carolina, finds that internet filters are apt to block legitimate educational content. Tech-savvy students, meanwhile, argue that administrators should have more faith in their judgment and ability to deal with inappropriate content, and they blame the school--not their teachers--for prohibiting them from conducting sound, unbiased research, the report said.

The U.S. Department of Education estimates that 90 percent of K-12 schools today employ some sort of web filtering technology in adherence with guidelines set forth as part of the Children's Internet Protection Act, the five-year-old law that requires libraries to install filters or surrender federal funding, including eRate discounts on telecommunications services and internet access.

But, based on her findings, filters overstep their bounds in many cases, Sutton says. And, whether teachers simply are too busy to follow up with technology staff to request access to legitimate sites, or--worse--technology staff aren't responsive enough to the needs of classroom teachers, too often educationally useful sites aren't removed from these filters' block lists, despite the ability of administrators to remove them at the local level.

"Even at risk of losing federal funds, school districts should carefully consider whether filtering is necessary--or necessary at all grade levels," Sutton wrote. "If the decision is made to filter, communication among students, teachers, librarians, and technology administrators is critically important to minimize the negative effects of filtering."

Sutton, who conducted the study as part of a doctoral dissertation, wrote that students were "frustrated, annoyed, and angry" when blocked by internet filters in their schools, especially when attempting to access content sought in relation to classroom assignments.

As part of the study, Sutton interviewed two distinctly diverse classes of English students: an advanced rhetoric class and a basic composition class. Both had been assigned to conduct term-paper research using internet-connected computers in the school library.

Prohibited through a confidentiality agreement from revealing the name of the school she performed her observations in,

Sutton could say only that it was a large suburban institution in Michigan with more than 1,500 students.

In almost all instances, she said, students experienced both "underblocking" and "overblocking" of online content. Underblocking, explained Sutton, is when inappropriate content somehow sneaks past the school's web filter. Overblocking is when legitimate educational content is blocked because it is deemed inappropriate by the technology.

"The majority of students felt that the school's internet filter hindered their work in doing internet research for their papers," Sutton wrote in her report.

In interviews conducted during her stint with the advanced rhetoric class, Sutton said, 12 of 14 students complained that the filters presented "a hindrance to their research."

"Students were upset that they weren't being given enough credit for how to handle these types of things," added Sutton, who said she received a similar response from students in the lower-level composition course.

In many cases, she said, students told her that much of the content they're prohibited from viewing in school they encounter in their daily lives, either at home or elsewhere. What's more, she found, when students can't access the information they need, many of them are savvy enough to get around the protections.

"Students in the study were adept at getting around the filters," she pointed out.

When confronted with a blocked web site, she said, students confessed to a number of tactics for getting to the content anyway. Depending on the technology, she said, students simply switched web browsers, changed their browser settings--or even waited until they got home to conduct their research.

"They would say, 'Why am I even doing this here?'" said Sutton. For students who have computers at home, she explained, sometimes it's just easier to find what they need online when the filters aren't an impediment to what they perceive as their academic freedom.

For students who don't have online access from home--or some other venue outside of school--the problem is more severe, she said.

"When you have a digital divide, some kids only have filtered access from school on a wide variety of issues"--from abortion, to sex education, to world history, Sutton explained, citing a common criticism of internet filtering. "The real problem," she added, "is that the school is only letting through one view of society that the school deems appropriate for children to see. And that ... is discrimination."

But that doesn't mean filters are useless, she said.

On the contrary, Sutton said, students in the basic composition course, while annoyed with the filters, also agreed they were necessary. In fact, eight of 13 students told her that despite the hindrance presented by web filters, the technology itself was needed to protect schools from the liabilities associated with allowing students to view inappropriate content, including online pornography and other lewd materials, while at school.

Instead, the problem seems to lie in how the technology is administered and applied.

It's a problem she attributes mainly to a lack of communication between administrators and busy classroom teachers, many of whom, she said, don't take enough time to understand how the filters work. In many cases, she said, teachers simply accept the technology as an inconvenience and don't actively work to solve the problem, which can be done to some degree merely by adjusting the filter settings.

"There was a significant disconnect between the district's technology administrators and the classroom, which resulted in an undercurrent of frustration and hopelessness at effecting change," Sutton wrote in her report.

During interviews with school technology staff, Sutton said, it became clear that a major problem with school-installed web filters isn't the technology itself, which can be adjusted, but rather that the school technology director often is not informed of the challenges faced in the classroom.

Too often, "the technology director just installs the filter," she said. "He isn't aware of the problems people are having. And no one ever tells him."

Aside from working with technology staff to adjust the filter settings so more relevant content gets through, Sutton

suggested that teachers and administrators also poll their students for advice.

Students, she noted, are full of ideas. The students she interviewed for her report suggested that administrators and teachers work together to devise different filter settings for different age groups of students; that they use a filter for a trial period before purchasing it to make sure that it fits the needs of the school; that they consider installing pop-up blockers as an alternative to constrictive filtering devices; and that administrators consider giving teachers and librarians more control over the filters, perhaps allowing them to turn the devices on and off based on the nature of the project and the level of supervision afforded each individual student.

In the end, Sutton said, it's up to school leaders to decide "whether the filter is creating more harm than good."

Links:

American Association of School Librarians
<http://www.ala.org/ala/aasl/aaslindex.htm>

American Library Association
<http://www.ala.org>

Z. Smith Reynolds Library
<http://www.wfu.edu/Library/>

U.S. Department of Education
<http://www.ed.gov>

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