

ACCESS AND CONTROL OF SEXUALLY EXPLICIT MATERIAL AVAILABLE VIA THE INTERNET IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES

INTRODUCTION

The 1997/98 Grand Jury decided to study the Internet computer access in Ventura County public libraries. The Internet, World Wide Web and information superhighway are part of the vocabulary used to describe the most innovative and exciting learning tool of this century. Unfortunately the same advances in computer technology that enable children to reach out to new sources of knowledge and cultural experiences also leave them unwittingly vulnerable to exploitation and harm by pedophiles and other sexual predators.

INQUIRY

A subcommittee made visits to various city, county and community libraries. Meetings were held with district librarians, regional librarians and a community relations manager. Brochures were obtained such as; "Internet Use - policy and guidelines" and "the Parent's Guide to Cyberspace." The subcommittee studied the "Internet Access and Use Policy" for the County of Ventura, Information Systems Department. "Rules of the Road" and "Terms of Service" were downloaded using America On Line.

FINDINGS

Computers for public use, including Internet use, are located in highly visible areas of the libraries. Employees of the library can easily monitor the purpose for which the computer is being used. There is no privacy as would be if the computers were in a closed area, which limits use to the intended purpose of research and education. Passwords and/or time limits are in force and controlled by library personnel. Some libraries require a signed parental consent form for young people to use the Internet. In one library the following sentence was found to be taped on the front of the computer, "Please do not display graphics that are not appropriate in a public setting." This justifies an employee approaching a person who is breaking this rule. Noncompliance is grounds for requiring a person to forfeit his/her computer time.

Library policies and procedures for Internet use are published and in place.

New policies are written as needed to conform to usage of new technology by the general public. Some libraries have graphic computer capabilities and some do not.

Arrangements with on-line service providers and commercial software are available to block access to sexually-oriented Internet sites.

CONCLUSIONS

Librarians are aware of the undesirable aspect of young library patrons accessing sexually explicit and inappropriate material but they do what they can to prevent the misuse of public computers.

Parents are involved by having to sign permission slips. Books and brochures are available at the libraries to educate and guide parents in the matter of Internet use which is currently widely used at home and school as well as in public libraries.

Blocking programs have limited value in public libraries as they are restrictive and could be challenged in court; however, some capabilities are not necessary for research, such as chat rooms and E-mail, where pedophiles could be lurking to prey on children. Libraries have different philosophies as to blocking any capability, for instance, some block chat rooms and some do not.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Public libraries should:

- Continue to be aware of the latest technology and monitor Internet use so this research capability is appropriately used.
- Study the commercial software available to block access to sexually-oriented Internet and on-line bulletin boards, chat rooms and web sites.
- Be reminded by the fact the public libraries are not obligated to offer access to the entire Internet any more than they have to carry every book and magazine in existence.

RESPONSE REQUIRED

None.