

Slipping Down the Slope: A Memoir

Melora Ranney Norman, Chair, IFRT

It was 1995. I was 7 months pregnant, new to Maine, and attending my first state Intellectual Freedom Committee meeting.

The chair announced to the three of us that she was done--with her chairmanship and with the profession. Who wants the boxes of stuff? I took them.

Shortly after that, the Maine School and Library Network was born, putting every little school and library in every little village in our rural state on the Internet.

Almost immediately, they talked about filters. I got into a debate with the head of systems at the University of Maine, who forwarded me some newsgroups. "See how tacky these things are? There's no good reason to let people get access to these. That's all I want to block. It's a service we should provide to schools."

Suddenly, all I could see was how easy it would be to flip a switch and censor the whole network.

So, I put together a panel for the next Maine Libraries Conference. My systems head joined several others: a school librarian, who said she was understaffed and couldn't supervise all the kids; a prominent library professor and First Amendment advocate who said why the CDA was unconstitutional; and a young journalist who asked, "If you could have a whole world of information and ideas that you could put on your shelf, why wouldn't you?"

The systems head made violin-playing gestures indicating his lack of sympathy with this view. He was the first of several technical folks I've met who just can't understand why librarians or journalists wouldn't use technology to block whatever isn't worth seeing.

Every year, we offered programs at our conference: young people from Peacefire and The Censorware project, who talked about how blocking software didn't work and how the religious right targets big companies with smear campaigns, designed to make censorship so prevalent that nobody dares question it; Judith Krug from ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom; Chris Hansen from the ACLU; a panel of teens who had never experienced Internet censorship at school and who looked with bewilderment at librarians who asked whether they ran into disturbing material often. After misunderstanding the euphemisms for several minutes, they finally said "Oh, that--maybe once a year? We know what we're doing. We don't run into stuff we don't want, and that doesn't interest us."

There is no question that giving anybody with a computer the ability to publish worldwide results in plenty of low-quality material. However, what's worse: having

some people annoyed or disgusted--or having some people denied access to useful information?

For me, as a librarian, the answer has always been clear. Continued experiences confirmed my impression: a class full of high school students I volunteered with for a day, blocked from all of the biography sites they needed to complete an assignment. The library of a colleague whose shared Internet connectivity blocked everything the school blocked, including jokes, alcohol, firearms, chat, email, all of Geocities . . . every filter I tested for fifteen minutes massively overblocked and underblocked.

"We just" became the rallying call of many from whom I heard: "We just don't want people getting into nasty pop-ups by mistake." "We just want to do what we've always done--not select nasty sexual material." "We just want to protect kids in schools--filters don't belong in public libraries." And for every "we just," there were 1,000 other things that somebody else "just" wants to filter – until finally here we are, mandated to follow a program of national library censorship for the first time.

Why? I ponder questions like this when I go to places like our Portland Museum of Art, nodding with sympathy as I read of an artist who got so sick of American attitudes toward naked bodies that he finally moved to Paris to paint nudes in peace.

Speaking of art, I had a call a few years back from a frustrated high school student, a would-be artist, who wanted to know what I could do to help: his art teacher wouldn't let him use nude models.

My answer? Sorry.