

## **Don't Filter – Select! : First Suggestions Toward a “Technological Solution”**

By Stephen Cochran

### ***Introduction***

The author has played with the idea presented in this article for over five years, wondering if anyone else out there is thinking in the same direction. Lurking – and participating to a degree – in discussion lists dealing with cataloging, intellectual freedom, and filtering issues, he hasn't seen the idea explored – or mentioned – in the way in which it is conceived. The editorial by Leonard Kniffel in the October, 1999 *American Libraries* – particularly the sentence that states “...while we argue that filters are not effective, we do nothing to develop a technological solution” – prompted the article's completion, and suggested its title. The author is neither a programmer nor a computer whiz, and cannot therefore assert with certainty that the concepts discussed here can be implemented. However, he feels intuitively that they ought to be, for the sake of both library professionals and the public they serve.

It must be noted at the outset that the usefulness of a selection tool that can be applied to the Internet's vast resources will be different for large academic libraries striving to collect comprehensively in all areas than it will be for small school libraries where teachers and librarians are required to act *in loco parentis*. It is hoped that this piece will generate fruitful discussion, and will allow librarians to reclaim the function of selection from those who would use the innocuous label of “filter” to censor access for everyone.

### ***The Issue***

It seems in library-land these days, a person can't open a professional journal or magazine without reading articles or news briefs about the content of the World Wide Web, discussion about “protecting our children,” Internet filtering devices, and related issues. We read about court cases, going all the way to the Supreme Court, dealing with whether or not the Internet is a public forum and thus deserving of First Amendment protection. We hear about library Boards at odds with library Directors about whether to filter or not to filter. We see, in the long CIPA and COPA legislative struggles, an ill-informed move by the federal government to strong-arm libraries into using Internet filtering software if they wish to receive or retain federal E-rate telecommunications discounts. We witness local initiatives like the one in Holland, Michigan, where libraries would be required to filter or lose local funding.<sup>1</sup>

Entirely absent from this discussion is any perspective that would allow librarians to do with Online resources what they have traditionally done with every other form of print and non-print material; that is, selection.

Why, given the digital tools and standards either developed or under development, has nothing been made to facilitate the *selection* of web resources for inclusion in the library? Even more damning, why have librarians not vigorously pursued the development of tools which would allow

them to select web sites to include in their collection?

Assume shelf space, cataloging resources, and materials for shelf preparation are not an obstacle in your library. If someone gives you 500,000 new books, absolutely free, would you put each and every one of them on the shelf without a glance at your collection development policy?

If you answered “yes,” it can be reasonably argued that you aren’t doing the basic job of a librarian: to select, organize, and disseminate information, because you’re ignoring the selection function.

If you answered “no,” then perhaps you see why, philosophically, the notion that librarians have no selection obligations when it comes to web-based resources is objectionable.

### ***Philosophy of Selection:***

“Selection refers to the decision to retain as well as to add to the collection. It is based upon awareness of the diverse needs and interests of the individuals in [the] community, balanced against evaluation of material and knowledge of the collection’s strengths and weaknesses. The selection process is also shaped by ...the accessibility of alternative information sources.”<sup>2</sup>

Given this definition of selection, it can be safely asserted that most libraries don’t “select” web-based resources. But why not? Surely, many libraries have decided to “deselect” certain print resources because of the facile availability of web-based “alternative information sources.”<sup>3</sup> How is the library patron enabled to find the new, web-based replacement for the print resource if the web-based resource isn’t cataloged, but instead merely “bookmarked” at the library’s public access Internet terminal or linked via the library’s web site?

Ronald Hagler, on the very first page of his book *The Bibliographic Record and Information Technology*, says:

That different information storage and retrieval techniques have become associated with different formats, subjects, and information-service agencies is no surprise since each has its own history. That this is neither theoretically ideal nor even efficient is and should continue to be a concern of librarians, the scope of whose professional activity is both information in its broadest sense and user requests at their most specific.<sup>4</sup>

Part of what Hagler is saying is that it isn’t “ideal” or “efficient” for librarians to treat print resources one way and electronic resources another. It opens libraries up to charges of inconsistency in the way materials are provided. It gives the public the impression that librarians are biased in favor of one type of material over another. This can also create administrative and operational headaches.

### ***What Is “Filtering” Really?***

The fact of the matter is that the public *likes* selection. If the Internet filtering debate should teach us anything, it's that library users want librarians to exercise *some* sort of control over the availability of electronic resources. The *way* in which this control is exercised is what needs to concern librarians professionally.

This brings us to the question: What is "filtering," really? Filtering is – operationally as well as philosophically – much more akin to censorship than it is to selection.

In an article that reached its 50<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2003, but which bears examination by every collection development librarian because of the timelessness of its message, Lester Asheim examines standards for selection and for censorship (standards like the intent of the author, literary merit, and presumed effect upon the reader) and concludes that "if...the standards employed as touchstones by the librarians are essentially the same as those used by the censor, the distinction between selection and censorship will have to be found in the *way* the standards are applied.."<sup>5</sup>

He goes on to point out such distinctions:

The major characteristic which makes for the all-important difference seems to me to be this: that the selector's approach is positive, while that of the censor is negative. This is more than a verbal quibble; it transforms the entire act and the steps included in it. For the selector, the important thing is to find reason to keep the book... For the censor, on the other hand, the important thing is to find reasons to reject the book... The positive selector asks what the reaction of a rational intelligent adult would be to the content of the work; the censor fears for the results on the weak, the warped, and the irrational.

...The negative approach is that it leads to the use of isolated parts rather than the complete whole upon which to base a judgment...In other words, four letters have outweighed five hundred pages.

The negative orientation, which seeks reasons to ban rather than to preserve, also leads to the judgment of books by external rather than internal criteria... what kind of husband and father is the author; of what nation is he a citizen; what are his political affiliations;...what is his color, his race, his religion?...

The selector, on the other hand, judges by internal values...it is the content of the book that is weighed, not the table manners of the publisher or the sartorial orthodoxy of the author...

Finally, the selector begins, ideally with a presumption in favor of liberty of thought; the censor does not.<sup>6</sup>

In the above passages, replace the word "book" with "web page," and the word "censor" with the word "filter," and it will become clear that a filter is neither more nor less than an electronic

ensor and, as such, deserves no place whatsoever in the librarian's toolbox.

Filtering, like censorship, is reactive and exclusive, having as its objective the exclusion from the collection those materials with which its proponents disagree. These materials are Internet resources in the case of filtering, everything else in the case of censorship.

Selection, on the other hand, is proactive and inclusive, having as an objective the inclusion in the collection of all of those materials which patrons want or may find useful. Now, how do we apply the philosophy and standards of selection to web-based resources?

In the world of print and audiovisual resources, an item not held by the library simply isn't available for perusal without some sort of intermediation by a librarian, such as filling out a request for purchase, or an inter-library loan request. Imagine a similar situation pertaining to online resources. Suppose, for instance, a Java script applet that could be invoked by your library's web browser to automatically check your OPAC to see if a MARC record existed for whatever URL was being sought. If such a record was found, then the browser would download the web site.

However, if no such MARC record was found, a dialog box would appear in front of the web browser window which said something like: "the item you have chosen is not currently held by this library; would you like to request that the library add this item to its collection?", allowing the patron to request the addition of the web site in the same way patrons request other library materials, but leaving the browser window where it was.

Such a piece of software would eliminate the need for a filtering device, and may even meet the CIPA-required definition of a "technology protection measure". The library would once again be enabled to assume full responsibility for its entire—virtual and actual—collection. The library catalog would once again be given primacy as the place from which to begin a search for information, and the same controlled vocabulary—e.g. name and subject authority files—applied to actual materials would be applied to virtual materials as well. Patrons would *still* have to worry about their children finding inappropriate content on the web, but no more than they worry now about their children finding inappropriate content in books and magazines. Rather than using the broadax that current filtering technologies represent to deal with such "inappropriate" web content, web sites considered "inappropriate" could be challenged by library patrons as being incompatible with a particular institution's collection development objectives in the same way that as other types of materials are challenged currently.

### ***How do we facilitate selection of web-based resources?***

In the MARC bibliographic and holdings records for electronic resources, the 856 field allows for the storage and display of information required to locate and retrieve an electronic item. Further, most ILS vendors have products that allow for hot links from the 856 field, allowing patrons using a web-based catalog to click on a URL displayed in a bibliographic record in order to jump directly to the web location of the resource. That's good, and saves the time of the user.

A Java script applet like the one mentioned would give library selectors a steady stream of electronic resources in which patrons are not only interested, but which they have *already tried* to access. Since this is not at all different from the patron who comes and requests a book that they have already tried, unsuccessfully, to locate in the catalog, it effectively “levels the playing field” between print and electronic resources, and ensures that *all* materials “held” in the catalog have been selected by those responsible for overall collection development.

There are certainly problems that this method will introduce, least among them the increased maintenance of cataloged URLs that would result. Patrons would initially be confronted by the dialog box nearly all of the time, and the “surfing” allowed by unrestricted access to the “uncataloged” Internet would be greatly constrained. Certain web sites used for communication (e.g. Hotmail.com) or commercial (e.g. ebay.com) purposes rather than for informational purposes would have to be accommodated by this system somehow. There are doubtless more problem areas, that the critical reader will have no trouble articulating.

None of the problems envisioned thus far are insurmountable. The development of a high quality, locally relevant collection of electronic resources will – like the development of any good collection – take time. The appearance of the dialog box would generate many “requests for acquisition” of sites that users found important and useful. Perhaps vendors could develop “opening day collections” of electronic resources tailored for specific niches (for example, elementary students, undergraduates, retirees, reference collections). User surveys could easily gather information on the general and specific types of electronic resources in greatest local demand. OCLC’s Cooperative Online Resource Catalog (CORC), a three-year research project to catalog and provide Pathfinders for web-based information resources represented a significant step towards the development of a sizable opening day electronic resource collection. Its integration into Connexion, a web-based cataloging tool for print, non-print, and electronic resources, has allowed the cooperative cataloging for which OCLC is renowned to be expanded to include an ever-growing number of web-resident electronic resources.<sup>7</sup>

The point is that such a piece of software would allow librarians to do what we do best: develop strong and useful collections to serve a population with localized needs and wants, to select library materials in all formats to strengthen those collections, and to allow for consistency in library technical services workflow. Moreover, all of this would be done with the consistent application and interpretation of established collection development policies, while respecting and conforming to the Library Bill of Rights.

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Library Hotline. V. XXVIII, N. 2, p. 1; N. 4, pp. 1,4; N 11 p.1; N. 18 pp. 2, 5; N. 22 p. 1; and N. 25 p.6 for an idea of the nature and intensity of this discussion in only one (small) professional serial.

<sup>2</sup> Futas, Elizabeth, Collection Development Policies and Procedures, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. , Phoenix: Oryx Press, 1995, p. 158.

<sup>3</sup> In November 2000, I posted the following question to the Indiana Cooperative Library Services

Authority (INCOLSA) Listserv:

Have any libraries out there decided to weed certain print resources due to the increasing availability of web-based resources? Taken to the next step, have any libraries out there re-written their collection development policies to prefer CD-ROM or Online version of publications over print versions?

Of the eleven libraries that replied, all of them had made decisions to remove materials based upon the availability of online equivalents. While none had actually rewritten collection development policies to underpin their collection development procedures, one indicated that it was “a great question and one we are wrestling with,” and one indicated that a conscious decision was made “not to weed print titles” because “if we decide not to renew, or can’t renew... [subscriptions to the online resource], then we would not have the product available at all.”

<sup>4</sup> Hagler, Ronald, The Bibliographic Record and Information Technology, Second ed., ALA/CLA, 1991, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Asheim, Lester, “Not Censorship But Selection,” *Wilson Library Bulletin*, September, 1953, pp. 63-67.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p. 66 *passim*.

<sup>7</sup> When checked on July 28<sup>th</sup>, 2004 OCLC’s WebCat listed catalog records for more than 457,000 unique domains.