Filters Get Clogged:
Legal and Technical Problems for Internet Filtering (2)

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In the first of these two short articles, I described how the American Library Association is planning to fight the new Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA) and the Neighborhood Internet Protection Act (NIPA) which will take effect in April 2001 and put pressure on libraries to install filtering software.   The second item in the story was that Hotmail blocked access to the Peacefire organization's Web site using misleading messages pretending that the outbound mail had bounced (when in fact it had been discarded by Hotmail).

So how are these two items connected?

One strand is that Peacefire happens to make freeware to disable censorware.   The organization also has informal quality assurance studies on the inability of censorware to avoid false positives; i.e., all of the censorware products they study block access to many sites using false explanations for the blockage.   See < http://www.peacefire.org/amnesty-intercepted/ > for a full report on the sites blocked; they include Amnesty International Israel, Amnesty International at New York University, Canadian Labour Congress, Algeria Watch, American Kurdish Information Network, Strategic Pastoral Action Network, International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission, Human Rights for Workers, Peace Magazine, The International Conference Combating Child Pornography on the Internet, The International Coptic Congress and many others involved in human rights and progressive causes.   So much for freedom of reading for the youth of America; never mind the First Amendment prohibiting the government from pre-emptive interdiction of political speech.   In addition, the Peacefire report points out that some censorware products are forthright in explaining that they have blocked access; however, others simply silently interdict the connection, leaving the browser to put up a generic message indicating (falsely) that the target site was not reponding.   In addition, Peacefire presents convincing evidence that some censorware companies are being untruthful in claiming that a human being examines every page that is added to the Index Paginorum Prohibitorum*.   If the Web page for Dagistan, which is devoted to civil rights for untouchables in India, was put on such a list by a human being, then the human being should be put on the Index Personarum Stupiditarum.

The second strand is that both of these stories involve the abdication of human communications in favor of an easy way out: automatic filtering.   Both the Hotmail decision to lie to its customers and the thinking behind the CIPA express contempt for human responsibility; they discount the value of respectful, honest interpersonal and professional relationships in favor of sloughing responsibility onto automated processes.

In a recent interview I was asked about why I think that adult supervision and teenaged monitors are preferable to blocking software in schools and libraries.   I answered, "A program cannot teach values; a thoughtful human being with sensitivity can talk to a child and explain the implications of different kinds of misuse. An adult or even an intelligent older student serving as a monitor or prefect can provide a role model for kids. A computer program can at worst make a kid even more determined to overcome the barriers it rigidly imposes without explanation."

* [Note for pedantic readers (I know you're out there): the Index Librorum Prohibitorum was a list of books forbidden to Catholics that the Vatican promulgated until 1948.   The basis for inclusion in

the Index was that the books might challenge readers' acceptance of Church dogma. Latinists are requested to forgive my rusty Latin (my five years of Latin studies ended in 1965): I can't remember the ending for the female genitive plural.][And I wonder if THAT will get this column put on the censorware list?]

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