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Section 730

Internet Censorship in Schools

Internet usage in the classroom can be beneficial in countless ways, whether it is by watching a YouTube video about the Holocaust, Skype conferencing with a scientist, communicating with peers across the world via Facebook, or keeping up with current events by following a credible news network on Twitter. In many schools throughout America, however, students are unable to partake in these educational opportunities on the internet. Censorship of the internet in schools has been common practice since 2000, when The Children's Internet Protection Act was passed by congress (Federal Communications Commission). But how much censorship is too much? Do children really need to be protected from the internet? And if they do, to what extent?

The Children's Internet Protection Act, also known as CIPA, requires schools and libraries to "...block or filter Internet access to pictures that are: (a) obscene; (b) child pornography; or (c) harmful to minors (for computers that are accessed by minors) (Federal Communications Commission). They also must monitor the online activity of children and teach them how to behave appropriately on the Internet (Federal Communications Commission). In Finsness's (2008) research, she found that schools also tend to block social media sites, non-educational games, personal blogs, and other sites that administrators do not see educational value in (p. 99-100). Some educators see these filters as a shield that protects students. "Some school leaders and education

advocates have argued that the Internet can be a distraction in the classroom, and that blocking social media is also a way to protect students from bullying and harassment at school” (Hu, 2011).

Although internet filters cause students to sometimes run into websites that they are not able to view, most administrators from Finsness’s study did not believe that the inability of students to access these websites affected their long term education. Of the many administrators interviewed, “only two administrators expressed concern that if students continually encounter blocked Internet sites in their pursuit of learning, they may become less engaged in school” (Finsness, 2008, p.90-91). The majority of educators did not believe internet censorship hindered the students ability to learn or had long term consequences (Finsness, 2008, p. 91). Although most educators did not see long term consequences, there are cons associated with internet censorship in schools.

Phil Goerner, a librarian at Silver Creek High School, organized a debate on internet censorship on Banned Websites Awareness Day (Hu, 2011). He wanted to remind students that “that censorship takes away a person’s voice or, in this case, online privileges” (Hu, 2011). Goerner is not the only one who feels that students are being held back from expressing themselves by internet filtering. “New Trier High School stopped blocking many sites this year after teachers voiced concerns that the filtering had grown oppressive” (Hu, 2011). Internet filters are especially oppressive to particular minority groups. “Many filtering companies- private entities with no obligation to disclose how and why they blacklist particular sites-set their products to default

blocking of LGBT sites, including those featuring political issues, educational content, and support groups for LGBT youth” (Maycock, 2011, p. 8). This is a problem because the filters discriminate against particular groups of people. The American Library Association is against internet filtering because they believe it blocks “constitutionally protected speech” (Maycock, 2011, p. 7) and “facilitates new ways of violating privacy... and has created intellectual freedom issues in schools and library media centers” (Maycock, 2011, p. 8).

Many agree that internet filtering in schools is unconstitutional and there has been much controversy surrounding CIPA. “The restrictions CIPA places on access to online information may ultimately exacerbate the digital divide, the gap between people who have access to and use the Internet and those who do not” (Jaeger, 2004, p. 1136). For students who do not have internet access at home, school might be the only place they can go online. With heavy internet censorship at school that blocks entire categories of websites, these children will not be able to explore as much of the internet as students who can go online at home. This not only increases the digital divide, but also increases the achievement gap which exists between students of higher and lower socioeconomic classes. The broad language in which the law is written in also makes it controversial. “If restrictions on free speech are so broad that the law creates restrictions both on the speech it is intended to regulate and on other forms of speech, then courts will consider altering the law on grounds of overbreadth” (Jaeger, 2004, p.1137) The oppressive quality that strong internet filtering has on students is not its only downfall.

Heavy internet censorship makes it difficult for students to conduct research since many large categories of information are often blocked. Librarian Judy Gressel believes this to be true and said that “students could not read about, say, military weapons for a history paper” (Hu, 2011). Finsness’s study also found that having many websites blocked makes research difficult. One administrator explained that they had to unblock some hate group websites so that students could complete a project that compared Nazis to modern day hate groups (Finsness, 2008, p. 94). It becomes frustrating when students and teachers continuously run into blocked websites when looking for information about particular topics.

Schools filter their internet to attempt to keep students from harmful material or material that is not educational. But how necessary are filters if students know ways to get around them? Administrators from Finsness’s study admitted that filters are not perfect and many students are able to circumvent them, so teachers must carefully monitor students while they are online (Finsness, 2011, p. 89). There will always be students who try to break the rules, and if they are determined enough they will eventually be successful. Once these students find out how to access blocked sites, the filters become useless.

Many schools block more websites than the Children’s Internet Protection Act requires. Finsness (2011) found that schools not only ban what is required, but also other categories that the districts choose, sites that they find non-educational, and sites with certain formats in attempt to control bandwidth (p. 98). This causes frustration to school faculty and students. Most teacher frustration stemmed from their inability to

access certain formats, such as blogs and streaming video, rather than individual web sites (Finsness, 2008, p. 92). Some of the most educational websites often include blogs or video because these are good resources to help students learn. Blocking websites beyond what CIPA requires denies students access to sites that could be very beneficial to them.

I believe that there needs to be some internet filtering in schools, but not to the extent that many districts have chosen to filter. I am in favor of CIPA because I believe that schools should do their best to protect children from viewing pornographic or harmful material. Although it is impossible to shield kids from all of the truly harmful content on the internet, it is important for schools to block these websites to show students that they do not support these types of sites. However, I do not think internet censorship in schools should go beyond what CIPA requires. In the case of internet filtering, the cons outweigh the pros.

Students will be exposed to many different types of ideas, people, and ways of thinking as they grow up, whether it is through people they meet, on television, or on the internet. Some things that they are exposed to may be counterproductive to what educators see as important, but students must make their own decisions about what is important to them as they mature. Blocking particular websites is not going to stop students from being exposed to the content that is being blocked. If they cannot access certain information on the internet at school, they will find another way to retrieve it. Since internet censorship at school is only a temporary roadblock for kids, schools should educate students on how to make good decisions on the internet and monitor

them while they are online. This is a more practical approach to keeping students safe on the internet. The internet is a great tool with endless learning opportunities. Students should be able to explore it as freely as they can without exposing them to anything that is truly inappropriate or harmful.

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