Internet Censorship Essay, Research Paper

Internet Censorship

Does censorship violate the first amendment? This is one of the largest questions in Congress at the moment: whether or not to require blocking software in schools and libraries that receive government funding, cutting their funds if they do not. By law, all printed materials are protected from censorship due to freedom of speech and freedom of the press, but does this include the Internet? Yes, it does and, therefore, blocking software companies, such as Solid Oak (makers of CYBERsitter) and N2H2 (makers of BESS), have been abusing their power and should not be used to control Internet access.

Keyword blocking filters incoming html documents and web sites for certain key words that these companies have decided are not acceptable for minors. This does not allow access to those documents and sites that contain these words. This method prevents access to such sites as the Breast Cancer Legislation and The Vatican. In a study of average error rates due to keyword blocking done by Peacefire.org, the conditions of the study were as follows:

Using “zone files” from Network Solutions (which list all .com domains in existence), we obtained a list of the first 1,000 active .com domains on the Internet as of June 14, 2000. We tested this list of 1,000 domains using five popular blocking programs: Cyber Patrol, SurfWatch, Bess, AOL Parental Controls, and SafeServer, to see how many sites each program blocked as “pornography”, and of those sites, how many were actually pornographic (Error).

In this study, Surf Watch came out with one of the highest error rates, with 42 of 51 sites tested blocked (Error). Another problem with keyword blocking is a human worker does not review the website in order to rule it obscene or not. Our Review Team carefully analyses and catalogs in accordance with the Integrity Online Filtering Philosophy (Integrity). This is obviously a lie, because sites such as the Breast Form FAQ and Breast Cancer Legislation are blocked. Programs such as MudCrawler are used to search the web for keywords and place any offending site s address on the software s blacklist. These keywords and affected sites are usually not reviewed by a human being first, resulting in errors (BESS). This kind of mistake can clearly be avoided. Automatic keyword blocking is not a good way to filter the Internet, because far too many web pages that are not obscene in any way are blocked and placed on the hard-coded list.

Software companies are intentionally blocking many sites that are not overly violent or pornographic. For example, Cyber Patrol blocked the Ontario Center for Religious Tolerance and the Envirolink Animal Rights page due to the manufacturer deeming the description of animal testing in laboratories unsuitable for young children. Another example is the fact that BESS, another censorware company, blocks the Safer Sex Page, the anti-racists Hate Watch as well as the Marijuana Policy Project, a web site that advocates the use of medical marijuana. The company X-Stop blocks the AIDS Quilt and the official page of the Quakers (FAQ). The reason for blocking some of these sites is unknown as there is no offensive material on the web page at all.

Blocking software companies are severely abusing their power of censorship and forcing their conservative view on their customers. Many filtering companies discriminate against gay, lesbian and non-mainstream religions. Brian Milburn, the CEO of Solid Oak Software Inc., has censored access to nearly all Wiccan and Pagan sites and added witch , pagan , and the like to the list of blocked words as well as words usually connected with minority religions such as Jehovah s Witnesses , Hare Krishna , and Brethren . Many non-mainstream religions are not accessible at many schools and libraries across the United States. CYBERsitter also blocks all gay and lesbian sites that center on gay rights and AIDS awareness (Anti-Wiccan). Censorware companies also block their critics or send them an emailbomb. TIME Magazine was put on the CYBERsitter blacklist due to an article, The CYBERsitter Diaper Change , which criticizes CYBERsitter s blocking philosophy (Out). A lady by the name of Sarah Salls received an emailbomb from Solid Oak and her web site, Thewitchs.com, and many other Wiccan and Pagan were blocked:

This blocking came about as a result of an e-mail that I had written criticizing Solid Oak Software for blocking The National Organization for Women’s website and ALL homosexual related sites including sites focused on gay rights and AIDS awareness. As a result of that letter, I was e-mail bombed by the software company and had my own two domains, thepagans.com and thewitches.com blocked. The company further made a public statement dismissing my concerns as irrelevant due to the fact that I “run a website promoting Witchcraft and Pagan activities.” Two days after blocking my domains, the above Wiccan/Pagan related keywords were added, effectively blocking or censoring ALL Wiccan/Pagan websites on the web from customers using CYBERsitter (Emailbombed).

Wired News wrote, She says her account received more than 800 emails from support@solidoak.com, quoting her letter with the subject line re: your crap and a message Do not send us any more e-mail! (Emailbombed). This is simply uncalled for. TIME magazine wrote about the gay and lesbian access online:

Such programs also give parents near-complete control over what their children can and can’t read. Traditionally, kids have been able to browse the stacks of a library away from parental supervision. But when the library is online, access can be completely controlled by censorware. Pity the closeted gay son of homophobic parents, prevented by CYBERsitter from accessing soc.support.youth.lesbian-gay-bi (Change).

Encrypted blacklists prevent parents and librarians from seeing what sites are being blocked. TIME Magazine reporter, Declan McCullagh, wrote:

I have one major objection to all of the software filters currently on the market: Consumers have no way of knowing what’s being blocked. Without knowing what’s on the filter list, parents can’t know what Junior will or won’t be seeing. When reporters who try to reveal that information are faced with potential criminal investigations, the press’s ability to shed light on these companies is threatened (Change).

This abuse of power is unnecessary and should not be allowed.

Censorship can be like a hammer in the hand of a carpenter. It can be used to build up or tear down. Over 200 years ago, our forefathers left a country that was based on censorship. No one had the right to express his or her concerns against the English government or the church. On July 4, 1776, these same men established a government of and for the people with certain rights. It is interesting that this first right is the freedom of speech, the very same freedom that so many today are wanting to censor?

Is America going backwards to where its forefathers came from, or are the American people going to uphold the dreams of the founding fathers and the Constitution of the United States of America?

Let freedom ring!

Works Cited

Brown, Janelle. Write a Complaint, Get Emailbombed. Wired News 9 Feb. 1998 Wired News. 6 Dec. 2000.

Cockburn, Bruce. CYBERsitter is Anti-Wiccan, Anti-Pagan, Anti-Religious Freedom, Anti-Free Speech. CYBERsitter is Anti-Wiccan, Anti-Pagan, Anti-Religious Freedom, Anti-Free Speech. 6 Dec. 2000.

Haselton, Bennett. BESS, the Internet Retriever Examined Peacefire. 15 Nov. 2000

Haselton, Bennett. Blocking Software FAQ Peacefire. 15 Nov. 2000

Haselton, Bennett. Study of Average Error Rates for Censorware Programs. Peacefire. 15 Nov. 2000.

Integrity Online. Integrity Online Internet Filtering Philosophy and Methods. 7 Dec. 2000.

Lindsay, Greg. CYBERsitter Decides to Take a Time Out. TIME Digital 8 Aug. 1997, TIME Magazine. 28 Nov. 2000.

McCullagh, Declan. The CYBERsitter Diaper Change. TIME Digital 12 Jan. 1997, TIME Magazine. 28 Nov. 2000.