

Porn-Free Zone?

Citizens are speaking up about online pornography in public libraries—and filters are making them safer for our children.

By Frank York



According to a recent Yankelovich survey, 79 percent of the teens surveyed found porn on library or school computers.

Wendy Adamson is a self-described liberal Democrat and a reference librarian at the Minneapolis Public Library. She is also a battle-scarred veteran in the ongoing fight to keep libraries free of child molesters, child pornography and obscene material on library computers.

Adamson recently described the horrors that she and her fellow librarians endured after the Minneapolis Public Library installed 50 unfiltered computers. Adamson and her colleagues were upbeat about helping their patrons use the Internet.

"I think [the Internet] has countless constructive and interesting uses. I assumed people coming to the library would agree," she told *Family Voice*. "We saw some of that, but a huge number of people in our downtown library came to view sexually explicit images."

As soon as dozens of pornography addicts discovered they would have unlimited access to free computers, they descended on the library. Adamson says individuals and groups spent hours watching and downloading pornography. She noticed a middle-aged man who regularly brought young boys into the library to see the sites. In another case, a 6-year-old came in repeatedly with his disinterested parents; all of them surfed sex sites.

The librarians frequently saw porn deliberately left on tables and on computer screens. They—and their innocent patrons—were exposed to the vilest obscenity imaginable: child porn, bestiality, sodomy, torture.

Staff and patrons repeatedly complained to the library administration for a change in policy,

to no avail.

"We lost many [patrons] who never came back after they were exposed to sexually explicit materials on their way to the bookshelf," she said.

Finally, Adamson and several colleagues filed an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission sexual harassment lawsuit against the library system. It charged that the library had created a hostile and dangerous working environment.

"We know that we speak for dozens more on our own staff, as well as for countless librarians all over the country who face obscene materials daily and get no relief from their administrations," she said.

The EEOC ruled in Adamson's favor in May 2001, but the library has refused to settle. The case has now been forwarded to the Department of Justice, which is investigating. In the meantime, although the library has not installed filters, it has posted signs forbidding the accessing of pornography, which is illegal. Security personnel are authorized to usher out individuals who defy the policy. Although these measures are less effective than filters, they influenced many of the daily users to leave for good.

The obscene behaviors of porn addicts at the Minneapolis Public Library have been repeated across the nation, so it's easy to see why the great majority of Americans, including teens, want filtering in libraries.

Encouraging Trends

Concerned Women for America's chief counsel Jan LaRue is encouraged by recent statistics on Internet filtering



CWA's Kathy Valente, shown here with her husband Richard, succeeded in getting filters on her local public library and high-school library computers.

trends in our nation's public libraries. She notes this filtering increased by 43 percent in just one year—from 2000 to 2001.

LaRue attributes this increase to two factors: public complaints from patrons about exposure to library pornography and the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA). The law requires public schools and public libraries that accept certain federal subsidies for Internet access to use blocking technology to prevent access to obscene materials, child pornography, and materials deemed harmful to minors when a minor is using an Internet computer.

LaRue helped draft this legislation and filed a friend of the court brief when the American Library Association, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), and Oregon's Multnomah County Public Library challenged CIPA in federal court. On May 31, the federal court struck down CIPA. But hope is not lost—LaRue is

confident the ruling will be appealed and the Supreme Court will reverse the decision. "The court applied First Amendment analysis to speech that has no First Amendment protection, which is a serious mistake of law," she said.

"The problem in the libraries will not be addressed appropriately until the Justice Department is vigorously prosecuting obscenity," she said. "The Department of Justice is holding a training seminar this summer on obscenity enforcement. As a result, we should hear soon about indictments of major Internet pornographers," LaRue added.

In Illinois

Kathy Valente, CWA's state director for Illinois, first became aware of the problem of Internet pornography seven years ago when her son's school acquired Internet access.

When she was asked to sign a permission slip for her son to use the Internet, Valente refused. Instead, she contacted a filtering software company and put their salesmen in touch with her local school-district librarians. After a year of debate and testing, the librarians and school board were sold, and they installed filters on the high school's computers.

By this time, the public library had also installed unfiltered Internet access, so Valente and a small group of parents began working on this front.

"We found out that the director had been hearing one side—the American Library Association side—and we became a thorn in the side of the library director for two and a half years," Valente said.

Finally, the library director agreed



In many libraries, patrons may inadvertently see pornography on any one of about 300,000 sex-related Web sites.

to put filters on all computers except one. However, Valente refused to compromise.

When the library board met to vote on total filtering, more than 100 people showed up. The crowd so intimidated them that they tabled the vote. At the next meeting, Valente and only a couple of activists attended. The board refused to leave even one unfiltered computer. All of the library's computers are now filtered!

There's more good news in Illinois. Valente recently started working on getting filtering systems into the 78 branches of Chicago's library system. In March, a deacon from one of Chicago's largest black churches witnessed, in the library, an 8-year-old boy surfing the Internet for pornography. He confronted the librarian who told him she couldn't do anything about it. He then informed his pastor, Bishop Larry Trotter of Chicago's Sweet Holy Spirit Full Gospel Baptist Church, which has more than 14,000 members.

Bishop Trotter is now organizing black pastors in Chicago to influence the library system to filter computers. His base of Christian voters will also put pressure on state legislators to vote for legislation mandating filtering systems on public library computers. Bishop Trotter is also working on establishing a national coalition to fight pornography.

Valente's experience has taught her we can win these battles if we pray,

speak the truth, do not compromise, and remain persistent.

"It doesn't matter how impossible the situation looks," Valente says. "God can do the job."

Virginia Victory

Before his election, Virginia State Delegate Dick Black (R-Loudon) was a long-time citizen activist. He was appointed to the Loudoun County Library Board in 1996 and began lobbying for the installation of filtering software on all of the county's computers. His effort took the form of an anti-sexual harassment policy. The head of the board proposed a policy that would have allowed open access to pornography, with the addition of privacy screens. Instead, Dick devised a "Policy on Internet Sexual Harassment" that was adopted in 1997. The policy banned child pornography, obscene material, and harmful-to-minors material under Virginia statutes.

Almost as soon as the policy was

Is Your Library a Red-Light District?

If the Supreme Court declares the Children's Internet Protection Act constitutional, libraries may decide to refuse federal funding for Internet access so they may continue to provide pornography to their patrons—at taxpayer expense. To encourage these libraries to filter their computers, Karen Gounaud, founder of the Family Friendly Libraries Web site, has listed a series of questions that will aid parents in developing strategies to influence libraries to filter their computers. Here are a few:

1. What is the most direct governing body of your library system?
2. How is the governing board put together?
3. Who is on the board?
4. What is the main document setting day-to-day library policies?
5. What is the philosophy behind the policy document?
6. What procedures are in place for filing complaints?
7. Does the American Library Association have influence over spending policies?

A complete list of these questions is available on the Family Friendly Libraries Web site (www.fflibraries.org.) and the book, Protecting Your Child in an X-Rated World. (See page 38 to order.)

implemented, the ACLU, People for the American Way, and a coalition of groups called "Mainstream Loudoun" filed a lawsuit against the library system.

According to Black, these groups argued that "since adults are allowed to access soft-core pornography, the library system should be required to provide it. That's a very novel approach. The Ku Klux Klan may be able to publish literature, but it can't require the library to carry it. There's never been a requirement to stock everything in a public library."

In 1998, a federal judge struck down the library policy. The judge said that blocking the Internet "offends the guarantee of free speech in the First Amendment."

In order to avoid being overruled by a higher court, the groups and the library system settled out of court.

Black eventually ran for election

in the Virginia House of Delegates and defeated an opponent who had far more resources and name recognition. "I've since sponsored legislation that requires Internet filtering on all computers in public schools," he said. "The [pornography] industry battled this. The more they can degrade the culture, the more they can market this stuff. The money rolls in and everybody's happy for a generation or two until our culture dissolves."

Black says that it's important for activists fighting for Internet filters to shape the language of the debate. "If you get into theoretical speak about the First Amendment and freedom of speech, you're on their turf. You need to talk about whether or not libraries should provide pornography to children or if libraries should be places for the sexual gratification of adults."

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The Louisiana Battle Front

Lennie Ditoro, communications coordinator for CWA of Louisiana, began a fight several years ago to change the local library's policy of allowing children to rent R- or NC-17-rated videos without parental consent or knowledge. The library finally agreed to implement a policy that restricts children from checking out these videos without parental approval.

This win led Ditoro and her pro-family allies to require the libraries to install filtering systems. "Without any battle at all, the librarians decided to put filters on library computers [used by children]. Adults can get unfiltered computers," she said. "It's not as good a policy as it needs to be."

Ditoro notes that Jefferson Parish, the county that covers New Orleans, has implemented a more aggressive Internet filtering policy. The Parish's policy on Internet filtering changed after a man entered a local library in July 2001, accessed pornography, and was caught masturbating in front of two 12-year-old girls. The library system now filters all of its computers except for one located next to the librarian's station in each branch.

"I'm very optimistic about the future of filtering," Ditoro says. "The reports I've seen suggest that the libraries, the ACLU and the ALA are not being successful against the opposition of patrons and parents who want their libraries to be family friendly."


Turning Tide

All of these activists, from the East Coast to the West and places in

between, show that individuals can influence Internet filtering in public libraries.

A supporter of some filtering combined with a strong Internet policy that won't tolerate illegal activity, Adamson believes that the tide has turned since she became involved in the lawsuit.

"The public has become increasingly aware of the problem ..., library boards and administrations are now admitting it is a problem ..., and the new president of the American Library Association has indicated that there is room for debate. The previous ALA leadership ... refused any dialogue.

"We have been through a lot, and it is nowhere near over yet. ... However, it has been incredibly worth it." 

Call 1-800-323-2200 to order your copy of Protecting Your Child in an X-Rated World, by Jan LaRue and Frank York. \$15.00. Ask for our CWA policy paper, Internet Pornography, and we will be glad to include that free of charge with your order.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

- PRAY** Ask God to thwart the plans of pornographers.
- PRAISE** God for the victories in which some libraries are now trying to protect children on the Internet.
- ACT** Consider gathering your friends and urging your local library to shield children from online pornography.