

Internet safety issues

The challenges and opportunities they present

by Ann K. Symons

One of the most challenging—if not the most challenging—issues facing our profession is safeguarding children on the Internet without sacrificing our First Amendment right to receive information.

I believe that the most important principle, one that forms the very foundation for library service, is intellectual freedom. That is why I selected “Celebrating the Freedom to Read! Learn! Connect!” as the theme for my year as president of the ALA.

The theme has proved to be a timely one as access to the Internet, particularly children’s access in the library, has opened a national discussion and galvanized the library community as few issues have.

Many parents are frightened and they are looking for solutions. Often they feel insecure because they may not be as technologically proficient as their children. The use of filtering software in libraries is the solution most frequently advocated by those who claim they seek to protect children from what is commonly referred to as “the dark side of the Internet.” But deeper issues are involved.

In the United States, local library boards have always made their own policies regarding library use and collections. Today that tradition is in jeopardy because well-meaning but ill-informed politicians want to “protect” children by mandating the use of filtering software in libraries.

Not surprisingly, ALA does not endorse the use of software filters in libraries. Filters do, in fact, block useful information and they do not block all material that some find offensive. The ALA believes filtering mandates for local libraries are not only inappropriate, they violate basic democratic principles of free speech and self-governance.

The ALA is in fact playing a leadership role in educating parents about the Internet and providing quality sites for children, even as we seek to uphold First Amendment rights in cyberspace. These efforts, including the 700+ Great Sites for Kids and the KidsConnect information-help service, have been recognized in the *Washington Post, Parade* magazine, the “Today Show,” and other media across the nation.

Today’s children and teenagers are the students of tomorrow in your colleges and universities. As librarians—whether public, academic, or school—we have a responsibility to help find answers; answers that will both allay parents’ fears and at the same time, protect our core value of intellectual freedom.

Just as parents must guide their children in what they can watch on TV, buy at shopping malls, and do after school, they must teach their children what they feel is acceptable for them to view on the Web. The opportunity to help adults learn how to guide



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children in using the Internet is one of the most exciting opportunities our profession has today.

The debate over Internet access will, no doubt, continue for many years. And it should. Providing children and adults with the very best information, whether it is in print or on the Internet, is worthy of this debate and all our best efforts.

I believe we librarians will ultimately win the debate as more parents and adults become comfortable with this relatively new technology and understand the important principles involved. I also believe technology will evolve to address many of our concerns.

But it may not be soon and it will most certainly not be easy.

Those of us in public and school libraries are most directly on the frontlines in dealing with this issue. I urge you, my colleagues in academic libraries, to also take a leadership role by sponsoring Internet "teach-ins" and joining in community discussions helping to educate your colleagues, faculty, and students. We are all in this together. If we are to win this intellectual freedom battle, we need your support.

I look forward to working with you as we forge new and exciting programs and policies that ensure the next generation of library users enjoys equitable and free access to information. ■

Photo contest to highlight National Library Week

College and university libraries are invited to join in sponsoring a *Beyond Words: Celebrating America's Libraries* Photo Contest, sponsored by the ALA and the Library of Congress for National Library Week, April 9–16, 1999.

The theme of this year's National Library Week is "Read! Learn! Connect! @ the Library."

"National Library Week celebrates our freedom to read, learn, and connect to a spectrum of information at our nation's libraries," says Ann K. Symons, ALA president, 1998–99. "The photo contest is designed to capture the spirit of our nation's libraries and how they enrich our lives everyday."

Amateur, professional, and youth-age photographers are invited to enter the contest, which is underwritten by Ingram Library Services. More than \$10,000 in prizes, including a \$1,500 Grand Prize will be awarded.

Photographers must enter at local libraries—academic, public, or school. Libraries must forward their first-place winners to ALA for national judging by May 1. National winners will be announced in June.

Libraries of all types are also encouraged to use National Library Week as a time to host Internet "teach-ins" as part of the ongoing America Links Up campaign sponsored

by ALA, the U.S. Department of Education, and a coalition of organizations.

Symons said the "teach-ins" provide an opportunity to demonstrate how librarians help educate parents and children about the Internet and guide them to quality Web sites. The America Links Up campaign kicked off in September with more than 250 libraries nationwide holding "teach-in" events.

Ideas and suggestions for celebrating National Library Week and photo contest guidelines are available on the ALA Web page at <http://www.ala.org/celebrating>. A free poster/tipsheet for the photo contest is available from the ALA Public Information Office, 50 E. Huron St., Chicago, IL 60611. Telephone: (800) 545-2433, ext. 5044/4041. E-mail: pio@ala.org.

Tips for planning a "teach-in" can be found on the ALA Web site at <http://www.ala.org/teach-in>.

For more information about the America Links Up campaign and to register, libraries should see <http://www.americalinksup.org>.

National Library Week promotional materials, including colorful posters, bookmarks, pencils, and Read! Learn! Connect! lapel pins are available from ALA Graphics. To order, call (800) 545-2433 and press 7. For bulk discounts, call ALA Marketing at (800) 545-2433, ext. 2427.—Linda Wallace, director ALA Public Information Office, lw Wallace@ala.org

