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Internet Filters: A Public Policy Report **Highlights**

No sooner was the Internet upon us than anxiety arose over the ease of accessing controversial content. In response, private companies soon developed filtering products.

Filters were highly imprecise from the beginning. The sheer size of the Internet meant that identifying potentially offensive content had to be done mechanically, by matching “key” words and phrases; hence, the blocking of Web sites for “Middlesex County,” or words such as “magna **cum** laude.” Despite the use of terms such as “artificial intelligence” or “adaptive reasoning technology” to describe their operation, filters still, by necessity, operate through keyword blocking.

Filters also contain dozens of overly broad blocking categories, such as “politics,” “intolerance,” and “alternative lifestyles.” The inevitable result is that large amounts of valuable information are censored for no legitimate reason. *Internet Filters* gives hundreds of examples, among them:

- CYBERSitter blocked a news item on the Amnesty International site after detecting the phrase “least 21.” The offending sentence described “at least 21” people killed or wounded in Indonesia.
- SurfWatch blocked the University of Kansas’s Archie R. Dykes Medical library upon detecting the word “dykes.”
- X-Stop blocked the “Let’s Have an Affair” catering company and searches for *Bastard Out of Carolina* and “The Owl and the Pussy Cat.”
- WebSense blocked a Texas cleanup project under the category of “sex,” and The Shoah Project, a Holocaust remembrance page, under the category of “racism/hate.”
- Cyber Patrol blocked a Knights of Columbus site and a site for aspiring dentists as “adult/sexually explicit.”
- BESS and SurfControl blocked curriculum materials on Populism because they also contained information about National Socialism. Symantec blocked the National Rifle Association and other pro-gun sites while allowing sites associated with gun control organizations.
- BESS blocked a site on fly fishing, a guide to allergies, and a site opposing the death penalty as “pornography.” It also blocked all Google and AltaVista image searches under its category of “pornography.”

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