

Casting too wide a 'Net

Mayor's plan to block children's access to porn ultimately sends wrong message / **Simson L. Garfinkel**

IT'S HARD TO IMAGINE that Mayor Thomas M. Menino would walk into the research room of the Boston Public Library, grab a copy of Playboy from the shelf, and start ripping it to shreds. It's harder still to imagine the mayor closing his eyes, grabbing wildly for more magazines, and tearing them up for good measure.

But that's essentially what the mayor has decided to do with his call to install "antiporn" blocking software on the city's computers.

Menino said last week the city would install software to restrict children's access to pornographic sites on the Internet. Michael Hernon, the city's chief information officer, says the software will consist of two parts. First, the city will purchase a program called Cyber Patrol and install it on every computer that can be used by children in the city's libraries, schools, and community centers (one of Cyber Patrol's competitors, Surf Watch, offered to donate blocking software but was inexplicably rebuffed).

Second, the city will turn on the "parental controls" feature of Microsoft's Internet Explorer. The browser will then be programmed to block access to any site that has rated itself as containing more than the prescribed amount of harsh language, vio-

lence, nudity, or sexual themes.

The trustees of Boston Public Library have voted to go along with the mayor's dictates, although the new incoming library president has asked for an extension until March 10 to evaluate the Cyber Patrol software.

Boston is in a difficult position, says Hernon. The city wants to let kids access the Internet's World Wide Web, but it doesn't want to be in the business of possibly supplying pornography to those same

children. Hernon is also worried about the problem of mistaken identities - pornographic Web sites that children might stumble upon by accident, when they are looking for something else.

Apparently there is some reason to be alarmed. Consider two sites that Hernon directed me to: bambi.com and one whose Internet address is the initials of a famous toy store. Bambi.com isn't about the cartoon deer, it's the "1st AAA rated Adult XXX Web site, Erotica On-Line." The second site's motto is: "Your inner child isn't the only one with adult desires," and contains free, explicit sexual images.

"What was happening was that little Johnny was accessing a site

and he was calling over other children and forcing this on them," said Hernon. "Nine out of 10 kids might behave themselves, but it's that one kid who is going to throw it into somebody's face." The censorship software is supposed to block both accidental and intentional access.

At the heart of Cyber Patrol is the "CyberNOT" list of Web sites that contain objectionable material. The CyberNOT list is apparently created by a team of adults who examine sites for a variety of material that Cyber Patrol's publisher, Microsystems Inc., of Framingham, finds objectionable. On the blacklist is pornography, information about sex, hate speech, sites that promote alcohol and drug use, and on-line gambling.

Unfortunately, parents, educators, or even city officials can't see the list of the sites Microsystems finds offensive.

"The CyberNOT list is a list of inappropriate material," says Susan Getgood, Microsystems' director of marketing. "If we published it, we would be contributing to the problem that Cyber Patrol is trying to help people solve."

But others see it as an Internet blacklist that can be abused.

"There is really no parallel for this sort of secret blacklist of banned books or banned Web sites in the physical world, in the history of libraries, as far as I can tell," says Declan McCullagh, a columnist for The Netly News and the moderator of the Internet's "fight censorship" mailing list.

Last summer some computer hacker decoded Microsystems' list of naughty sites and gave McCullagh a copy. According to McCullagh, the list contained the names of sites that didn't violate any of the company's guidelines.

An animal-rights site was on the list, as was the Electronic Frontier Foundation's censorship archives, the University of Newcastle computer science department, and a Web site devoted to Christian dating. Cyber Patrol even blocked the Web site operated by the League for Programming Freedom, a group opposed to software patents.

Getgood says McCullagh's information is out of date, and that Cyber Patrol no longer blocks many of those sites. She says the company has an appeals process that blocked sites can use to try to get off the company's list - if they happen to discover they are on it in the first place.

I'm opposed to computer-aided censorship because it sends fundamentally the wrong message to our children. It says we don't trust them to act responsibly. It says quick technological fixes are appropriate answers to social problems. It says adults are too busy to supervise our kids, so we're building computers to do the job for us. And it says censorship is an appropriate decision for our elected leaders to make.

Menino has painted himself into a corner. There is no way he can back down without being accused of delivering pornography to our children.

I'll take solace in the fact that the blocking software isn't perfect - I couldn't even get it to work on my Macintosh. Our city's kids are sure to find ways to defeat it. The mayor may think he's taken pornography out of the schools and libraries, but he's really just created a new high-tech game for the kids to play.

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