

As media watchdog Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation was preparing to issue its updated report on the impact Internet filtering products have on gay and lesbian electronic resources—a report that says right-wing groups are leading the push to filter public terminals—commissioners in a small Texas county were voting to limit Net access at their public libraries.

The commissioners court in Montgomery County, north of Houston, decided in mid-March to filter the Internet after reviewing information provided by a group called Adults Helping Out Children.

ADHOC is made up of members of the Republican Leadership Council, the Christian Coalition and other right-wing groups.

"We think the Internet is a somewhat defective product that needs to be fixed up, and the fix is filtering," says ADHOC President William Elmer.

The Montgomery County decision stands in contrast, however, to a recent failed ballot initiative to filter the Net at libraries in Holland, Mich.—evidence that the issue continues to be divisive.

Yet the subject is one about which Congress and the U.S. Supreme Court have already spoken.

Despite being advised against the move by the library advisory board, the librarian and the county attorney, Montgomery County commissioners voted to require publicly accessible Internet terminals at the county's libraries to filter out obscene and pornographic material.

County Judge Alan Sadler, who presides over the commissioners court, said he does not think filtering violates the First Amendment rights of citizens.

"We do not believe taxpayers are obliged to pay for patently obscene or pornographic materials to be made available in our libraries—whether in published or electronic form," he said. "We do not wish to deny anyone's right to free speech, their access to knowledge or their research needs. We have not done so."

While ADHOC is concerned, according to Elmer, with the flawed nature of the Internet, it is the flawed nature of filtering software that concerns GLAAD.

Some Internet filtering software sifts out gay and lesbian resources that are not pornographic, meaning information that could be valuable to people questioning their orientation would not be available from terminals equipped with those types of filtering software.

"We just have not found filtering software that doesn't filter out some good resources and support information," explains Loren Javier, GLAAD's digital media director.

FRACTIOUS FILTERING

Internet filters that block sites with gay content continue to be a hot-button issue

by Gip Plaster

For that reason, GLAAD does not favor filtering at places such as libraries and questions whether it should be used in homes.

"GLAAD is opposed to filtering in public institutions," Javier says. "In private homes, we want parents to be educated about what they are installing."

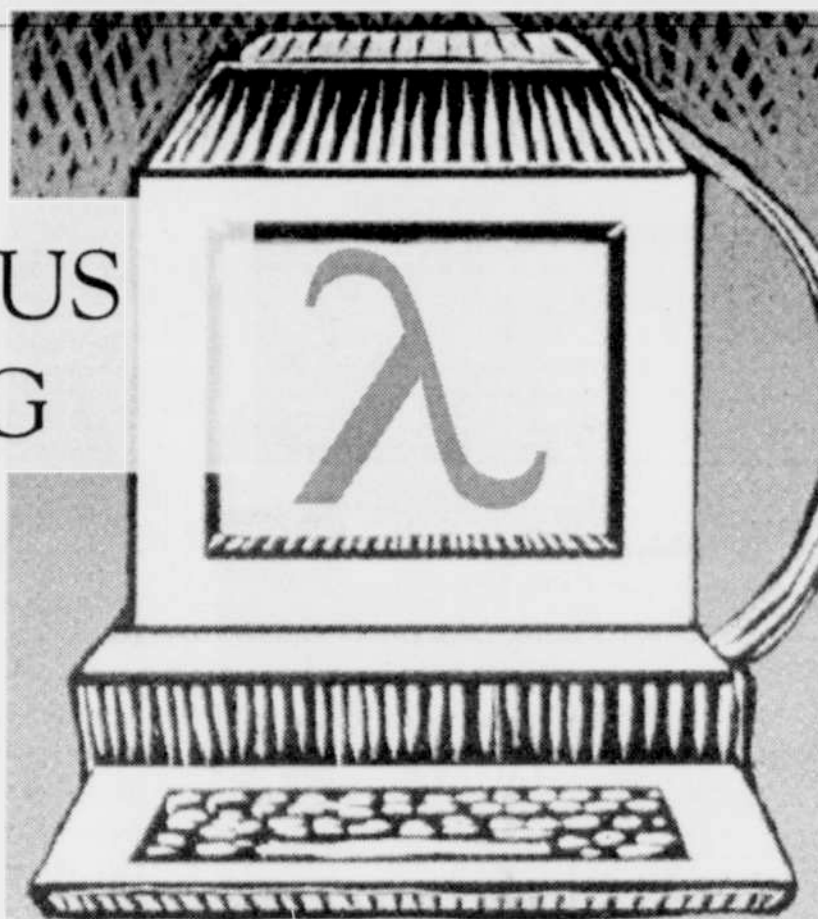
Most filtering programs keep their lists of blocked sites secret from everyone, including the software's users and the owners of the blocked sites, but at least one company's list has been compromised.

The American Civil Liberties Union is representing three Americans who own Internet sites that include so-called "mirrors," or copies, of the decoded secret list of sites blocked by popular filter Cyber Patrol.

The information was decoded by people outside the United States who have settled suits with Cyber Patrol and agreed to give the company the copyright to the decoded information.

Cyber Patrol's lawyers have tried to use those settlements in its legal proceedings against the three ACLU clients, but the civil rights organization has argued that new legal proceedings are necessary.

Among the sites blocked by Cyber Patrol, according to information provided by the ACLU, are those belonging to Gay.net, an interactive site that also carries news and information; the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the U.S.; BLK.com, for gay



African Americans; and the personal site of a reporter for gay and lesbian newspapers.

The case is still pending, but the ACLU has made clear its opposition to what it calls "censorware" programs. Filters are a particular threat to the gay and lesbian community, says ACLU spokesman Eric Ferrero.

"Increasingly, people are turning to the Internet for support and information as they grapple with coming-out issues. Censorware programs often block Web sites that can offer potentially life-saving support and information," he says.

The ACLU was also involved in a 1998 Virginia case in which a district judge ruled that forcing adults to use blocking software in public libraries "offends the guarantee of free speech."

The U.S. Supreme Court had already ruled, in 1997, that communications on the Internet couldn't be limited to what is suitable for children.

Congress had its say, too, striking down the Communications Decency Act.

GLAAD is also concerned that efforts to filter the Internet are coming from conservative and sometimes anti-gay groups.

The Holland, Mich., vote against Internet filtering demonstrates that not all conservative voters want filtering software in public libraries, according to Karen Schneider of the Shenendehowa Public Library in New York.

"The intense push for filtering is being

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orchestrated by conservative political groups like the Family Research Council and the American Family Association," she says. "In fact, Holland's pro-filtering initiative was bankrolled by the American Family Association to the tune of more than \$40,000."

Whether the filtering system in Montgomery County will limit access to nonpornographic gay and lesbian sites is still unclear.

County library director Jerrilynn Williams said there was no mention of gay and lesbian matters during any of the discussions of the issue. She said the concern was with children accessing pornography.

And Farley Stewart, chief executive officer of Internet Products, says the county will have to go out of its way to block gay sites.

Internet Products makes iPrism, the device the county will use for filtering. The device looks similar to a modem or a router, Stewart says, that is attached to the computer network server. It is the only Internet filtering product that is a device rather than software.

The iPrism blocks only by URL, a method sometimes preferred over less efficient keyword blocking. Users can choose to block or monitor certain categories.

Most gay and lesbian sites are included in the "social issues" category—the same as sites on euthanasia and gun control. If the user decides to turn on blocking for that category, all social issues sites would be blocked.

Users can also add a list of individual sites they want to block.

Stewart says electronic "robots" seek out categorized sites, but a person reviews each site before determining whether it should be blocked. He notes that gay and lesbian sites that contain nudity, for example, will be cross-referenced in the nudity category, which will likely be blocked by the user.

"These products are never going to be 100 percent perfect on either side of the equation," he says. "What we're hoping to do here is provide more access by providing finer granularity."

The iPrism device was first sold in late 1999 and is now in use in fewer than a dozen libraries, Stewart says.

Elmer would not say whether he thinks gay and lesbian sites should be blocked.

"I'd kind of circle around your question to say that anything related to a community on the Internet—rights should not be taken away from that community," he says. "We're concerned about smut, pornography and obscenity."

■ GIP PLASTER writes for dozens of gay and lesbian newspapers and magazines. He also maintains a list of gay publications at www.gayscribe.com. He lives in Fort Worth, Texas, with his partner, David.

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