Dangers Hiding in Public Libraries

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It's not likely that most people would let their children browse in an "adult" bookstore. But have you ever considered the danger of letting them browse in your local public library?
The American Library Association's conference held in Chicago in July opened the window on how public libraries have changed. Here is how some of the workshops and panel discussion topics were listed in the program.

The program description of "Erotica in the Libraries" stated: "Given that erotica is available in chain bookstores like Tower and Borders, isn't it true that erotic fiction and pictures now fit within the `community values' of at least some communities? This program will move beyond debates about whether libraries should collect erotica to an examination of what erotica a library could collect."

The panel discussion on "Freedom of Expression vs. Tolerance: Exploring the Limits" produced a pro-gay "debate." One side loudly condemned "hate speech" (i.e., any disagreement with the homosexual lifestyle), while the other side defended the abstract right to utter such speech but soundly criticized anyone who did.

The keynote speaker at the workshop on "Intellectual Freedom Principles in an Academic Library" was C. James Schmidt, Professor of Library and Information Science in San Jose, California. His thesis was that unfiltered internet access should be available to everyone.

The focus of "Risky Business: Legal and Liability Issues to Internet Access" was on creating strategies for libraries to circumvent obscenity laws.

The workshop called "It's Our Bill of Rights Too! Children, the First Amendment, and America's Response to Violence" was devoted to the longtime ALA goal of making sure that children, no matter how young, have access to everything in the library.

The ALA's own view of a public library's mission is no longer to serve as a custodian of the literature of a great civilization. The ALA sees itself as a radical change agent, presuming to change our culture and our attitudes by using our tax dollars to control what printed and internet information will be made conveniently available in public libraries.

The ALA's "Catalyst for Change Award" this year was given to the organization's immediate past president, Ann Symons. The award praised her: "For actively and positively influencing . . . the initiation and implementation of change . . . For continually being an inspiration to others to be involved in the programs and projects of the Association and to become change agents themselves."

The tone of the conference reflected the ALA's philosophy set forth in its brochure called "Intellectual Freedom": "Censorship, like charity, should begin at home; but unlike charity, it should end there."

The ALA's brochure further asserts: "When censorship is attempted, not only is our constitutional right to seek and receive information endangered, but also the very essence of our democratic society put at risk."
The ALA's definition of censorship is decidedly skewed; to the ALA, censorship means any public criticism of how ALA members are spending the public's tax dollars.

The ALA has developed the impudent assertion that librarians have a constitutional right to give any materials, no matter how "adult" or pornographic, to children of any age. Of course, there is no such right to interfere with parental rights and there is no constitutional right to spend the people's money.

Because of the vast quantity of porn on the internet and the speed with which it pops up on the screen, parents, voters and public officials are increasingly demanding filters on public library computers available to children. The ALA used its July conference to showcase its passionate resistance to any filtering of pornographic sites on terminals used by children.

In addition to its phony argument that protections for children are unconstitutional, the ALA argues that internet filters don't work because they filter out non-pornographic sites, such as those dealing with breast cancer, while allowing about 15 percent of undesirable sites through anyway. However, a recent study at three public library systems employing filters, Tacoma (WA), Dayton (OH) and Cincinnati (OH), showed that legitimate sites come through more than 99 percent of the time.

In 1999, the Chicago Public Library denied a request under the Freedom of Information Act to reveal a three-month study on internet use which the library claimed had found that only 5 percent of the terminals were used to access pornographic sites. However, even this figure would mean up to 30,000 half-hour porn-surfing sessions during the slowest summer months.

Only about 1,000 of the 16,000 public libraries in America currently use internet-filtering software, but citizen activism is beginning to make a difference. Kathy Valente, founder of Citizens for Community Values of Illinois (www.safeplace.net/ccv), was successful in establishing a policy that requires all the library computer terminals in Lansing, Illinois to be equipped with internet filters, and her organization stands ready to help other local groups.