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| LIS 6010: Introduction to the information profession |
| Internet Filtering |
| Assignment #4 – Ethical Scenario |
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*It is the year 2020. Presently, the government has total control of the information Highway and refuses to allow public access to unfettered information via the Internet. Filters are mandatory in all United States libraries. Do you consider this action to be ethical or unethical? Is freedom of speech a relic notion of the past?*

Although we can only imagine what the year 2020 will hold for the library profession, what guides its standards of behavior and service today are two documents: the Library Bill of Rights and the Code of Ethics of the American Library Association. These documents have existed for many years in order to protect intellectual freedom in America’s libraries, and so it is likely that they or ones similar to them will still exist 10 years from now. Of particular relevance to this hypothetical situation regarding Internet filtering is the second article of the ALA Code of Ethics, which states that librarians “uphold the principles of intellectual freedom and resist all efforts to censor library resources” (1997, amended 2008). Though it is unclear in this hypothetical situation why filters are mandatory, or what is being filtered, Internet filtering is unethical because of its direct impact to intellectual freedom. Through limiting access to information, Internet filtering violates the right to free speech as written in the United States Constitution, impacts the ability of a populace to think critically, and allows the entity in power to censor information it does not want the populace to know.

Far from being a relic of the past, freedom of speech as guaranteed by the Constitution is more important than ever in the Information Age. With the advent of the Internet, society’s ability to share information expanded at an exponential rate. New legal issues began to arise involving freedom of speech over the Internet prompting Congress and eventually the Supreme Court to define its constitutional boundaries.

One of the earliest cases, *Reno v. ACLU* (1997), challenged certain aspects of the Communications Decency Act of 1996 which criminalized the transmission of “obscene,” “indecent,” or “offensive” materials over the Internet with the intention of protecting children from inappropriate material. In a unanimous decision, the Supreme Court ruled that while certain restrictions within the Act regarding child pornography were legal, several provisions violated the First Amendment because they created a broad restriction on free speech and were too vague in their definition of “indecent” and “offensive” (Oyez Project, 2010).

A more recent case, *U.S. v. American Library Association* (2003), challenged the legality of the Children’s Internet Protection Act of 2000 which requires public libraries receiving federal funds to install Internet filtering software on their computers. In a split 6-3 judgment, the Court majority concluded that the provision did not violate patrons’ First Amendment rights and that the practice is a legitimate exercise of Congressional spending power. They also noted that the scope of the filter was relatively small and focused and that libraries could unblock sites at the patron’s request (Oyez Project, 2010).

While funding requirements might induce libraries to install Internet filtering software, their strict aim is to prevent children from accessing pornographic sites rather than fettering free speech. For the government of the United States to completely control the flow of information on the web would be unconstitutional and as well as unethical given the importance of free speech in a democratic society.

Censorship can seem harmless sometimes, even to the point of feeling productive. A mother challenging a school to stop teaching “The Catcher in the Rye” might see the book as destructive to her child or to other children. Unfortunately, censorship of anything does not allow the public to exercise their ability to think for themselves. When a path is blocked off to someone, that person can no longer make the decision to take that path.

In his article, “The Obligations and Responsibilities of the Librarian Concerning Censorship,” Leon Carnovsky points out that “the practice of censorship has been most frequently invoked in three areas, namely, politics, religion, and morals, and therefore it is in these areas that the problems of censorship as they impinge on library administration are most often encountered.” Carnovsky goes on to point out that much of censorship has to do with challenging the government or whoever is “in control.”

To take away access to materials on the Internet would be akin to taking away access to certain kinds of books. When patrons are not allowed to read “certain opinions” or go to “certain sites” they will lose their ability to make critical decisions on practical issues concerning their daily lives, their local government, and perhaps their federal government.

Reading opposing viewpoints on things like politics, religion, and morals, one is able to assert what one believes which in turn makes one a very valuable and informed citizens. When citizens do not have access to information these citizens will lose the ability to think critically for themselves and will eventually and mindlessly pass on control of small parts of their lives over to the government.

Censorship creates a knowledge imbalance between those censoring and those being censored. For an entity to decide something should not be accessed, that entity has to first discover and learn about the offending material. At that point, the material is determined to be unfit for access. However, the entity is allowed to retain this knowledge, giving them an advantage over the restricted individual.

Further, while censorship is often carried out in the name of protecting people from “dangerous” information, there is potential for those deciding what is dangerous to exploit their power. An extreme example of this would be Nazi Germany, where censorship was a tool to stifle viewpoints opposed to the Nazi doctrine. Restricting access to knowledge has historically been a way to gain control over people. It may be difficult to entertain that the United States could reach a point where information is restricted as a means to control a group, even in the semi-distant future. However, as recent as the 1950s the United States allowed for segregated public education facilities, with their separate but not-so-equal materials that limited African-American access to information.

One problem with censorship is that most people can imagine a situation where restricting access to information would benefit society. If websites with bomb making instructions were inaccessible to the public, perhaps a life somewhere might be saved. If Wikileaks.com posts classified documents online, military secrets might be revealed. However, as Charlene C. Cain (2006) wrote in *Librarians and Censorship – The Ethical Imperative*, “The problem arises when information is withheld for the purpose of keeping specific economic or social classes from progressing, which is antithetical to our democratic system.” The moment government restricts public access to information in a way that suppresses a group or individual, it is violating its core democratic values.

This paper has discussed a scenario in which United States government has total control over the information highway, and makes filters mandatory in all libraries. Through a discussion of the effects of information control on a populace and their ability to think critically, the ability of a ruling entity to control information, and freedom of speech in the information age, the unethical nature of these policies have been made clear. Although the 2020 scenario seems Orwellian in nature, it has highlighted the importance of these rights, particularly to libraries in the United States today. The role of a library is to allow ease of access to information for its community members, for the purpose of creating more knowledgeable and therefore healthier society. Any government that hinders this ability hinders the development of the people it governs. Thus, the protection of a society’s right to free information must be constantly guarded by all of its members, especially the librarians of today and tomorrow.**References**

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