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The Blocked Blog (or Websense and the Technical Colleges' Fight for Academic Freedom)

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The blocked blog (or Websense and the technical colleges' fight for academic freedom)
by Carol Stanley and Jerry Stovall

The use of Websense filtering software by the Technical College System of Georgia (formerly known as the Department of Technical and Adult Education) prompted a survey of the technical college libraries in the state during the spring of 2007 by Jerry Stovall, director of library and media services at South Georgia Technical College in Americus. The aim of his research was to determine what subject categories are blocked at each institution. The results show disparity among the colleges as some colleges block more categories than others, usually depending on the whims of the information technology staff. Carol Stanley, branch librarian at Athens Technical College in Elberton, expresses her frustration over the censorship by writing this paper in a form of a blog, which she cannot create at her library due to the enforcement of Websense.

August 2, 2006
Wishing away Websense
I wish I may,
I wish I might,
Have this wish
I wish tonight
What do I wish? I wish that my institution, that's "academic"

institution, would not use Websense filtering software to restrict access to social networking sites, including blogs. That's right. Don't filter and prevent access to freedoms of expression in any format. So, I'm writing this blog. OK, I'm pretending to be writing this blog in protest.

September 27, 2006
Websense strikes
My library colleagues are at it again. They have been posting to our listserv about how they have a blog and are using it to promote the library and its resources. I tried to go to their blog sites, but couldn't. If I try to view a personal blogging site, I get the following screen message:

> WEBSENSE Enterprise
> Your organization's Internet use policy restricts access to this Web page at this time. Reason: The Websense category "Social Networking and Personal Sites" is filtered.

I wonder what this is about?! How can people at other libraries read them and even create them, and I can't? What is so wrong with blog sites?

October 13, 2006
The return of Websense
I understand from researching a bit that We***b logs*** (blogs, get it?) are personal postings by individuals sharing opinions on all kinds of topics on a Web site, but I also found out that "They can be used as tools to support learning in the classroom by expanding discussions into the online realm."[1]

I attempted to go to http://www.blogstreet.com to see a directory of blogs and received a different message from Websense this time:

> WEBSENSE Enterprise
> Your organization's Internet use policy restricts access to this Web page at this time. Reason: The Websense category "Message Boards and Forums" is filtered.

October 27, 2006
Blog stats
The 2006 Pew Internet & American Life Project report on bloggers states that "8 percent of Internet users, or about 12 million American adults, keep a blog. Thirty-nine percent of Internet users, or about 57 million American adults, read blogs — a

significant increase since the fall of 2005."[2] (Update note: "One year later, in 2007, there are 15.5 million active blogs and there are 1.5 million postings per day," according to Technorati statistics.[3])

November 1, 2006
IT responses
I decided to ask our information technology staff why I received different Websense messages when accessing different blog sites. They say it depends on the site. OK…. And then I decided to ask them why we block blogs and other social networking sites. They said the view is that those sites have limited educational value and are not worth tying up valuable bandwidth. Oooooooh, bandwidth… But the IT guy says to let his staff know which site I'd liked unblocked, and they'll unblock it. It is nice to be so privileged, but this strategy doesn't help all the people who don't know they can ask for a site to be unblocked.

December 10, 2006
Importance of blogs
So, I wonder what educational advantages are there to NOT FILTERING blogs?

According to a professor of communication studies, "It is essential for us to pay attention to all emerging technologies as a way to help our students understand the importance of mass media in our lives today."[4] The Lenhart & Fox report on bloggers states, "Some observers have suggested that blogging is nothing more than the next step in a burgeoning culture of narcissism and exhibitionism spurred by reality TV and other elements of the modern media environment. But others contend that blogging promises a democratization of voices that can now bypass the institutional gatekeepers of mainstream media.

This democratization is thought to have implications for the practice and business of journalism as well as the future of civic and political discourse."[5] Shouldn't I be helping to prepare our library community for the future? But they can't bypass Websense…

January 2, 2007
Kate Stirk's blog
My birthday! While I was visiting family for the holidays, I decided to go to Kate Stirk's blog, http://northmetrotechlibraryatacworth.blogspot.com. Kate is the librarian at North Metro Technical College in Acworth, Ga., and has had a blog since 2005. She gives updates on library resources such as GALILEO databases and Web sites. Too bad I can't access it from WORK!

January 12, 2007
Blogs everywhere
FreeRangeLibrarian.com's Karen Schneider, who is also on staff at the College Center for Library Automation, shared her thoughts on blogs, "It is hard to find an elected official, government committee, NGO, major company or nonprofit organization that does NOT have a blog (or at least an RSS feed) or treat this blog/feed as a primary tool for information dissemination. With 15 million active blogs, even if .01 percent of them were useful, that is still an astonishing amount of high-quality information."[6] Oh, by the way… I can't actually GO TO her site… you know why…

March 30, 2007
Survey out
Jerry Stovall, library director at South Georgia Technical College, posted a Websense survey to the Technical Colleges Library Council listserv to see how many Websense categories are blocked at the different technical colleges in the state. I'll keep you posted how that turns out.

May 16, 2007
SOLINET Annual Membership Meeting
Whew, that SOLINET Annual Membership Meeting was great but DEPRESSING. It was on Web 2.0 and all the social networking sites, and blogs are like old news, 'cause EVERYONE knows about them. The famous "library of the future" speakers were there like Roy Tennant, Diane Kresh, Richard Madaus and Lorcan Dempsey (they said to be sure and visit his technology BLOG). My library colleague and I just looked at each other and rolled our eyes…

It was SURREAL that we were paying money to attend a library conference on topics that were not attainable at our library. I'm thinking we are doing our students, staff and faculty a real disservice from keeping them from Web 2.0.

June 1, 2007
Georgia Internet policies
Back from the Technical Colleges Library Council quarterly meeting. The Websense survey results were presented to the group. Very interesting. First were the internet policies from the Georgia Technology Authority (GTA) and the Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG) that prohibit certain internet activities.

According to the GTA policy, "the following prohibitions shall apply to all state-provided equipment and services: creating, accessing or transmitting sexually explicit, obscene or pornographic material; creating, accessing or transmitting material that could be considered discriminatory, offensive, threatening, harassing or intimidating; creating, accessing or participation in online gambling; infringement of any copyright, trademark, patent or other intellectual property rights."[7] TCSG enhanced these slightly, stating: "The following uses of Department or

Technical College-provided computers, networks and Internet access are not permitted: to create, access or transmit sexually explicit, obscene or pornographic material; to create, access or transmit material that could be considered discriminatory, offensive, threatening, harassing, intimidating, or attempts to libel or otherwise defame any person; to create, access or participate in online gambling. Occasional access to information or Web sites of the Georgia Lottery Corporation shall not constitute nor be considered inappropriate use; to violate copyright or otherwise use the intellectual property of another individual or organization in violation of the law, including software piracy,"[8] Thus, these were the reasons for TCSG using Websense software. GTA did not mandate its use.

June 5, 2007
Technical college Websense survey results (Table 1)
Oh, and about the survey of the technical college libraries… of the 34 technical college libraries, 24 submitted results by the spring meeting of the Library Council. Here are some of the results of which Websense categories are used to restrict Internet access: 100 percent block "Adult Content"; 70.83 percent block "Lingerie and Swimsuit" — uh, NOT sexually explicit, obscene or pornographic, but blocked nonetheless… I remember someone commenting that it was a problem for their fashion design program of study; 95.83 percent block "Nudity" — while not overtly sexual in intent but could be interpreted as such; 100 percent block "Sex" related sites; 16.67 percent block "Sex Education" sites — neither GTA or TCSG policies require that these sites be blocked; 87.5 percent of "Illegal or Questionable" sites are blocked; 37.5 percent block "Abused Drugs;" 37.5 percent block "Marijuana" sites —

Table 1

Websense survey results

Responses were received from 24 of the 34 technical colleges, indicating the percentage of the colleges that block certain Websense categories.

24	100.00 percent	Adult
24	100.00 percent	Sex
23	95.83 percent	Gambling
23	95.83 percent	Malicious Web sites
23	95.83 percent	Nudity
22	91.67 percent	Proxy Avoidance
21	87.50 percent	Illegal
20	83.33 percent	Internet Telephony
19	79.17 percent	Violence
18	75.00 percent	Hacking
18	75.00 percent	Racism and Hate
18	75.00 percent	Tasteless
17	70.83 percent	Lingerie/Swimsuit
15	62.50 percent	Militancy and Extremist
15	62.50 percent	Personals and Dating
14	58.33 percent	Peer-to-Peer File Sharing
13	54.17 percent	Games
13	54.17 percent	MP3
11	45.83 percent	Potentially Unwanted Software
9	37.50 percent	Abused Drugs
9	37.50 percent	Marijuana
9	37.50 percent	Pay to Surf
9	37.50 percent	Web Chat
8	33.33 percent	Gay Lesbian Bisexual
8	33.33 percent	Weapons
7	29.17 percent	Internet TV and Radio
6	25.00 percent	Personal Network Backup + Storage
5	20.83 percent	Instant Messaging
5	20.83 percent	Streaming Media
4	16.67 percent	Non-Traditional Religions
4	16.67 percent	Online Brokerage and Trading
4	16.67 percent	Sex Ed
4	16.67 percent	Sport Hunting and Gun Clubs
3	12.50 percent	Alcohol and Tobacco
3	12.50 percent	Internet Auctions
3	12.50 percent	Real Estate
3	12.50 percent	Shopping
2	8.33 percent	Alternative Journals
2	8.33 percent	Web Hosting
0	0 percent	Advertisements
0	0 percent	Financial Data and Services
0	0 percent	Freeware and Software Download
0	0 percent	Message Boards and Clubs
0	0 percent	URL Translation

not even about the use for medicinal purposes?; 54.17 percent block "MP3 and Audio Download Services" — worried about copyright infringement; 95.83 percent block "Gambling" — remember, except for the Georgia Lottery site!; 54.17 percent block "Games" — don't they know work is supposed to be fun!; 75 percent block "Hacking" — well, sites providing information on the topic anyway; 91.67 percent block sites promoting "Proxy Avoidance" — naughty, naughty; 37.5 percent block "Web Chat;" 62.5 percent blocked "Militancy and Extremist" — can't have speech by groups advocating anti-government beliefs now… what is this, the United States or Cuba?; 75 percent block "Racism and Hate" — if only we could block it 75 percent worldwide with the use of Websense, now that would be a good thing… but censorship? Not a good thing…; 16.67 percent block "Non-traditional religions and occult and folklore" sites; 12.5 percent block "Shopping" — don't they understand consumer purchasing makes up 70 percent of the GDP? This explains the economy's woes; 12.5 percent block "Internet Auctions" — but if you select on the Websense screen that you are using eBay for "work-related purposes," one can access it… Shhhhhh.

Other blocked Web categories are not up for discussion… you can't access them even for work or educational purposes; 12.5 percent block "Real Estate" — just the other day an accounting student needed to find a house for sale online for an assign-ment… good thing this wasn't blocked at my college; 12.5 percent block "Alcohol and Tobacco" related sites; 33.33 percent block "Gay or Lesbian or Bisexual Interest" sites, including information on these lifestyles, but excluding sexually oriented ones… just plain ol' homo-phobia here?…; 62.5 percent block "Personals and Dating"; 75 percent

block "Tasteless" sites; 79.17 percent block sites promoting "Violence"; 33.33 percent block "Weapons" sites providing information about or promoting them; 29.17 percent block Internet Radio and TV; zero percent said they block "Message Boards and Clubs" — which includes "blogs," hmmmm, but, but I've been telling you I'm blocked!… Oh, Jerry said he didn't receive our response in time… technical difficulties! (Really!)

June 13, 2007
Now What
Didn't mean to leave you hanging out there… In the presentation were some possible solutions to the Web-sense dilemma, including developing a policy at the state level to apply consistent guidelines for all the technical colleges. As it is now, the decision to block certain sites is made by the information technology staff or administration at the individual colleges. There is no input from the librarians. It should be the responsibility of the person who blocks access to a Web site to have to justify blocking it; not the other way around. The technical colleges should use the least restrictive means possible in regulating access. Decisions about restrictions on Internet access should be made by those who are directly involved with the teaching and education of our students.

June 29, 2007
GOLD/GALILEO Annual Users Group Conference
Not one more conference on Web 2.0 — Sounds like the GOLD/GALILEO Annual Users Conference is going to be focusing on social networking. What a slap in the Facebook! I just can't attend this year. I think I will start screaming and pulling my hair out if I get to hear about innovative library blogs, or Facebook, or MySpace, or YouTube, etc.… Know what I mean? Toni Zimmerman, of Georgia Public Library Service, forgive me!

July 12, 2007
Happy Day!
Hooray! All is not lost! I can NOW access Kate Stirk's blog "View from the Library" at North Metro Technical College. And I can visit some main-stream ones like CNN's Anderson Cooper's, but NOT view their news videos ("Media Streaming" category is blocked — but that's another blog by this author), BUT I cannot visit sites about blogs, or personal blogs which could be by EXPERTS, or create one of my own, or visit many other Web 2.0 sites, and neither can my patrons…

August 4, 2007
The Last Blog
I think I'm through with my blog. Thanks for reading it, if you were able to, without going "Websenseless" as my colleague Michael Miller calls it. ⏭

Notes:

1. "Web & Wild," *TechTrends: Linking Research & Practice to Improve Learning* 48:6 (2004): 66.

2. Amanda Lenhart and Susannah Fox, "Bloggers: A Portrait of the Internet's New Storytellers," Pew Internet & American Life Project. http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP percent20Bloggers percent20Report percent20 July percent2019 percent202006.pdf (accessed August 27, 2007).

3. Heather Green, "With 15.5 Million Active Blogs, New Technorati Data Shows that Blogging Growth Seems to be Peaking," Business Week. http://www.businessweek.com/ the_thread/blogspotting/archives/2007/04 blogging_growth (accessed August 30, 2007).

4. "More Faculty See Value in Podcasts, Blogs," *BizEd* 6:4 (2007): 66.

5. See note 2.

6. Karen G. Schneider, e-mail message to author, August 30, 2007.

7. Georgia Technology Authority, "Enterprise Information Security Policies," http://www. gagta.com/download/Enterprise_Security_ Policies_FINAL091002.doc (accessed May 1, 2007).

8. Technical College System of Georgia, "Acceptable Computer and Internet Use," http://www.dtae.org/dtaepolicy/docs/Computer percent20Use percent20and percent20Access percent20to percent20the percent20Internet. htm (accessed May 1, 2007).