In regards to public filters, my suggestions:

1. Allow libraries to choose their own filter products.
2. Suggest or require that libraries use filtering products whose parent company discloses what criteria is used when blocking or allowing a site (many don't) since many sites may be blocked for often poor reasons, sometimes even on a whim, or if they go against an individual's beliefs or agenda (even if the sites are not in any way profane or could be considered dangerous.) Here's a few articles of interest:

http://slashdot.org/yro/00/12/08/0238239.shtml about a decrypted filtering list used by SmartFilter, which found a number of sites obviously mis-rated. As with everything else on Slashdot, there are a number of interesting comments appended to this article.

http://dfn.org/focus/censor/contest.htm A contest, apparently to find the most ridiculous examples of filtering – such as a high school student that couldn't access his own high school's web page from its own library since the filter automatically blocked the word "high" from domain names. The runner up, Hillary Anne, tried to register her email address at Hotmail as hillaryanne@hotmail.com but the filtering software spotted the word "aryan" hidden in her name… A number of other examples exist here, too. Richard "Dick" Armey's Web site is blocked by Netnanny, Surfwatch, Cybersitter, N2H2, and Wisechoice, the very same filters he promotes – because his site contains the word "dick." And, this excerpt from the article:

The conservative group Focus on the Family intends its anti-porn site Pure Intimacy to be a "resource for those struggling with sexual temptations" and the "psychological bondage" that is "a major reason why individuals go online." Jim K. observed that Cybersitter blocked this site for violating the following categories: porno, hardcoreporno, sexual, nudity, and, of course, bondage.

I could go on and on, but just visit that contest site - it does.

http://slashdot.org/yro/00/03/09/133243.shtml about Symantec's I-Gear software and a hack that revealed its true nature – reporting user information back to Symantec and blocking – unnecessarily – a number of .edu sites for no real reason.

About I-Gear, the high school I graduated from – Celebration – used it, but only for monitoring, since they believed it to be too unreliable and preferred to go after students that continued to visit sites that they themselves could deem inappropriate. They could check for sites that were inappropriate, some of which the filtering software would miss, and would be able to ignore sites that weren't really inappropriate at all but were otherwise blocked by the software anyway. I only know of one site that was blocked, which was a message board for people complaining about the town of Celebration, which has a policy that forbids anyone living there from practicing their first-ammendment rights (they sign them away.) involving negative comments about the town. Whether the site was blocked because of over-use or if it was blocked for more political reasons is unknown to me. I also do not know if they continue this more involved practice of checking the records themselves.

Having read the article on the contest, however, I really can't say I blame them!

4. Take steps to protect privacy. Notably, Mattell's filter software (cybernanny, I believe, but I'm not sure) has been accused of spying on the user. A good idea would be banning any software that reports back to the filtering software company. This information is often sold for profit, for uses like targeted advertising or for "spamming."

5. Allow institutions to selectively add or remove individual sites. Given the above information, I feel that this is more than reasonable. Researching Fibonacci's sequence tripped up one filter, for example – so much for a student's math homework.

6. Please endorse free and open source solutions. An open product would allow for anyone to suggest that a site be added or removed because of its content, and allows for a debate over sites that otherwise could be blocked or allowed on a whim. In the case of open software, a library could be instead required to go through the developer for a change to be made (improving the integrity of the filters). In addition, allowing for different "levels" of filtering might be desired – allowing for different levels of appropriateness similar to movie ratings. For example, while no minor should access pornography, "adult language" isn't really a problem for 16-year-old students (anyone who's ridden on the back of a school bus can vouch that most elementary school students don't have much trouble with it either, but that's another story.). As an added benefit, they're free, and libraries, schools, and the like could use the money. Unfortunately, however, I know of no open-source filters at this time (much of the tech community is anti-filter anyway, since they disagree with cencorship of all but the most objectionable content.)

7. Allowing users to gain higher levels of access in order to be able to find more diverse material upon proving age is probably a good idea. In middle school, my required reading occasionally had some amount of profanity, which nearly all filters would immediately modify or block. Filters would also block a number of perfectly legitimate phrases. Saying "I'll just be in and out of the store really quick" would be blocked by any filter that watches for the phrase "in and out" (and I'm sure that there's a filter out there that does, or will.) The upside to this is that a number of areas of interest could be blocked to younger users, such as a study on homosexuality that, while perfectly fine for an older teenager or adult to read, may not be read by children if their parents would prefer they didn't. In addition, allowing parents to selectively add and remove restrictions on various areas of interest that could be considered "gray areas" would be good. While it's fairly obvious that pornography, bomb-making recipies, marijuana growing tips, and the like should be blocked, a number of areas such as human anatomy, homosexuality, religion, and discussions or even readings of banned books (Catcher In The Rye, for example, which many schools and libraries still censor but some embrace as a literary masterpiece) and research reports on the aforementioned topics could be considered "gray areas" that some ages could be allowed or denied access to, and that parents could control more. Allowing a filter software provider of full control over what users can see, and deeming everything to be either bad or good (as is done now) is, obviously, less than desirable. Personally, I don't see what a political campaign and hardcore bestiality have in common, but may programs will block both at once and don't

discriminate. Since there is no clear-cut means of deciding what to block, etc., allowing for more flexibility is ideal.

Personally, I think a standard should be defined for filtering software:

1. NO reporting back to ANYONE other than local administrators on what users have been doing. Privacy should be protected and only necessary exceptions to that should be allowed. Corporations have no business knowing what a child does online. However, the local administrator and certain individuals (parents, perhaps teachers, etc.) should be able to review logs of what a user does (and all usage should be logged! This offers recourse in the event that a site that is inappropriate, but not yet blocked, is visited.) No one that has no business in knowing should be able to review an individual's usage of computer resources.
2. Material should be broken down into different "categories" by their topic and the objectionability of each, and a separate standard should be set for which categories are to be blocked to all users, which should be blocked to older teens, to younger teens, etc. and unless unlocked by an authorized operator (eg. A librarian) the software will assume that the user on the given station is a toddler, or a member of the most restricted group.
3. Aside from mandatory blockings (such as porn) that are simply blocked, period, parents and local administrators should be able to define restrictions for the aforementioned "gray areas," topics that may or may not be objectionable to some. While administrators would be able to specify general restrictions by user groups, parents would have the option to selectively modify their individual child's restrictions (aside, of course, from the mandatory blocks such as bona fide pornography.) A standard should be set for what gray areas will and won't be blocked, that should be enabled by default on all software, but that is modifiable by the local administrator.
4. Administrators should be able to selectively alter site lists. As demonstrated by the previous examples, a local administrator really is no less trustworthy of what should be blocked and allowed than the software developers, so as long as site visiting is logged, there should be no problem.
5. Word and phrase filters should be avoided, and only the most extreme examples used. For example: "sex" should not be blocked as the word is often used for gender and appears accidentally within a number of phrases, "cum" appears, among other places, in the word cucumber, "breast" would prevent discussion of breast cancer (America Online once inadvertently did this).

Government-produced, multi-platform software is likely a plus for this. Since this will cost a great deal of money for each institution to set up, avoiding for-pay services will be a tremendous benefit.

I would suggest finding and endorsing an open-source effort for creating filtering software and push to see the above features implemented, or for the government to spearhead an effort itself. A number of programmers would become involved for the opportunity to protect their children/nieces/nephews/neighbors and still minimize

censorship that is simple unnecessary. An open source model, under government supervision and control, would enable tremendous security and quality and minimize potential for abuse, while allowing for an amazingly rapid exposure rate for newly-appearing sites.

At any rate, I would appreciate a reply on this. This hits close to home for nearly all Internet users, especially the more technologically-inclined like myself. The simple fact is, currently available solutions simply are not ready for public use and are very much unrefined, and a fair implementation is impossible.

Sincerely,

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