Stop censors now before they burn books

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Beware the thought police who now seem intent on censoring your unfettered access to information on public library computers.

In case you missed it — and that would be difficult to do since the group has run three full-page ads in this and other newspapers — the group "Citizens for Filtering Shiawassee District Library Public Access Computers" wants to restrict access to Web sites on computers at the Shiawassee District Library's Owosso branch to keep people from looking at…heh, heh, heh…dirty pictures.

The group, in its ads, and on its Web site (Stoplibraryporn.com) makes it sound as though adult content has never existed at the library before and the current proposals will "bring pornography to our public library, using tax dollars."

The group also tries to paint its "standards" as those of the entire community. I, for one, don't want them speaking for me.

I would hope, although as is typical when dealing with public officials it's a faint one, that the library board and other city officials have the moral strength to stand up to this ham-fisted attempt at censorship.

The group tells us it's trying to protect the children. It's an interesting idea, asking the library and the city government to protect the children — you'd think it would be liberals making such a request.

I always thought it was the parents' job to make sure kids were raised correctly. Obviously, if you look around, there aren't enough people who feel the same way.

If parents don't want kids looking at adult content, maybe they should teach them to avoid it. Maybe they should teach them not to look over other peoples' shoulders, which is kind of rude anyway.

The stoplibraryporn.com people say they are looking out for their kids by stopping porn at the library. But they are actually trying to take away everyone else's right to raise their kids and teach them lessons about such things.

The group's proposed policy would stop all children 9 and younger from using any computer unless an adult is standing next to them. Kids 10 to 18 would need a permission slip filled out by a parent before they could use a computer. Their policy further restricts Internet access for those younger than 13 (ridiculous) and require the same parental form for those 14 to 18.

They also want to have forms so people can complain about "inappropriate Web sites." Who, I'd like to know, is going to determine what's inappropriate and who is going to review that and make a determination? I already know my standards don't match the censorship group's.

It's certainly a great idea to throw up road blocks to kids using computers because someone might see something. We don't want them to be too technologically inclined in this simple, non-technological society we live in.

Also, just to point out, anyone 18 is an adult and doesn't need your permission to do practically anything.

This issue first came to light several months ago when a woman claimed her 10-year-old granddaughter got an eyeful of those…heh, heh, heh…dirty pictures. I don't recall all the particulars, but I don't believe the child suffered any seizures or an aneurysm or began speaking in tongues. I suspect if grandma hadn't blown a gasket the kid would have forgotten about the entire experience in about 20 minutes.

Since then, the library board has done some increased regulation of the situation (it's currently filtering everything) and is in the process of creating a policy describing the use of its computers.

Under the policy, the majority of the library's computers would include filtering software designed to lock out sites that are not appropriate for all ages. A few computers, though, will remain unfiltered so adults may view any Web site they wish. The unfiltered computers, located on the main level, rather than the children's level, also will be set apart where casual observers would have some difficulty in viewing the screens.

In this era of "It has to be my way and nothing else," it seems to be a reasonable compromise. People who don't care if their access to information is taken away can use a filtered computer while those who like to have all their rights can use one of the unfiltered computers.

The anti-porn group quotes Supreme Court precedent it portrays as though a library must filter content. Not so — the court only ruled that if a library chooses to filter content it can't be sued.

I believe, though, the court erred. The entire purpose of a library is to provide free access to information — popular and unpopular. Filtering it in any way bars the flow of information. Any library that does so subverts its own mission.

I applaud the SDL's director for saying the organization endorses a patron's right to choose. I hope the board backs Stephen Flayer on this issue.

If all the computers are filtered, what happens when I want to do research on something like breast cancer, rectal cancer, testicular cancer or even erectile dysfunction?

Even though the group claims those kind of sites are available despite filtering, there remain many filtering systems that will block all those things.

What about photos of classical sculpture? Pretty much all nudes. Will those be filtered out? Could be.

Let's suppose, though, the library board does fall in line with this book-burning crowd. Where do their demands end?

I can go through the library right now and find dozens of books and magazines, some with pictures, that portray sexuality in some way. Some are tawdry, of course, but others are informational in content.

Any kid who knows how to read and has a vague notion of what sex is — even a 10-year-old — knows where to find those books (Twilight, for instance) and magazines (National Geographic anyone?). If the Stoplibraryporn.com people think otherwise they are kidding themselves. It's as easy, if not easier, for a kid to look at or read those as it is to use a computer.

Those books will be next on their list. Bet on it.

They can shine their motives as bright as they like, but censorship never illuminates like the free flow of knowledge.