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Dad, can I borrow the browser? Unfiltered Web can faze freethinkers

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[Sam McManis](#)

Brow-furrowed parents of computer-savvy teens -- hey, are there any other kind these days? -- filed into a high school cafeteria in Moraga the other night to learn about Internet filtering, the software tool that supposedly blocks hard-core porn from impressionable eyes.

This wasn't some book-burning, censorship-frothing horde, though. It was merely a group of conflicted parents, children of the '60s who still retain many civil-liberty ideals from their youth, wondering how to quell the avalanche of online smut directed at their progeny.

They seemed overwhelmed by technology, overmatched by their kids' Net knowledge. They came for help.

"I consider myself computer savvy," said "Laurie," mother of four sons who sat in the second row, "but I still don't know as much as my boys."

Some in the crowd, like Laurie, were aware of the legal controversy surrounding the Children's Internet Protection Act, which would require libraries and schools receiving federal funding to filter access to porn sites.

A federal court in Philadelphia is expected to rule next month whether the act is constitutional, but these Moraga parents seemed more concerned about dealing with the nuts and bolts of filtering, its fallibility and the ingenious ways their kids circumvent the filters.

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They kept pens poised over legal pads as Randy Duke, a Silicon Valley software executive and Web-filter advocate, taught them about keyboard buffering and checking browsers for past use. Chortles ensued when Duke showed them how a "Best of the Christian Web" page and the Boy Scouts of America site were blocked by Microsoft Internet Explorer's adult-content filter.

But the room became so quiet you could almost hear the audience cringe in unison when Duke related his next Internet anecdote.

"When I first got involved in this work," Duke said, "I was a vice president of a software company and was doing a research project with my 10- year-old son. He wanted to know about Hanukkah for a school report. So we went on a search engine and found a site about Hanukkah and Christmas songs and their common heritage . . . "

He paused for dramatic effect.

"I clicked," he continued, "and it took us to 'Slut Central: How to use a dildo.' I thought, 'Whoa!' "

Two words in the above paragraph are probably graphic enough to have this column blocked by Web filtering programs. And that would constitute censorship,

free-speech advocates argue.

Opponents of the Internet protection act have testified to federal judges in Philadelphia that 15 percent of Web sites that are blocked by filters are not objectionable. Consumer Reports last year reported that some filters it tested blocked legitimate sites about breast cancer, for instance, while letting in up to 90 percent of adult porn sites.

"Filtering is an imperfect solution, I'll be the first to admit," said Duke,

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chief marketing officer at Reallusion.com, a San Jose maker of graphic animation software. "But we don't live in a perfect world. If my son or daughter is going to go online by themselves, they're going to have a filter until they are 18.

"My kids understand it's not that I don't trust them. It's that I don't trust the other guy. I tell parents the absolute best filter out there is you. I know I sound like a Nazi parent, but there have to be limits."

Duke travels the country advising parents and community groups about online porn directed at children. He says he sympathizes but disagrees with First Amendment advocates who say protecting children with filters tramples on adult library users' rights. He says librarians were unanimous in denouncing him and Web filters when he spoke last year at an Association of Bay Area Governments summit.

"I asked them if they'd have a problem sending people to www.whitehouse.com, " Duke said, "and over half of the librarians said, 'Mr. Duke, that's the White House.' I said, 'No, that's a porn site.' My point was, there are savvy businessmen out there with deceptive URLs to get your kids to porn sites."

Why not filter out such sites? Duke said libraries and schools already practice what he called "censorship" by not carrying Hustler magazine and explicitly erotic books on the shelves. "At least put the same controls they have for text-based materials," he said.

Moraga parents seemed to be won over by Duke's arguments. One parent with two teen boys, "Beth," said she's all for free speech but wants to protect her kids until they come of age.

"I'm shocked they don't have filters in our libraries," she said. "I'm all for them. We're not always around to supervise them at the library and, you know, boys can be tempted by things like that."

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If parents don't think their kids are tempted, said Lafayette psychologist Robert Marino, they are fooling themselves.

"You say, 'I trust my kid, and he won't go for this online porno stuff,' but it would be almost unnatural for a teenager not to be curious," Marino told the crowd. "The problem is a 13-year-old doesn't yet know what's normative in sexuality, so being exposed to graphic images of bestiality or group sex can skew their perception of normal."

Not to mention radically skewing teens' perception of the executive branch of the government, should they happen to slip up and type in "www.whitehouse.com" instead of ".gov."

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