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Should UK universities block access to parts of the web?

Blog entry

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Should UK universities block access to parts of the web?

🕒 01/08/2014 📁 Internet 🛠 content filtering, filters, freedom of information, Higher Education, Information literacy, internet, Internet Watch Foundation, literacy 👤 The Informed Team

The following post was submitted by Daniel Payne.

Either a subset of the internet – or no internet – is ever accessible to any individual. We are never using the Internet, if that even exists. This is due to a variety of positive and negative mechanisms which include the state, the law, the self, whether you actually have internet access at all, internet service providers, friends, teachers, financial situation, cultural reasons, and your mum.

It might come as a surprise to learn that universities and other higher education institutions throughout the UK choose to block categories of the internet beyond what is required of them by law, from sex and abortion, to naturism, online greeting cards, and marijuana. This is often referred to as “content-filtering” by the companies who perform the blocking, since this sounds less bad.

As information professionals working in the libraries of these institutions, should we care that we are working in an environment which automatically excludes whole categories of the internet? Why does a university pay money to do this, and who decides which categories to block and why?

There are of course parts of the internet which are blocked before the university steps in. The **Internet Watch Foundation** (IWF) maintains a constantly changing list called the Child Abuse Image Content list (CAIC). Companies which give us access to the internet subscribe to this list and block these parts of web. There are also websites blocked by order of a court. These are usually file sharing sites where major infringement of intellectual property occurs. Try accessing: <http://www.thepiratebay.se>.

In addition to that which is legally required, many universities license third-party content filtering software such as BrightCloud, Websense, Smoothwall, Bloxx, and Fortiguard [1]. In response to a request for a webpage, the software will either allow or block access depending on which categories the university has selected (and as is the case in some universities, the profile of the individual requesting it).

So what categories are universities choosing to block? Under the Freedom of Information Act, I

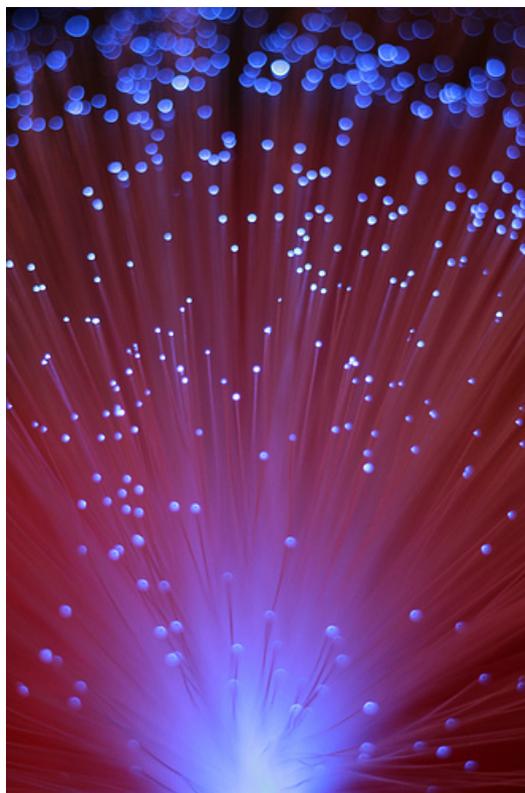


Image c/o Gerardofegan on Flickr.

contacted universities to find out whether any blocking on their networks occurred, and if so, what categories they blocked. Where universities claimed an exemption to disclose a list of URLs due to perceived security implications, subsequent requests were made to ascertain the “categories” by which websites were blocked (i.e. pornography).

Here is the good news: of the 119 higher education institutions I received a response from, 63% confirmed they did not carry out internet blocking [2]. Indeed, some institutions such as Imperial College, pointed out that blocking parts of the internet would be against the principles of academic freedom.

Here is (some) of the bad news. A full list of responses is available on figshare [3]:

- 10% refused to confirm or deny that they did or didn't block parts of the internet.
- Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance blocks the category “abortion” for junior users.
- In addition to “adult”, Queen’s University Belfast also blocks “naturism”.
- University of Aberdeen and Nottingham Trent University block “marijuana”.
- There are a whole host of vague categories such as “questionable”, “tasteless”, “extreme politics”, “violence”, “unethical”, and “intolerance”.

Universities who carry out the category-based blocking described above are keen to point out that they have mechanisms in place where an individual can request that a block is lifted. However, this can often involve seeking permission from the head of department, or submitting an evidence form which justifies your need to access that material; processes which will never be immediate and could be humiliating. Should an adult have to get permission to access porn? Are the number of adult individuals in UK universities getting off on porn on library computers in full view of everyone else endemic enough to warrant this? What about a 15 year old looking up abortion?

The 10% which refused to provide any information at all generally did so by claiming an exemption under section 31(1)(a) of the Act, which permits public bodies to withhold information in the interests of the prevention and detection of crime. My only comment on this would be how surprising it is that 63% of universities didn't think this.

Universities and these content-filtering companies cannot or will not release very detailed information on these categories, since doing so would provide information for the individuals or organisations behind those URLs to attempt to circumvent their designated classification. We therefore don't really know much about how companies decide which webpages are “unethical”, or “questionable”.

Universities and their libraries are about creating, disseminating, questioning, and archiving information. The biggest possible subset of the Internet out there in the wild should not be reduced any further by universities according to an arbitrary, “undesirable” set of categories, but offered alongside digital literacy skills which empower students to judge information for themselves, not make judgements on their behalf.

[1] Some universities freely volunteered the name of their content filtering software. Some, when requested, disclosed this information. Others specifically refused due to “commercial” interest

reasons. The list of content-filtering companies here have all been mentioned by at least one university.

[2] Where a university responded by stating that it only blocked malware/spam sites, this was counted as a “no blocking” response.

[3] Payne, Daniel (2014): Categories of websites blocked by UK universities. figshare. <http://dx.doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.1106875> Retrieved 17:12, Jul 23, 2014 (GMT)

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2 thoughts on “Should UK universities block access to parts of the web?”



01/08/2014 at 14:37

This is a interesting article. 63% of universities were happy to disclose information, slightly worrying that the remaining institutions were not as clear.

ivan teece

great read,

Thank you

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