



Filtering inappropriate content in school

Filtering inappropriate content at Denbigh Secondary School

Denbigh School (<http://www.denbigh.net/>), a technology college for 12- to 18-year-old students in Milton Keynes, uses an Internet filtering system to prevent students from accessing inappropriate web sites - and not just those that might feature sex or violence. "No football sites are allowed either", says deputy head Chris Woods. "Otherwise the kids would just waste time".

A ban on the national game isn't automatic, though. The school's Internet server is pre-programmed to block all the obvious material, but the school's management can also choose to bar additional sites so, for example, the Manchester United home page had to be added to the banned list manually.

The system also blocks access to sites that use certain keywords, although such a catch-all approach can affect the innocent too - biology students suffered in this way until certain sites were de-classified.

Those who spend all their time attempting to get on to prohibited sites are soon detected by the computer. Every time this happens they lose points, from an initial total of a thousand. When they reach zero, the system logs them out and sends a message to a teacher.

Within the 'First Class' environment (<http://www.softarc.com/>), staff at Denbigh School allow students to use their own names in e-mail addresses and the college doesn't monitor every e-mail. The use of Internet newsgroups is not permitted as Woods considers this to be inappropriate.

In addition, he points out that over 80% of his students have access to a computer at home where they are beyond the school's supervision and, he concludes, "There has to be a point where you've taken every reasonable precaution".



Filtering inappropriate content at Cornwallis Secondary School

In a few weeks time, Ken Allen, deputy head of Cornwallis School (<http://www.cornwallis.kent.sch.uk/>), a secondary school in Maidstone, will have the power to stop his students using the online version of the Encyclopaedia Britannica.

Allen is unlikely to exercise his power to bar access to this publication - much as some of his pupils might like him to - but he uses the encyclopaedia ban as an example of the flexibility available to a school that operates an Internet filtering system on its own local area network (LAN).

Cornwallis will have its system up and running by next month and, explains Allen, "We will have total control over what we do. We will be able to decide what's in the best interests of the school and what we want to do."

Like many schools, Cornwallis also has unsuitable sites filtered out by its Internet service provider. The Technology College Trust (<http://www.tctrust.org.uk/>) performs this function for Cornwallis and the school is very happy with its work, but running an Internet filtering system on the school LAN as well gives additional benefits.

Apart from being able to tailor the system to a school's particular needs, once staff have identified an undesirable web site, a filter which operates at the LAN level enables them to use their discretion and, if they want to, take instant action to block access to that site.

A LAN-based system can also monitor which web sites are accessed by individual students. If there are persistent attempts to access unsuitable sites, this will be recorded by the system, so, says Ken Allen, who may after all have slight Big Brother tendencies, "We'll be able to find out exactly what they've been doing."