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THIS STORY

Man vs. machine: Internet filter software no substitute

By **WILLIAM HELLER**

Last Updated: May 11, 2001

The New York City public school system has installed an Internet filter in all of its schools with Internet access. It is called I-Gear, and blocks all sites deemed to be inappropriate for schoolchildren. Under a recent congressional mandate, schools and libraries around the country will be required to install similar software.

While many nervous teachers and parents may welcome this filter, I wanted to keep an open mind. So, in the tradition of John Henry and Garry Kasparov, I decided to go up against the machine to see if I could beat it.

As a general rule of thumb, any typing error when entering a common Web address will lead you to a pornography site. So I decided to start off easy, typing into the browser two known porn sites spelled much like well-known non-porn sites. The filter successfully blocked them.

I then did a search for "sex." I got a list of categories, but wasn't able to follow the links, not even "safe sex." I did a search for "breast" and got another category list. I was able to get information for "breast cancer," "breast feeding" and even "breast augmentation," but not "breast fetish."

One point for I-Gear.

I did a search for "cocaine." I got Cocaine Anonymous, which is fine, but I also got a site that seemed to be aimed at the active user.

One point for me, and it's a tie game.

I did a search for "Ku Klux Klan" and was denied. I did a search for "KKK" and was again denied. But when I did a search for "white pride," I got a list of sites that, shall we say, were not shy about expressing their opinions. The filter wouldn't let me follow the links for "Jew Watch," "Skinheads" or the "White Aryan Resistance," but when I clicked on the link for the "American

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Nazi Party," I was greeted with a giant swastika and the notice that white people were in a fight for their lives.

Bill, 2. I-Gear, 1.

I did a search to see if I could get information on how to make a bomb. All of the sites I found were blocked, except for one site showing me how to make a plutonium bomb. Since plutonium is not widely available, I'll give the point to I-Gear, but I also found a site on how to pick locks, with instructions and diagrams, so I'll take a point as well.

Bill, 3. I-Gear, 2.

I did a search for each of George Carlin's seven words you can't say on television. Six of them were blocked, while the seventh led to innocuous sites, one about a painter whose last name is spelled a little bit like the word. When I did a search for a more offensive expression, the offending word came on the screen, though the filter didn't allow me to follow the link. A search for "nude" was denied, but a search for "naked" brought up such non-porn topics as The Naked Lunch and the rock group Barenaked Ladies.

I did a search for the word "pornography" and was denied, but the banner that came up was explicitly pornographic. Oops.

I checked out several e-commerce sites, and was able to get to eBay, Amazon.com and

Kozmo.com with no problem.

I tried to get to Pokemon pages and was denied.

I did a search for "God" (as we all do at some time in our lives) and had no problem getting to any religious sites. In the interest of fairness, I did a search for "Satan." Again, I had no problem getting to any of the sites. I even found contact information for a New York branch of the Church of Satan.

Final Score: Bill 6, I-Gear 3.

OK, so I won, but that's hardly the point. The filter may be effective in preventing someone from accessing some inappropriate sites, but it cannot prevent all inappropriate material. That means it cannot serve as a substitute for vigilance.

William Heller is a professional development specialist with Teaching Matters, a New York-based non-profit organization that trains teachers to use computers in the classroom.

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