

# Book Reviews



**Brody, Peter, Jenny Craven, and Shelagh Fisher.** *Extremism and the Internet*. Manchester, Eng.: Centre for Research in Library & Information Management, Manchester Metropolitan University (British Library Research & Innovation Report, 145), 1999. 95p. (ISBN 0-9535-3430-8).

This thorough report will make interesting reading for American librarians, especially for its comparative discussion of the issues as they are viewed from the United Kingdom and the European Union and contrasted with the United States. As opposed to the U.S., the U.K. (and its library association) does not have written constitutions and thus has no Bill of Rights. Although there is evident controversy in the U.S. over filtering, there is much clarity in our Library Bill of Rights and its various interpretations. The U.K.'s library association has a number of policy statements that apply, but it appears that they lack the kind of legitimacy that comes from a constitutional framework.

The authors viewed more than one hundred extremist Web sites of organizations extolling hate, racism and white supremacy, homophobia, and fascism. Various groups that monitor these sites describe a universe of up to 600 sites, and the number keeps growing. One interesting insight is that the authors found most of these sites were quite sophisticated and did not include overt messages inciting racial violence. This made the messages more appealing to young and impressionable Web surfers. The authors also found that U.S. white power groups predominate. The report covers both legal and technical issues, describes how libraries are trying to deal with the problems, summarizes findings, and makes recommendations for future research. There is also a selected bibliography.

Some years ago, *Progressive Librarian* called for articles on the effect of new

technologies on librarianship and society at large. The editors gave my brief response (summer 1992) the title, "Liberation Technology" (although they should have added a question mark). My point was that new electronic technologies provided a new organizing space for progressive opposition movements, including e-mail during the coup attempt against Gorbachev in the Soviet Union and faxes sent supporting the students at Tiananmen Square in Beijing. This report makes the same argument for the opposite political direction. Extremist groups are able to bypass national laws to get their messages out. For example, both Germany and France have laws prohibiting material denying the Holocaust, but Web sites in other European countries effectively go around such laws. The report also addresses the possibility of international treaties to harmonize national practices but holds out little chance for success due to diverse national situations.

National regulation, self-regulation, filtering, labeling, and encryption are discussed. Filtering is called a "blunt-edged tool" because it always blocks too much. The U.S. Library Bill of Rights is against labeling, although labeling is becoming more widespread. Encryption plays no role because it counters the hate groups' needs to reach a wider audience.

The discussion of censorship notes the need to balance the right of unrestricted access with responsibilities to the communities served and quotes Mason's conclusion that "We are struggling to solve a radically new problem with old paradigms." This reviewer would like to ask who among us would be completely comfortable in criticizing (the ineffective) German and French Holocaust denial laws? Should we be upset if Cambodia and East Timor followed Germany and France?

This surprisingly reminds one of the debates on library sanctions against South Africa. The Social Responsibilities Round Table Guidelines adopted by many ALA groups noted in section 2.3: "As professionals, we must strive to balance our methods to promote the free flow of information with work activities that are morally and politically responsible." However, the 1990 ALA membership meeting adopted the guidelines with the following change to meet intellectual freedom concerns: "We note that the lack of the free flow of information to and from the mass democratic organizations and anti-apartheid institutions in South Africa has inhibited the evolution of South African democracy" (1990 Membership Document #4). Intellectual freedom advocates argued that the potential harm resulting from free flow of information to apartheid institutions must be tolerated to uphold a higher moral purpose. However, one must wonder how this applies to the extreme, but real, case of nuclear bomb information that was transferred to the apartheid regime. Or put it this way, should a reference librarian give a skinhead a freely available manual for bomb making, or should such information be freely available on a skinhead Web site?

One common way to deal with these problems is to adopt acceptable use policies. This report gives a number of examples, and here we see real differences between the U.K. and the U.S.; typical U.K. policies are much more restrictive than U.S. policies. For example, from the Suffolk County Council: "We will not censor access to information (any more than we do for books) but you may not look at information which may contravene the law." And, "If we know of sources of such material we will make them inaccessible so that they cannot be found through our terminals."

The report concludes with the following nonconsecutive contradictory paragraphs:

Even so, there must be limits. Just as society will not tolerate the use of the Internet to promote child por-

nography, there must be some extremist content which is simply unacceptable. The promotion of hatred, especially against vulnerable minorities, and incitement to violence have no place in a democratic society. Libraries are at the forefront of this dilemma: just where should the line be drawn?

And,

In the final analysis, librarians can ensure users are aware of the dangers, but they cannot make ethical decisions for them. Attempting to control the material people access would deny them the right to see both sides of an argument, and the freedom to judge for themselves.

An intervening paragraph advocates open access to the Internet, acceptable use policies, and lists of positive and useful Web sites, but the authors do not draw any lines. Where our core values conflict, we may not be able to fine-tune such policies, but we must have tools to approach specific situations in a logical manner. Perhaps the debate on boycotting the apartheid regime in South Africa has provided that tool. Whether in the U.K., Ghana, Thailand, or Brazil, we need to balance intellectual freedom with social responsibility. Each library association, government body, library, and librarian will have to figure out how to implement such balance depending on the local context.—*Alfred Kagan, University of Illinois-Urbana.*

**Brosnan, Mark J.** *Technophobia: The Psychological Impact of Information Technology.* London and New York: Routledge, 1998. 220p. \$75 cloth (ISBN 0-4151-3596-6); \$22.99 paper (ISBN 0-4151-3597-4). LC 97-39321.

This book is not the book I thought it would be. I had mistakenly assumed from the title that it would relate directly to the library profession, imparting sage advice on how to help both users and