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Chicago Library Defies Angry Mother, Keeps Internet Porn



ILLINOIS—Suburban mom Megan Fox uses libraries regularly to home-school her children, but what she said she saw on a recent visit to a local library left her aghast: three men on three different library computers viewing pornography.

And, according to library policy, there's nothing wrong with that.

Fox wrote a letter to Orland Park library officials and followed up at a library board meeting last month, confronting officials about their policy and posting a [video online](#) of the meeting that has been viewed nearly 10,000 times.

The Orland Park Public Library cites the First Amendment in explaining why it allows patrons to look up anything — including pornography — on its adult-only computers so long as the material isn't illegal or obscene. The district's stance is an anomaly in the south and southwest suburbs, but other local library districts, including Chicago's, have policies similar to that in Orland Park.

"Let's see how long their so-called First Amendment rights to porn can stand up against angry parents," said Fox, who lives in a nearby suburb but said she uses the Orland Park library often. "Who do they think they are?"

The controversy is the latest installment in a debate that stirs passions on both sides and has lacked a cure-all answer for decades. How should public libraries balance access to information with keeping potentially inappropriate material away from children? With the advent of new technologies, the dilemma extends beyond books

and into websites, photos and videos, making an attempt at balance even more daunting.

"We do not filter access to our adult computer area," library spokeswoman Bridget Bittman said. "We believe people have a right to access that legal information."

Support for Orland Park

Orland Park's policies have a powerful ally in the Chicago-based American Library Association, the largest and oldest library advocacy group in the country.

The association tracks debates nationwide and lends its opinion when a library faces backlash for the material it provides.

"It's up to the library to provide as much as possible so people can learn to think critically about what is out there," said Barbara Jones, director of the association's office of intellectual freedom. "If they don't agree with it, they can go on to another (Internet) page."

The association says libraries that restrict the ability to view certain images or videos online put themselves at risk of lawsuits.

Deborah Caldwell-Stone is deputy director in the association's intellectual freedom office. She outlined the issues library boards have to consider when making policies that include Internet access and patron behavior.

"Libraries have to balance so many concerns — financial, legal, community interest and needs and things like that," Caldwell-Stone said. "Lots of libraries are walking a tightrope."

It's ultimately up to the library board and the community to decide what works best to address safety concerns and best practice, she said.

Reading the courts

There are differing opinions about which court rulings are the best legal groundwork for library boards to follow when drafting Internet and computer policies.

Dan Kleinman writes about the debate on his website, SafeLibraries.org, which keeps track of library policies. He cites a 2003 Supreme Court ruling that he said allows libraries to ban pornography without fear of a lawsuit.

"No library has ever been sued because someone said, 'You blocked my pornography,'" Kleinman said. "It has never happened. Not once."

Attorneys say libraries that ban pornography on computers are treading on uncertain legal ground because there's no legal definition for pornography, and obscenity must be decided in court. Some argue the case is already closed.

"Banning pornography raises the possibility of subjective and arbitrary ejection policies based on a librarian's individual tastes," attorney Robert Corn-Revere wrote in an email.