



June 24–June 30, 1999

**CyberAngels Compare
Safe Surfing Notes**

The provocatively titled program “Kids Have Rights/Parents Have Responsibilities/Librarians Have Ulcers!” drew an overflow crowd, as well as a C-Span TV crew. Cosponsored by the Intellectual Freedom Round Table and the ALA Council and division intellectual freedom committees, the program offered a spectrum of approaches to striking a workable balance between parental concerns and kids’ educational needs, with local control the maxim of every panelist.

Declaring that kids consider chatting with strangers to be “the whole fun of the Internet,” Parry Aftab, executive director of the online safety group CyberAngels, reminded ALAers, “You can teach people how to deal with dangerous drivers without exposing them to dangerous drivers.” Aftab urged librarians to help create “an informed parent pool” who will partner with them in teaching children that “stranger danger applies online.”

The U.S. coordinator of UNESCO’s Innocence in Danger initiative to foster safe Internet experiences for children, Aftab also emphasized the need for librarians and concerned parents to exchange ideas instead of “separating into camps.” Still, she emphasized, there are limits to what overscheduled parents can do, a view with which the audience apparently agreed. When she asked, “How many people think parents are going to go to the library with their children and supervise what they do on the computer?” the room remained silent.

Dismissing across-the-board filtering since “I don’t even know a Supreme Court justice who can sit there and only censor illegal materials,” Aftab instead favored SmartCard technology that could encode a child’s library card so that a youngster wouldn’t be able to surf unfiltered, or at all, without parental permission.

A reactor panel of three librarians described a range of local solutions their libraries employ. “Problems arise when people think they are anonymous,” Pam Klipisch of the Hayner Public Library in Alton, Illinois, said, explaining that her library’s small-town setting precludes the need for filters. That approach didn’t work for Glendora (Calif.) Public Library, according to Jill Patterson, who countered that her library installed blocking software for minors because “the problems we have are with patrons we know very well—now much better than we ever wanted to.” The Tampa-Hillsborough County

(Fla.) Public Library also filters now at the behest of county commissioners, explained Susan Oliver, who worked with Patterson on the industry-critical Internet Filter Assessment Project in 1997.

Admitting that librarians sometimes have “an idealized notion of what parent’s skills should be,” Intellectual Freedom Committee Chair Steve Herb nonetheless urged the profession to bear in mind that “children are citizens of this country too” when they craft policies. Asserting that nothing “protects children better than emergent literacy,” he proclaimed—in a not-too-veiled allusion to Dr. Laura—that anyone that discourages people from supporting libraries “because of a stance ALA has taken on filters is no friend of children.”

Later in the week Herb also addressed an Association of College and Research Libraries program on the perils of open Internet access in academic settings. Among the pitfalls: authentication and privacy issues (“anonymity is disappearing rapidly,” Herb noted); access policies (Herb urged librarians to ensure limits on terminal use are based on management of time rather than content); reliability of information (we must be sure that “we haven’t lost our ability to evaluate materials just because they’re not print”); and the temptation to charge fees for added new technologies.

He urged librarians to develop partnerships to let teaching faculty know that “the issue of access to online material has as much to do with academic freedom as any type of material.”