

# INTERNET ACCESS AND SERVICES: PROCEDURAL GUIDELINES REGARDING LIMITATIONS AND OBSCENE MATERIALS

**OVERVIEW:** Access to and use of the Athenaeum Internet workstations is a privilege and should be treated as such by all users. Electronic information resources are to be used in a responsible manner consistent with the educational and informational purposes for which they are provided. Violators of library policy, including policies for Internet Access and Service, may lose the right to use those resources and ultimately library privileges. While the library's professional and paraprofessional staff may immediately suspend a person's Internet or library use privileges for cause, longer suspensions should be determined by the Library Director, or supervisor in the absence of the Director.

**INTRA-STAFF COMMUNICATION:** It is important that Internet policy enforcement problems are documented and shared with appropriate coworkers. So that repeat offenses can be addressed promptly, chronic or particularly difficult problems should be documented on Incident Report forms and filed in the department for coworkers to review.

**ENFORCEMENT OF TIME LIMITATIONS:** The library policy provides for time restrictions on the use of Internet workstations. The short-term Internet workstations are also the library's OPAC (Online Public Access Computer) workstations, and time restrictions are necessary to ensure the public's access to the library catalog. While thirty minutes on the Internet goes by quickly and is probably insufficient for a comprehensive search, it is the library's position that a brief searching opportunity is preferable to none at all.

Since short-term Internet access has been introduced on the same workstations as online catalogs, the most common complaint has been that some people tend to monopolize the workstations with Internet-related activities that effectively blocks public access to catalog information. To prevent this from happening the library must enforce the time limitations provided by the policy statement.

- X If in the judgment of the librarian on duty a user has exceeded the time allowed for the use of the Internet work stations, the patron should be approached, the policy with regards to time limitations should be briefly explained, and the person should be asked to surrender the work station. If the user questions the request he/she should be provided a copy of the Internet Access and Services policy statement.
- X As a means of providing equitable access to the library's catalog and Internet workstations for all, patrons will be limited to one thirty-minute session per day on the short-term Internet workstations and one one-hour session per day on the long-term Internet workstations.
- X Surrendering the use of one short term Internet workstation because a time limit has been exceeded does not allow the patron to initiate a new block of time by switching to another short term Internet workstation.

**DISPLAY OF OBSCENE MATERIALS:** The deliberate display of obscene materials is prohibited by law. Obscene materials are defined<sup>1</sup> as: (a) Whether an average person, applying contemporary community standards would find the work, taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest; (b) whether the work depicts or describes, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by the applicable state law; and (c) whether the work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value. Patrons may need to be reminded that the library's computer terminals are located in public areas that are shared with library users and staff of all ages, backgrounds and sensibilities. Individuals are expected to consider this diversity and respect the sensibilities of others when accessing potentially offensive information or images.

- X If obscene images are displayed on the screen, advise the patron that accessing such sites does not constitute an acceptable use of the library's Internet service and request that the patron exit the site.
- X In many – perhaps most – cases the evidence that a patron has accessed obscene sites is more circumstantial (i.e. where such sites are left minimized on the work stations for others to find). When such minimized sites are discovered by library staff they should be immediately removed.
- X If there is evidence that a patron is responsible for calling up these sites, the person should be advised that accessing such sites does not constitute an acceptable use of the library's Internet service and request that the patron refrain from visiting such sites while at the library in the future. As much as possible, preliminary contacts should be informational, not accusatory or confrontational. If the patron denies calling up unacceptable sites, especially on a preliminary contact where the evidence is more circumstantial, allow the person to “save face” by accepting their denial while letting them know that such searches are contrary to library policy.
- X Repeated offenses should be addressed more assertively. If there is direct evidence that such sites have been visited (i.e. images seen on the screen), then the patron should be warned that further inappropriate use of the Internet resources will result in the suspension of Internet use privileges. If the patron is already aware of the prohibition (documented through previous Incident Reports), then the person should be asked to surrender the Internet workstation, and an Incident Report forwarded to the Library Director documenting the offense(s) for further disciplinary action.

**LIMITING NOISE:** Patrons using Internet sites or library software with audio effects must use the library's headphones (available for checkout at the Circulation Department). Library

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<sup>1</sup> The standard for “obscenity” was set forth in Miller v. California, 413 U.S. 15 (1973). The law pertaining to obscenity is substantially more complicated than the Miller test largely because it is so difficult to determine whether certain material is obscene, or merely objectionable.

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staff who hear these sounds will approach the patron and request they keep the volume set at a level that makes these effects inaudible to anyone else.

**E-MAIL AND CHAT ROOMS:** Library policy is intentionally ambivalent with regard to e-mail and chat rooms. The library does not facilitate their use, nor does it prevent it. Patrons who express concern or dismay that others are “just playing games,” “just checking e-mail,” or “just using chat” on the short-term Internet computers should be informed that the library recognizes each patrons legal right to use his/her time on the computer in whatever manner he/she chooses, as long as it does not violate library policy.