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An Interview with David Burt

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Lake Oswego Public Library Information Technology Librarian, David Burt, is one of the best known names in Librarianship these days as a result of his Internet Policies site on the WWW (see *Public Libraries*, May/June 1997, pg. 156. An update of his article "Policies for the Use of Public Library Workstations" is in this issue of OLA Quarterly). He is perhaps even better known for his non-profit organization, *Filtering Facts*, launched in July, 1997, which encourages libraries to voluntarily adopt filters. The group's home page is: www.filteringfacts.org. David's article, "In Defense of Filtering" appeared in the August, 1997, *American Libraries*. The following interview with David was recorded on November 14, 1997 and has been edited only slightly for the sake of space limitations.

CP: David, I think it is entirely possible that, in this world of "instant" communication, your name is better known in library circles than the President of ALA. But I've noticed that many of those writing about you have very little information about your background. Could you tell *OLA Quarterly* readers a bit about yourself—your personal and professional background?

DB: I've been a librarian since 1992 when I got my Master's Degree in Library Science from the University of Washington. After that I went to work for the New York Public Library and I worked in the branches and out on Staten Island. After that I was in the Technical Services Department of NYPL where I worked on computer related projects. I came out here to work for the Lake Oswego Public Library in January, 1996. I'm 36 years old, married. I grew up in Corvallis, Oregon and went to school there. I got my undergraduate degree in history from the University of Washington.

CP: Please explain how you started your Internet Policy site.

DB: We have been planning to offer Internet access here at the Lake Oswego Library for a long time and my boss (Library Director Carole Dickerson) had directed me to look into policies that other libraries were using. I started doing that and wrote an article on my findings for the *PNLA Quarterly*. I decided this would make a neat web site because I noticed that a lot of librarians posted to lists like Pub Lib and

Web for Lib asking about "how do you handle the Internet?". So I started collecting policies and writing a research project out of (the information) and that's how it all got started and led to the article in *Public Libraries* last year.

CP: When I was visiting Boston last May, I made a trip to the venerable Boston Public Library which is in the process of having its original architecture and art restored. I chatted with the Young Adult Librarian on duty about the Boston mayor's requirement that the library filter its Internet stations for minors. She asked what Oregon library I was from, and when I said Lake Oswego Public, she exclaimed, "Oh! That is where David Burt works. His site has been so helpful." Was it your research into Internet Policies which led to your starting "Filtering Facts?"

DB: That was part of it, but mostly protecting children from what's on the Internet. And also, I wanted to make sure that the media and the public knew that there was a substantial minority of librarians who agreed that children shouldn't be exposed to that in a public library.

CP: The views expressed in "Filtering Facts" have made you a very controversial figure in library land. First, I'd like to ask you to explain why you started "FF" and, then, what the response has been.

DB: What really motivated me to action after that was what I felt was kind of a hard line stance that the American Library Association took in resolutions they passed at the San Francisco convention. Also at that San Francisco convention was a program called "To Filter or Not To Filter" that was sort of billed to look as though it was going to be a debate about filtering and everybody who was on the panel was against filtering so I really felt like my point of view wasn't being expressed and it really needed to be.

David Burt points out information to Carolyn Peake at the Lake Oswego Public Library where both work.



CP: The allegation which I read over and over again is that you are closely aligned with the groups "Family Friendly Libraries" and "Enough is Enough." What is your relationship to these groups?

DB: We talk. I have never accepted money from them. "Filtering Facts" is not affiliated with either of these two groups and has never taken any contributions from them. We do communicate; we share information, we share resources: but we, "Filtering Facts," only have one goal and that is to promote the use of filtering in libraries. These other groups have all kinds of other goals too that "Filtering Facts" does not agree with. We've only worked together on this one specific issue.

CP: It has been suggested that these groups, and perhaps the religious right, is financing you. Is there any truth to this?

DB: At first I used to worry that I wasn't going to get much money because I felt I needed a lot, and actually it turns out I don't really need a lot of money to do what I do. Basically, what I do is provide information for people and I speak to the media and just have a web site that does that, and I make long distance phone calls. It doesn't cost a lot of money so money isn't an issue. I have gotten a handful of small donations from individuals. None of them, as far as I know, have been from employees of filtering companies or members of either of those organizations—but they could be.

CP: You have been quoted as saying that your sole concern is protecting children from pornography on the Internet. Does that statement, in fact, accurately reflect your views? And what is your definition of pornography?

DB: Yes, that statement does accurately reflect my views and that is my primary concern: protecting children on the Internet. My definition of pornography is material whose primary purpose is to sexually titillate and really has no other kind of legitimate purpose to it.

CP: An article titled "The Mind of a Censor" by Jonathan Wallace which was posted to the ALA OIF list November 10, refers to publications which have been blocked by filters, among them "The Ethical Spectacle" which included a short story by Mr. Wallace who is an attorney and the author, with Mark Mangan, of the book *Sex, Laws, and Cyberspace* (Henry Holt, 1996). He ascribes the following quote to you :

"The filtering vendors I talk to think that you are playing games with them, putting lurid articles like this full of foul language and reference to sex and drugs, then claiming that 'your site is blocked' when it is about free discussion of ideas."

I think most librarians would have trouble with the notion that "lurid" material, foul language, and reference to sex and drugs constitutes pornography or that such material would not be constitutionally protected speech. Please respond to this.

DB: First of all, as far as I know, Mr. Wallace's site wasn't blocked as pornography by any of those sites. Some of those sites were blocking in the category of profanity and Mr. Wallace's story contains it. He is basically accurate, but Mr. Wallace kind of implies, which isn't true, that I thought the site should be blocked from every public library and, of course, I never said that because I *would* never say that. What I *did* say to him was that if the school that was blocking out pornography was [also] blocking out profanity from its site—which they are certainly entitled to do—block out things that have profanity (in them)—that blocking that story of his might be an appropriate thing to decide to do. He is misquoting me.

CP: There is no question that Internet access and filtering are the hot topics in library circles. Filtering Facts has just about everybody talking, from library-profession icons like Dorothy Broderick, who's quite miffed with you, to *American Libraries's* Will Manley, who accuses ALA of being hypocritical when it comes to intellectual freedom regarding the filtering issue. How do you react to being vilified as an enemy of First Amendment rights on the one hand and congratulated as a representative of a valid, albeit minority, professional point of view, on the other?

DB: I will have the opportunity to debate Dorothy Broderick at the convention of the Kansas Library Association in Wichita, Kansas on April 8. It will be interesting to hear what she has to say. I have also been invited to speak at the Maryland Library Association March 31 and at the Connecticut Library Association April 15.

"Vilified as an enemy of the First Amendment"! I think the only people who vilify me as an enemy of the First Amendment are the people who take an extreme position on the First Amendment. When I hear people say that, I say these people are wrapping themselves in the First Amendment because they take an extreme stance and then accuse anybody who disagrees with them of being against the First Amendment. I think that is pretty unfair. I think it is a silly charge to say that wanting to protect children from pornography is being against the First Amendment. There is no precedent to support the idea that minors have a constitutional right to pornography.

CP: David, is there anything I haven't asked you that you would like your fellow OLA members to know about you or your views?

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"I think it is a silly charge to say that wanting to protect children from pornography is being against the First Amendment."

Intellectual Freedom

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The 50+ *Great Sites for Kids and Parents* have been selected for their quality, content, accessibility, currency, uniqueness and appeal to children. It is available at <http://www.ala.org/parentspage> or by calling the ALA Public Information Office at 1-800-545-2433 ext. 5044/5041.

"The American Library Association affirms that the use of filtering software by libraries to block access to constitutionally protected speech violates the Library Bill of Rights."

Due to underreporting, the Oregon Intellectual Freedom Clearinghouse Annual Reports are not an absolute picture of the status of intellectual freedom in Oregon. To help us obtain a better picture we invite every library in Oregon to report challenges to intellectual freedom, and we have posted information about the Clearinghouse, the information request form, the reconsideration report form and other intellectual freedom resources on the Oregon State Library Web site at <http://www.osl.state.or.us/libdev/libdev.html>. Please communicate with us about concerns and challenges that you receive, so we can maintain contact with libraries in Oregon and are able to fulfill our roles as the Oregon Intellectual Freedom Clearinghouse. *You can contact MaryKay Dahlgreen, Clearinghouse Coordinator, by e-mail at marykay.dahlgreen@state.or.us or by telephone 503-378-2112, extension 239.* 

BREAKDOWN OF CHALLENGES REPORTED DURING INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM CLEARINGHOUSE'S TEN YEARS OF OPERATION:

Total Challenges 378

LIBRARY TYPE

In Public Libraries 253
In School Libraries 125

TARGET AGEGROUP

Material designated as Adult 136
Material designated as Children's or Young Adult 242

REASON FOR CHALLENGE

Scary or violent content 59
Graphic sexual content or explicit language 146
Witches or occult themes 50
Homosexual content 60
Other content 63

ACTION TAKEN

Material retained in collection 325
Reclassified material 10
Restricted access to material 18
Replaced material 3

Interview

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DB: I would just like to say that, although my boss doesn't agree with my views, she has been very understanding and I appreciate that. My boss recognizes that whatever political activities I may have are outside of my work, and she has never done or said anything to indicate to me that she holds [my views] against me nor has she treated me any differently than in a professional way because of them, and I appreciate that.

CP: David, thank you very much. I'm sure this conversation will be very much of interest to our colleagues. I would like them all to know that you are an amiable guy and great to work with. We, on the staff of the Lake Oswego Public Library, have found you a real asset to our staff—whether we agree with you on filtering or not. 