

Choosing an Internet Filter

In the future internet filters are probably going to be as common in businesses and homes with children as virus software is today.

Families with children and businesses concerned about employee productivity are already using internet filters in significant numbers. Many adults have also begun using these controls to curb their own internet behavior. The three A's of internet porn (anonymity, affordability, and availability) make the temptation to become preoccupied with porn overwhelming for many people.

Businesses are also using filters to reduce liability for condoning a "hostile work environment" where employees are subjected to objectionable sexual material on their fellow workers' computers. In addition to porn, businesses are also filtering other types of material that may distract employees (sports, health, or financial information, etc.)

The following is a brief explanation of filters and how they work. The prices quoted may change at any time...they were current as of September, 2003. I presented this material at a workshop at the 2003 Annual Conference of the National Council on Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity.

There Are Four Main Methods for Controlling Internet Access

- **Filtering or blocking software** - For this solution you simply install a piece of software on your computer or computer system. You do not need to change your internet provider. It is the most common solution and is explained further below.
- **An Internet Service Provider (ISP) that filters itself** - To do this you must get your internet service from someone who filters the internet at their location as part of your internet service package. It can be either "dial-up" or "broadband" service.
- **An ISP that is a closed community** - This is rare. It is not actually a filter, but rather an ISP that allows you to visit only pre-approved sites. (Usually you can request that specific sites to be added to the list.) This product involves limitations that will not satisfy some people, but it will certainly prevent any visits to sexually related sites.
- **Monitoring software that emails reports** of visited sites to a chosen person (sometimes also sold as "spyware".) This is also not a filter, but a software program designed to prevent internet surfing from being done "privately" without someone else knowing what is being viewed.

Note:

- Combinations of the above also exist, such as a filtering product that sends out monitoring emails.

- Some filter/blocking software will also limit hours of internet use or provide additional controls.
 - Any of the above methods may allow multiple users on one account. Each user can then have a unique profile to control the type of sites that are filtered for them.
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Filtering or Blocking Software - The Most Common Method

First, the filter program you have placed on your computer intercepts your request to see if it will permit you to view the requested site. It does this at one of two places:

- In the browser program: This is not too hard to get around for a technically sophisticated user.
- In the computer operating system: This is much harder to get around and typically requires a password from an administrator to remove the software from the system.

Second, website requests are forwarded to a database for approval before access is allowed.

Sometimes sites that are not in the database are also filtered out "on the fly" when the verbal content of the site meets the blocking criteria. However, the database is typically the most important part of things.

The database can be stored either on your computer or at the company who provides the filtering service. (For large businesses it can get more complicated.)

- On your computer ("client-based filtering"): The database will need to be updated frequently over the internet.
- At the company who provides you with the filtering service ("server-based filtering"): The database is updated automatically at the service provider's location.

Databases typically have categories that can be selected to define a user profile for blocking. Examples include porn, chat, online email, file trading, drugs, gambling, alternative lifestyle, health, religion, stocks/finance, and sports. Also, filtering solutions are typically sold by subscription.

How Are User Profiles Managed?

Account administrators control the user profiles. This can be someone at home or an IT person in a business. In some cases administrators control the profiles via web pages at the provider's site set up for this purpose. In this situation a group of people at different locations can share one account.

Some groups of people from churches or 12-step programs have actually set up "internet accountability groups." An administrator (someone outside the group) signs up, pays for the account and manages the user profiles.

Sometimes the filter provider is willing to serve as the administrator (see WiseChoice.net below.)

Examples of Current Products

Filtering or blocking software solution

- **CyberPatrol**: (client-based filtering for home and small business) CyberPatrol will also control how much time is spent on computer games, etc. (www.cyberpatrol.com)
- **WiseChoice.net**: (server-based filtering for home and small business) Wise Choice **always** acts as administrator for the account after the initial setup. This means that the service cannot be adjusted or removed from the computer without voice communication with the Wise Choice office. Also, a male cannot terminate a female's account. Cost is \$4.95 per month with no setup fee for home use, and several computers and users may use one account. For businesses the cost is \$1.50 per month per user (up to 50 users in one business.)
- **s4f.com**: (server-based for home and up to medium sized businesses) Four or five of the top filtering services use the filtering provided by s4f. Home use is \$4.95 per month with no setup fee, and several computers and users may use one account. Cost for filtering 10 users is about \$180 per year with no setup fee. Cost for 500 users is about \$1000 for setup & \$200 per month (40¢/user/month after setup). For home accounts the s4f office will occasionally act as administrator. Offers the option of shutting down internet use for a period of time when a preset percentage of the last 20 access attempts are to blocked sites.
- **Norton Internet Security** has a very simple filter on it that will allow either a closed community (that you set up yourself) or a filtering solution to be chosen. It has limited effectiveness.
- **Websense.com**: (up to large businesses, 50% of Fortune 500 companies use Websense)

Filtered Internet Service Provider

- Internet for Families - www.i4f.com

Closed community (only pre-approved sites can be visited)

- CharacterLink.net

Monitoring

- CovenantEyes.com

Making a Choice

Many filters and other solutions are reviewed on the internet. One good site is www.filterreview.com. FilterReview.com asks your requirements for a filter then lists possibilities. User reviews are included so you can see how others have liked the product. It also includes listings for Macintosh computers. Web searches will also turn up filtering products that you can inspect and try.