

# Culture, Gender and Subjectivities: Computer and Internet Restrictions in a High School Library

Tara M. Brown

**ABSTRACT.** This paper is drawn from an empirical, ethnographic study of information and communications technologies (ICT) use among thirteen, low-income twelfth-graders attending a large urban high school and focuses on participants' ICT access in the school library. It examines how library staff members' cultural and gendered perceptions shaped ICT restrictions in ways that disproportionately impacted students of color, boys, and boys of color and how institutional factors helped to create conditions under which subjectivities served as guideposts for managing scarce resources. I argue that some restrictions were unfounded, unnecessarily impeded these students' ICT use and access and created avoidable tensions between students and library staff. *[Article copies available for a fee from the Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2007 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

**KEYWORDS.** Censorship, internet filtering, student computer use, computer use restrictions, race, gender, low-income, high school students, K-12 schools

## INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of information and communication technologies (ICT) in U.S. society and our rapidly increasing dependence upon them has raised interesting contradictions in perceptions about youths' ICT use. On the one hand, the development of ICT-related skills and knowledge is considered vital to educational and workplace success. Yet, there are significant worries that ICT use, particularly internet use, exposes

---

Tara M. Brown is Assistant Professor Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Minority and Urban Education Graduate Program, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742 (E-mail: [tmbrown@umd.edu](mailto:tmbrown@umd.edu)).

young people to inappropriate media content and provides them with opportunities to engage in unproductive and potentially dangerous activities. Within the literature, adult supervision – namely surveilling and imposing limits on young people’s ICT use – emerges as the primary means for maximizing benefits and minimizing hazards of ICT use. The tensions in meeting these two goals are evident in K-12 schools, which are simultaneously charged with increasing and restricting young people’s ICT use. In their role as media and information specialists, school library staff are central to the pursuit of these goals.

This study examines some of the ways that students’ computer and internet access were restricted in a school library from the perspectives of thirteen twelfth-graders and two library media specialists (LMSs) in a large urban public high school. It examines how the cultural and gendered subjectivities of the LMSs (middle-aged White women) influenced their perceptions about where dangers lay and what types of ICT-mediated content and activities were worthwhile for students and thus, the restrictions they imposed. Institutional factors compounded the task of supervising students’ ICT use in the library and helped to create the conditions under which subjectivities served as guideposts for managing scarce resources in ways that disproportionately impacted students of color, boys, and boys of color. Some of the restrictions were unfounded, unnecessarily impeded these students’ ICT use and access and created avoidable tensions between students and library staff.

### ***THE PARADOX OF YOUTH TECHNOLOGY USE***

In the following, I will examine the ways in which ICT use is posed as both beneficial and detrimental for young people and how these contradictory views both shape ICT use and access within and pose dilemmas for K-12 schools.

#### ***The Promise and Perils of Youth ICT Use***

In the U.S., technological advancement is widely associated with progress and prosperity. This perception, as described by Selfe (1999), “rests on a historically determined [Western] belief in the project of science and the fruits of science (technology) will yield a better world for the human species (progress)” (p. 115). A strong conceptual link has also been drawn between the use of electronic technologies, individual suc-

cess and the economic well-being of the nation (NCEE, 1983; Selfe, 1999; Bolt and Crawford, 2000; McNair, 2000). It is upon those convictions that ICT use been posed as beneficial for youth.

Information access is one of the most touted benefits of ICT. In his optimistic treatise on youth technology use, Tapscott (1998) argues that “as children interact with each other and the exploding information on the Net, they are forced to exercise not only their critical thinking but their judgment” (p. 26). Tapscott further posits that ICT use cultivates desirable traits, like “independence,” “emotional and intellectual openness,” “innovation,” (p. 68-71) and social acceptance. He attributes this particularly to the internet, which enables one to access and disseminate information, publish media content and communicate with others. Other researchers connect such activities to the development of a citizenry that is more innovative, critically aware and socially just (Mossberger, Tolbert et al., 2003; Warschauer, 2003). There is also a small body of research on the positive role of ICT use in identity development among adolescents, particularly girls. These studies show that electronic communication tools like email and instant-messaging provide youth with empowering and relatively safe spaces in which to build supportinve relationships and construct identities (Wolak, Mitchell et al., 2002; Gross, 2004, p. 642; Grisso and Weiss, 2005; Thiel, 2005).

The benefit of ICT use is also linked to K-12 education and the research in this area focuses on academic goals. Since its induction into K-12 curriculum more two decades ago, there have been countless studies showing how ICT use can facilitate learning. Knowledge construction, critical thinking and self-regulated learning are among the competencies long associated with classroom technology use (Winkler, Shavelson et al., 1985; Venezky, Wagner et al., 1990; Burnett, 1994; Jonassen, 1996; Sandholtz, Ringstaff et al., 1997; Dede, 1998; Means, Penuel et al., 2001). While there is little evidence to show that school technology use has led to widespread academic gains (Cuban, 2001; Cuban and Kirkpatrick, 2002; Oppenheimer, 2003), optimism about its educational benefits remains high and the imperative of technology use remains in the fore of K-12 academic discourse. Thus, ICT use is seen as profitable for youth, for learning, personal development and the acquisition of marketable job skills. However, in particular forms, ICT use has also been posed as problematic and even dangerous.

Buckingham (2000) draws attention to anxieties that through ICT use, youth have increased access to “inappropriate” media content, particularly that pertaining to sex, as reflected in literature on internet pornography. Pornography is seen as particularly detrimental for youth who are considered more likely than adults to be disturbed or morally corrupted by sexualized images (Males, 2000; Peters, 2002; Wolak et al., 2002). Similar worries exist about computer-mediated violence, focused largely on violent video games. There is fear that youth frequently exposed to violent and sexualized images will act in aggressive and sexualized ways though there is little agreement among researchers about the effects of these images on youths’ behaviors.

Another significant concern is that chatrooms and social networking websites like MySpace expose children to unknown predatory adults. According to Steidel (2000), stranger abduction, though the least common form of abduction, is the “most dreaded” (p. 43) potential danger of young people’s technology use. He points out that stranger abduction cases precipitated by internet use, which are highly sensationalized, are, in fact, extremely rare. The potential for youth to become victimizers through ICT use is also explored in media and scholarly discussions of hacking (illegally compromising web-based systems), illegal downloading of software and music and online bullying (Peters, 2002; Linn, Fagin et al., 2004; Magazine, 2005). While untoward activities and sexual exploitation are legitimate concerns, some researchers argue that perceptions of internet dangers are not commensurate with the actual risks and lead to undue restrictions on youths’ internet use (Males, 2000; Rapacki, 2007).

ICT use has also been linked with unproductiveness, particularly in relation to activities that are popular among youth like shopping, chatting and electronic gaming (Healy, 1999; Oppenheimer, 2003; Ziegler, 2006). As Ziegler (2006) points out, “the majority of popular video games play is unmonitored and is without the benefit of educational debriefing sessions” (p. 72). This statement belies two popular perceptions; 1) if youths’ ICT use is not somehow educational (as defined by adults), it is not productive and 2) youths’ ICT use should be monitored to insure that it is productive. The need for adult monitoring, supervision, and restrictions emerges as the dominant strategy for minimizing the potential for unproductive and dangerous ICT use among youth (Mitchell, Wolak et al., 2003; Fleming and Rickwood, 2004; Livingstone, 2005).

### ***K-12 Schools and Youth ITC Use***

Given the imperative of developing technological competencies and the potential for technology use to both foster learning and to pose dangers, K-12 schools have been charged with giving students access to and protecting them from ICT. In doing so, most schools use monitoring and internet filtering, as mandated by the federally-funded E-rate program. E-rate, launched in 1998, has been instrumental in the growth of ICT in schools. It offers discounts on “telecommunications, Internet access, and internal connections services” (FCC, 2001, p. 4) based on student demographics and geographic location. It is estimated that “82 percent of public schools” (NEA, 2006, para. 7) have participated in the program. As a requirement, schools receiving E-rate funds must “monitor the online activities of minors” and “block or filter Internet access” (FCC, 2001, p. 3) to chatrooms and media content that is pornographic or otherwise considered inappropriate for youth. Thus, while the E-rate program has helped to significantly expand access, it has also led to the institutionalization of surveillance and restrictions in school ICT use.

Internet filtering has generated controversy in discussions of information access. Filtering software provides preset categories of keywords associated with “objectionable” websites. Once selected, it performs wholesale exclusions of websites containing those words. Keywords can be added manually and particular websites can be individually targeted for exclusion. Such broad-based control has been criticized as unfair and ineffective. Critics point out that filtering systems are not impervious and can be compromised by tech-savvy students (Callister and Burbules, 1990; Pascopella, 2006) and that their “indiscriminate and often arbitrary” (Callister and Burbules, 1990, p. 649) effects can exclude access to useful websites. For example, in their study of 336 students, Levin and Arafah (2002) identified internet filtering as “rais[ing] barriers to students’ legitimate educational use of the Internet” (p. iv). Largely unexplored in the literature is the issue of on-site monitoring, also required by E-rate, which has implications for information access, as well as for individual privacy and student-adult relations.

Within schools, tensions around both increasing and limiting young people’s access to electronic information are acute in the library. Library staff are expected to be purveyors of information while, at the same time, as “information resource specialists [they] are most often the technology gatekeepers for the local school site” (Tyner, 1998, p. 159). Also, while

their primary purpose is to support academic objectives, in comparison to academic classes, libraries are usually associated with greater freedom to pursue personal interests. K-12 school libraries, like the library in this study, are essential sites for youth ICT access, serving as access points for many low-income students without home computers and/or internet access. Given growing worries about ICT use and increasing restrictions (Office of Technology Assessment, 1993), it is important to further examine how school libraries, as primary sites for accessing electronic information, manage the need to both facilitate and regulate youths' ICT use.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### ***Setting and Participants***

This paper is drawn from an ethnographic study of in-school and out-of-school technology use among thirteen, low-income twelfth-graders. They attended "Worthing High," a racially/ethnically diverse, urban public high school in the Northeast, with a student body of nearly 4,000. Among these participants were six girls (one White, one African American, one Brazilian immigrant and three Cambodian Americans) and seven boys (one African American, one Puerto Rican, one Brazilian, and four African immigrants). This study sought to understand these adolescents' everyday experiences of ICT use, including the nature of their access to and the purposes for which they used ICT, with the aim of understanding how different contexts shaped the ways in which they used ICT and the significance it held for them. Consistent with the chosen methodology, I sought to "uncover their lived world[s]" (Kvale, 1996), from their own perspectives and to understand "how differing structures produced the events observed" (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 4).

### ***Data Collection***

Data for this study was collected in the 2003-2004 school year. Three semi-structured, in-depth interviews, lasting between 45 minutes to 1 hour were conducted with each participant, in which they described various aspects of their ICT use both inside and outside of school, their schooling experiences and their relationships with school adults, peers and family. Participants were also observed in various settings, including home, classrooms, and the school and public libraries, to get a sense of

their everyday technology-mediated activities. During these observations I engaged in informal discussions with participants about their activities. Some of the student participants' teachers and the two school media specialists were also interviewed. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, verbatim. During observations hand-written fieldnotes were taken and typed up shortly thereafter.

### *Data Analysis*

All interview and fieldnote transcripts were entered into AtlasTI, a qualitative data analysis software package. The ease with which this program allowed me to organize and retrieve data within and across students as well as within and across various contexts of use, made AtlasTI a rich tool for analysis. Contextualized, thematic and largely inductive strategies were used to make meaning of and judgments about the data at several levels of coding. In the first iteration, each participant's data were coded separately. This case-based strategy allowed me to examine each participant's experience "within it's real-life context" (Yin, 2003, p. 13). As is customary in ethnographic research, I approached analysis with the explicit aim of understanding "the emic perspective – the insider's or native's perspective of reality" (Fetterman, 1998, p. 20). Codes were developed to capture experiences that appeared significant to participants themselves, as well as contextual factors that shaped their experiences and perceptions. Within each participant, patterns among the codes were then identified, using the software's "query tool" to compile segments of text attached to particular codes. The presence of barriers to ICT access in the school library was one of the patterns that emerged across most of the participants.

Emergent patterns in the interview and observational data were connected conceptually by examining relationships between participant's technology uses, their understandings and contextual factors and clustering them into "code families," as permitted by the software. A category was developed for each code family (e.g. "library access," "filtering" and "staff restrictions") and data for each participant was then arranged in a matrix by category.

Thereafter, the cases were brought together through examination of the matrices and theoretical comparisons were made, as described by Strauss & Corbin (1998). That is, between and across cases, comparisons were made between the "properties" (that defined each category) and "dimen-

sions” (the variation of properties within each category) of each category (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 101). Through these comparisons commonalities emerged in the nature of participants’ ICT access in the school library and the role of library staff members’ perceptions about particular ICT-mediated activities.

### ***FINDINGS***

In the following section I will show how the nature of some computer and internet restrictions in the Worthing High school library were informed by library staff’s subjective value judgments and unduly targeted the activities enjoyed and valued by students of color and boys. I will also examine how school-based institutional factors contributed to the difficulty of managing students’ ICT use in the library and increased the probability that library staff would rely upon their own value judgments to accomplish this task.

#### ***The School Library Environment and ICT Restrictions***

The library at Worthing High was a frenetic place in which ICT use was just one of many activities. Given the large size of the student body and in order minimize congestion in the hallways, the school had a staggered schedule. This meant that groups of students were passing to different locations every twenty-five minutes during the school day. Students came into the library with classes and with passes from teachers, specifically to do school work. They also came in on their “free” time, before and after school and during the seven consecutive lunch periods. Some students also came into the library “illegally” when they were supposed to be in class. To identify these students, library staff had to check students’ IDs, which indicated their lunch period. The majority of students in the library were unaccompanied by an adult. Thus, the three staff members – Carol (the lead LMS), Joan (a supporting LMS) and a Library Aide – had the formidable task of overseeing large and constantly shifting groups of adolescents engaged in myriad activities, with little way of knowing who was “supposed” to be doing what.

The daily demands put upon the library staff were tremendous and the internet filtering software was a primary tool for managing student ICT use. This software was implemented at the district level and applied to all student-use computers on the school district network. The main function

of the software was to bar access to chatrooms and websites containing pornographic or excessively violent content. The network administrator, housed in the central district office, administered the filtering software. Carol explained that she periodically requested that a particular “objectionable” website be added to the filtering system, making it inaccessible on all student-use computers in the district. Sometimes teachers alerted her to these sites but most often they were identified through the constant monitoring of student internet use in the library. Websites filtered out through keywords will be referred to as “excluded” and those added to the filtering system after its initial implementation will be referred to excluded “ad-hoc.”

There were also restricted websites and software. They were not excluded through filtering or forbidden according to the school’s Acceptable Use Policy. These websites, as well as those excluded ad-hoc, were usually not pornographic or excessively violent. However, they had been deemed “inappropriate” for a variety of reasons, some of which will be discussed later, and were restricted by the library staff in their everyday interactions with students. Unlike excluded websites, controlling students’ access to restricted content required “on-the-ground” monitoring. Library staff did this by perusing the aisles and peering over students’ shoulders, as described by Joan:

...it’s just a lot of walking around. You know, well, then you have to be careful because there are a lot of privacy conditions that we shouldn’t really be looking at what they’re doing but at the time same time we need to monitor what they’re doing. So we do walk around and make sure.

Library restrictions generated considerable contestation among student participants about adult control over their computer and internet use. This played out most immediately in the everyday, interpersonal interactions between students and library staff. There were several other underlying institutional factors that contributed to these tensions. Firstly, the library was the only school location where students were entitled to ICT use, as stated in the Student Handbook. Thus, students’ expectations for use in the library tended to be different than in classrooms. They generally considered library computer use more as a “right,” whereas they tended to see classroom computer use as more of a privilege. Secondly,

the library was the primary location where students used computers on their “free” time, which also shaped their expectations. As voiced by on student, Sekou, most participants believed that they should have considerable freedom in their computer activities during their “free” time.

I think that they [library staff] should give us like more freedom... Like, for example, you know some people, when they don't have nothing to do, come to the library and they want to play games. Just let them do it.

Also the media specialists had considerable control (in comparison to other school staff) over ICT restrictions. All requests for ad-hoc website exclusions went through the library and student participants were aware of this, making library staff members easy targets for resentments about internet access limits. As the library staff was obligated to monitor particularly internet use, this often put them into direct confrontations with students over activities that they enjoyed. Lastly, because the primary function of the library was to support academics, preference was given to students doing school work. Because there were only 16 computers in a library serving nearly 4,000 students, staff members often had to tell students engaged in “non-academic” ICT activities to leave computers. Thus, multiple factors helped to make the library a space in which students’ desire for autonomy over their ICT use and adults’ obligation to control that use, was in stark relief.

### *Ethnic-oriented Websites*

At Worthing High the primary reason for restricting internet access was to protect students from sexual and violent media content and chatrooms. Concerns about young people’s increased access to such materials fostered perceptions among many school adults, like the teacher quoted below, that greater control over students’ activities was necessary.

Widespread computer use brings access of inappropriate materials to inappropriate places and this creates a greater need to monitor areas that previously did not exist.

This concern, particularly the fear of students meeting predatory adults online, prompted the ad-hoc exclusion of several ethnic-oriented websites, AsianAvenue, BlackPlanet, C  d  ? and MiGente. Below, Carol, the lead LMS explains her perceptions of the problematic nature of these sites.

And we were having the problem a while back with kids going to AsianAvenue and there's BlackPlanet and we had those blocked. But they still can find their way around to get into those some-times. And I'm very nervous about those sites because they're advertising for, you know, dates and things and I'm really concerned when I see kids on those.

AsianAvenue, BlackPlanet and MiGenti were social networking websites specifically designed for people of Asian, African and Latino descent. They offered national and international news and information, topic-specific message boards, job postings and classified ads. Like the popular Myspace, they allowed users to create personal websites and to contact each other by posting public messages and sending private messages to other users' websites. At the time of this study, these sites did not allow for synchronous, real-time communication (chatting). These three websites, which were very similar in design and nature of content, also had a "find a date" component that allowed users to search the web-pages within the site by gender, age, location and "relationship status." This prompted Carol to have them excluded.

The exclusion of these websites was a point of contention among students, as they felt they were being denied access to useful information. Below, Ann Marie, a second-generation Cambodian student talks about her objections to the exclusion of AsianAvenue.

Stop the restricting site! Like that's where we get most our information, really. Like AsianAvenue, it's say all around the world news... and they have a site [about] how young people think now about certain topics. And it's really educational. It's not even bad.

Ann Marie, who had a personal website on AsianAvenue, also talked about this site's value in developing her website design skills.

...it's a way of expanding your learning. You learn about the html and the codes... You do things with a computer and see what these codes can do to put up on a site, and it's learning. [On] Asian Avenue, there's learning.

Unlike the LMS, Ann Marie did not see AsianAvenue as a threat to her safety but as a familiar space in which she could get useful information and gain technical expertise. Like Ann Marie, the two other Asian participants, Mary Jane and Kiri, also had webpages on AsianAvenue and expressed disappointment that the site, which had been available the previous year, was excluded. Carol recounted a similar reaction from a Black student who was disgruntled about her lack of access to BlackPlanet.

She was very annoyed when I told her she couldn't be on it because she said, 'I'm doing a report for Black History Month.' And I said, 'Well, I've a lot of other sources I can show you rather than...,' but the homepage gave her some information on that.

Like the Asian participants, this student resented being denied access to what she felt was a valuable source of information.

Another ethnic-oriented website called "Câdé?" was also excluded. Câdé?, a Portuguese language version of the popular search engine "Yahoo," was used by the two Brazilian participants, Lia and Marcos. Marcos spoke about the exclusion of Câdé?.

I used to be able to go in [to Câdé?] here but now I can't do that anymore. Now the site doesn't work anymore. But it's not just email on that site. It has like information, news, and like weather.

Like Ann Marie, Marcos pointed out that Câdé? offered useful information in addition to its communication capabilities. Marcos believed that Câdé? was excluded because it facilitated web-based email use, which had been prohibited for students for fear that they would download viruses. However, the network administrator had the capability to disable the email component. For example, email was disabled on the MSN

website and the English version of Yahoo, which consequently, also offered online personals.

There is no reason to believe that AsianAvenue, BlackPlanet, C  d  ? and MiGente were banned because of their ethnic-orientation. In fact, the library staff often emphasized their role in providing a space in which particularly immigrant students could get news and information about their countries of origin.

**Joan:** A lot of the kids will come in and they'll somehow they can get through to a site from their own country. Like Portuguese [Brazilian] kids will come in and they can get onto their website. So they'll be looking up things that are happening in their own country, which is okay. I mean, we don't discourage it because naturally they're curious as to what's going on in their own country.

This quote belies the tension in simultaneously enhancing and restricting students' access to culturally relevant internet content. Despite Joan's belief that students should not be discouraged from accessing websites pertaining their countries of origin, she characterizes this access as "somehow get[ting] through," connoting that some culturally-relevant information was not readily accessible.

### ***Games, Sneakers, Cars and Basketball***

In the school library, students were prohibited from playing computer games. Games were not excluded through the filtering system so the library staff enforced the "no games" rule through on-the-ground monitoring, putting them in direct confrontation with students.

**Carol:** So there's a lot of monitoring, walking around, seeing and you'll go by and there could be 10 kids on a computer and three of them will be playing games. So you just have to say, 'No games.' And every once in a while I see a kid on a game and I'll read him the riot act about no games, acceptable use and all of that. Oh, they'll try to stay, if I'm not visible probably.

Carol implied that computer gaming was in violation of school's Acceptable Use Policy which, coincidentally, made no references to gam-

ing. She also expressed a strong sentiment that gaming was inappropriate for school and suitably prohibited. I asked Joan, the supporting LMS, why computer games were prohibited.

To be honest with you I don't know if I have a good answer for that. What if, if no one else is using it then, why not? I mean, doing a game is probably better than putting your head down on the table and falling asleep. I'm not sure. I honestly don't have a good answer. It was just a policy that we had just so that, I think, it was easier just to tell everyone that they can't play a game than if, you know, than letting everybody do it. Because you might come in and have a report and then somebody else may come in and there may be three computers left but we just don't want everyone to sit there playing games. But I'm not sure why.

Joan seemed uncomfortable with the question, to which she felt she did not have an adequate answer. She did offer the concern that if students were playing games, there may not be enough computers for academic use. Though, because it was library policy that students doing non-school-related work had to relinquish computers to students who were, this did not seem like a satisfactory explanation. She proposed that it was just easier to prohibit games, although letting students play would have freed up the considerable amount of time and energy staff spent policing gaming activity. Finally, Joan admitted that they simply did not want students to "sit there and play games." She insinuated idleness and unproductiveness, comparing gaming to sleeping in school, and connoted a perception that gaming was antithetical to the educational objectives of schooling. Conversely, many students, particularly boys, greatly valued computer gaming so much so that they were willing to break rules and undermine adult authority. They regularly challenged the prohibition on games, and as Carol suspected, they often did surreptitiously play games. This led to a perpetual struggle between the library staff and students over the control of ICT use, which I witnessed many times over in my observations of the library.

Other ICT activities were also restricted, to varying degrees, in the library for apparently similar reasons – they were devalued by staff members and perceived as somehow incongruent with school. This included visiting sneaker and car websites and the NBA website. As with com-

puter gaming, many students enjoyed these websites and restrictions on them caused struggles for control over ICT use between library staff and students, particularly boys of color.

All of my male, adolescent participants (all Black and Latino) frequented websites that advertised and sold sneakers. At some, users could design and purchase customized sneakers online. These sites particularly captured the boys' attention because rare or unique sneakers were held in high regard, particularly among Black and Latino male students. In showing me a pair of sneakers that he had designed online and hoped to buy, Sekou told me with obvious pride, "I only seen like two people at the whole [Worthing] High with 'em."

On the contrary, library staff members were not enamored with sneakers. The lead LMS made her feelings about sneaker websites clear.

**Carol:** If I could block every sneaker site here I would be happy. They're always looking up sneakers. It's the passion. It used to be just the basketball team but now it's like every kid's looking up sneakers.

Despite Carol's obvious displeasure with sneaker websites, she and Joan contended that students were allowed to visit them as well as the NBA and car websites if no one needed the computer for school work.

**Carol:** ...even if I see them looking up sneakers, I let them unless, and I'll often say this, 'There's a class coming and you kids have to get off.'

However, four of my participants strongly disagreed and insisted that they were often not permitted to visit these sites in the school library, like Dakarai who said,

...here [at the school library], you can't look a shoes, comparing the shoes websites. Because there are the ones that people normally go, they go block it and you have to go find new ones and stuff like that.

Contrary to what the LMS told me, Dakarai said that sneaker websites were not only restricted but that some had actually been excluded through the filtering software.

Like Dakarai, Malik also talked about being denied access to websites that the library staff insisted were not prohibited. For English class, Malik had a project on cars, for which he attempted to do research in the school library. He insisted that he was not allowed to use the sites he needed.

**Malik:** I got in trouble one time before because they thought I was going on the computer just to be on the computer about cars.

**Tara:** Who are “they”?

**Malik:** The librarian. They don’t want you on the computers for cars and stuff. They wanted me to get off the computer. And they see what I was doing and was like, ‘Oh you’ve got to get off the computer.’

**Tara:** The librarians told me that they let kids look at cars. They can look at sneakers.

**Malik:** No they don’t! They lie. You should bring a hidden camera in there. They’ll be all, “Another kid could be using this computer.”

**Tara:** Were there people waiting?

**Malik:** No. There wasn’t anybody in here and they were like, ‘Oh, these computers are for these classes.’

**Tara:** So why do you think they didn’t want you looking at cars?

**Malik:** Because they only like certain people. Yeah, like Sekou. Sekou interns in here. He goes on car sites all day. He orders sneakers off the sites and everything.

**Tara:** So why do you think they wouldn’t let you?

**Malik:** They’re getting the wrong perspectives on people instead of asking us, “What are you doing?” They judge a book by its cover instead of asking us, what we doing.

**Tara:** So you feel like they judge you by what?

**Malik:** Our color [race/ethnicity]. Yeah, and by the way we dress too. Yeah, it’s a big thing around here.

Malik accused the library staff of saying that others were waiting to use computers for school work as a disingenuous excuse to keep him from

visiting cars websites. He also suggested that he, as a Black (African American) adolescent who dressed in urban, Hip Hop style, was targeted by the library staff because of the way he looked. Malik speculated that the library staff perceived him as a “bad kid, ignorant, probably a gang-banger.” Due to this assumption, Malik felt, the librarian ordered him to not only leave the car site but to get off the computer altogether without bothering to find out what he was doing. If she had, she would have learned that he was indeed doing school work.

Clearly, Malik felt that restrictions on computer use and access to certain websites were unfairly applied. As evidence, he pointed out that another participant, Sekou, was allowed to visit car sites. Sekou confirmed this.

**Sekou:** Like NBA site, you can't even go on NBA site. I think it's 'cause they know me that's why they let me. Because the librarian, 'cause last year and before that, if they see you on that site they be like, uh, "Get off that site." And the sneaker site, all them stuff. Like, I mean this year no one bothered me, but last year and the year before that they always came walking around, "You can't go on that site!" And then they're going to come back looking around again to see if you're on that site or if you're playing games and stuff.

Sekou corroborated Dakarai's and Malik's assertions that the library staff restricted the use of sneaker websites and substantiated Malik's charge that these restrictions were inconsistently applied. Sekou, who was also Black (African) and dressed in Hip Hop style, believed he was granted special privileges due to his status as a library intern. As an intern, he contended, he was allowed to visit the NBA and sneaker websites, which he was prohibited from using in previous years.

Investigating this issue further with Carol, I recounted the incident, as told by Malik, in which he claimed to have been prevented from visiting a car site for a school project.

**Carol:** Oh, my goodness! Wow... Oh, my God. Well, I don't know where he got that from. Wow, I'm sorry to hear that. That was really dumb. I hope you can you walk around. You walked around and what did you see?

**Tara:** Yes, I also told him that I've actually never seen anybody kicked off those sites.

**Carol:** No, no! Again, if there's a class coming and it's on lunch time and there's a lot of kids we'll have to say, 'Sorry.' But the virtual high school kids have priority too. Oh wow. But, you know, it's like anything else, the misinformation you get from some people.

I never witnessed any student being directed to leave a sneaker, car or NBA webpage. However, it seems highly unlikely that library staff would have asked my participants, or other students for that matter, to leave these contested websites in my presence, knowing that I was researching students' ICT use and having insisted to me that these sites were permitted. Malik's resoluteness that I been deceived by the library staff, corroborated by Sekou and Dakarai, prompted me to ask Joan about Malik's story about the car website. Her response was similar to Carol's.

**Joan:** Unless he was somewhere where he wasn't supposed to be and we said, 'Get off the internet,' or something. But no, because, I mean, you see it, we have kids here all the time. Maybe he was doing something that... I don't know. Because we don't... I mean, we let them come in to use it.

Both Carol and Joan insisted that the use of sneaker, car and basketball sites was not prohibited in the library and only restricted when other students needed to use the computers for school work. Though I have no observations to contradict this, my interviews with Dakarai, Malik and Sekou, strongly suggest that this was not always the case. Further supporting my participants' claims were Carol's own personal feelings about the sites in question, particularly sneaker sites. As mentioned earlier, she stated that she would like to "block every sneaker site" on the library computers. She compared their use to the use of basketball websites, which like car sites, yielded conflicting reports about the nature and equity of restrictions. Furthermore, Carol asserted,

I guess when I see them on those sneaker sites I get annoyed but if the library's not full what's the difference between them doing that or reading a magazine or looking at ads? I don't know.

Although Carol could direct students to leave sneaker sites when the computers were needed for school work, she still found this activity personally annoying. As in Joan's discussion about games, Carol compared visiting sneaker sites to other activities that might appear, to adults, to have little value, particularly in an educational context. In contrast, Carol spoke about a comparable use of the internet very differently.

You know, now, at this time of year they [girls] are looking at prom dresses but I don't see the harm in that. It's research, it's research. We're teaching them to be smarter consumers, smarter consumers so...

Whereas she saw value for students in browsing and comparing the prices of prom dresses online (done primarily, if not exclusively, by girls) as "research," she was annoyed by seeing boys doing similar things on sneaker websites.

### ***DISCUSSION***

Through the E-rate program, the U.S. federal government is imposing increased restrictions on internet access in K-12 schools. Further limiting students' ICT use, Bell (1994) points out that "school districts nationwide are voluntarily filtering the filters" (1994, p. 40). She and others contend that these restrictions are largely driven by fears about dangers of online pornography and strangers that are greatly exaggerated (Buckingham, 2000; Males, 2000). Callister and Burbules further suggest that, in the name of safety and productiveness, school-based ICT restrictions may "mask the implicit value judgments being made" (p. 650). This certainly was the case at Worthing High where adults' perceptions of danger and unproductiveness in ICT use led to restrictions that extended beyond the filtering system and the school's Acceptable Use Policy. Manifestations of raced and gendered subjectivities were also in evidence. The middle-aged, White female library staff members both extended and restricted students' access to particular ICT-mediated content

and activities based on their own perceptions about what was of value and/or appropriate for the school context.

At Carol's request, the network administrator "filtered the filters," to exclude AsianAvenue, BlackPlanet, C  d  ? and MiGente because they had a personals component. As stated earlier, neither the English version of Yahoo nor the MSN website were banned, though they both offered similar online "dating" components. The reason for this inconsistency is unclear but there are at least two feasible explanations. First, it could have been that Carol was unaware that Yahoo and MSN offered online personals although the "personals" features were as prominent on homepages of these websites, which were frequently accessed in the library. If Carol was unaware of their "dating" components it stands to reason that these websites were under less scrutiny than the ethnic-oriented websites.

It is also possible that Carol knew about the personals on Yahoo and MSN but considered these websites too valuable (to students and/or school adults) to exclude. This would point to assumptions about the intrinsic value of particular websites that were likely connected to Carol's own comfort and familiarity. Supporting that contention, DeFaveri (2005) points out that "librarians are a barrier [to information access] because we are mired in a culture of comfort" (p. 259). Furthermore, in her examination of the library and information services (LIS) curriculum Pawley (2006) argues that many university LIS programs do not adequately train their predominantly White, female students to be aware of issues of racial and ethnic bias. She contends that there is "historically embedded racialized thinking in LIS through the acceptance of normalized white, Anglophone collections and professional practices" (p. 159).

The excluded ethnic-oriented websites reflected the lives, concerns, interests and languages of youth of color, who made up the majority of the student body at Worthing High. For many students, they were comfortable spaces in which to get information, learn technological skills, communicate with others, and participate in the digital world. For the White library staff, these were unfamiliar spaces. Carol admitted that she had never actually explored any of these websites. Rather than investigating the sites and their value to students, Carol had them excluded because of their "dating" component. The result was that websites catering to the interests of racial/ethnic groups of color were posed as problematic and excluded in a way that did not apply to the more supposedly "main-

stream” websites. This contributed to negative perceptions about library staff among student participants.

Neither of the media specialists was able to adequately explain the reason for banning computer gaming in the school library, though personal feelings about gaming as unproductive likely underlay this prohibition. Gee (2003) points out the widespread view among adults of computer games as “a waste of time.” He attributes this to the culturally embedded notion that

Important knowledge (now usually gained in school) is content in the sense of information rooted in, or, at least, related to, intellectual domains or academic disciplines... Work that does not involve such learning is “meaningless” (p. 21).

Thus, especially in school where the primary objective for students is academic learning, playing computer games is easily construed as a worthless activity by school adults.

The surreptitious users of computer games in the library were mostly boys. Boys were also the primary users of the NBA, sneaker and car websites. These sites were not prohibited but data strongly suggests that they were unduly restricted by staff members. The interview data shows that, Carol, who had the most power to dictate ICT use restrictions in the library, had a personal aversion to sneaker websites. As Anderson (1999) points out, sneakers hold “significance as status symbols” (p. 78) for many Black boys. This certainly was the case at Worthing High and thus, sneaker websites were very popular among Black boys, as were car and basketball sites. Computer gaming was popular among boys, more generally. The data suggests that all of these activities were devalued by the White, middle-aged female library staff members. As such, they were targeted for restrictions beyond the school’s Acceptable Use Policy and the more informal policy that school work had priority over “non-academic” activities in library ICT use.

School-based institutional factors contributed to conditions under which library staff members’ personal value judgments served as guideposts for managing mandates to both enhance and restrict students’ ICT use and access. First, there was a dearth of resources in the library – both personnel and equipment. The relatively small number of computers, in comparison to the large volume of students, made the task of insuring

that “non-academic” ICT activities did not preclude computer use for academic purposes, was tremendous. This task was further magnified by the staggered school schedule including seven lunch periods, which meant that groups of students in the library were constantly shifting. Under such working conditions, a centralized system of control like filtering is an indispensable management tool and hasty judgments about websites and ICT activities, based on the staff’s own subjectivities, are likely to occur. Additionally, as the library was the only space in the school where students were entitled to use computers in school and the primary place where they used them on their free time, tensions between students’ expectations for ICT access and the staff’s need to restrict that access led to antagonisms. Some students who used the ethnic-oriented websites held resentments about their exclusion. Restrictions on the ICT activities that boys and Black boys valued put them in the position of having to access them “illegally.” This placed them in greater opposition to adult authority than students whose preferred activities were not devalued and restricted. As the library staff was obligated to monitor ICT use, this often put them into direct confrontations with students over activities they enjoyed. Some students experienced this monitoring as surveillance and resented being watched.

**Malik:** You go on the internet and they got the cameras all on you. [puts his hand to his mouth as though he’s talking into a walkie talkie] ‘Yeah, we got a kid on the internet.’ It’s crazy.

In the case of the restrictions highlighted in this paper, the strategies used to “protect” students from inappropriate ICT-mediated content and to uphold the academic priority reflected the subjectivities and personal value judgments of the middle-aged, White female staff members. As such, they led to undue restrictions on ICT content and activities that were culturally-relevant to and valued by students of color, boys in general, and boys of color, specifically and caused unnecessary antagonisms between these students and the library staff.

**CONCLUSION**

Adults have considerable control over young people's ICT use and access in K-12 schools. As prior research shows, teachers' perceptions and expectations of youth have led to race/ethnicity-, class- and gender-based disparities in K-12 classroom technology use (Robinson, 1998; Durán, 2002; Margolis and Fisher, 2003; Solomon, Allen et al., 2003). Such studies demonstrate the troubling reality that school adults have the power to exercise their own personal subjectivities in shaping how students use ICT. There has been little discussion about this regarding school libraries and LMSs, who are often instrumental in decisions about district-wide restrictions and "filtering the filters." More investigations into this issue are vital, particularly as the K-12 teaching force is becoming increasingly White and female and the student population is increasingly composed of youth of color (Epstein, 2005). Such examinations are also important given that low-income people and people of color continue to have lower rates of ICT use and access than middle-class Whites (Chakraborty and Bosman, 2005).

In addition to low-income status, the lack of identification with ICT content has been suggested as another impediment to use and access. Bolt and Crawford (2000) attribute this to the fact that, "for the most part, when minority youths go to a software store or log onto the internet, they do not see reflections of themselves" (p. 100). Websites that reflect their experiences and interests can serve as entrees for youth of color into the digital world and cultivate interest in ICT use. For those without a computer and/or internet access at home, such exposure in school is vital. In addition to advocating for more ITC content that is culturally-relevant to underrepresented groups, educators need to insure that, through their own personal values and subjectivities, they are not limiting access to such content.

Lastly, researchers explain that restrictions on media and technology use in school, which often reflects spurious perceptions about the vulnerability of youth, can inhibit student learning. Buckingham (2000) proposes that young people, particularly adolescents, have a greater capacity for discerning and contending with the potential dangers of media and technology use than is customarily thought. Callister and Burbules ask the important question, "How can students learn to be responsible, to make social and intellectual choices, if those choices are made for them

by filtering the information they access?” They and others suggest that we should redirect our focus from restricting ICT access to educating young people about using ICT in ways that are safe and potentially productive. Such a redirection will help young people to make their own informed choices about ICT use and expand the range of avenues through which they can enjoy, benefit from and ultimately connect to the digital world.

## REFERENCES

- Anderson, Elijah. 1999. *Code of the street: Decency, violence, and the moral life of the inner city*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.
- Bolt, David and Ray Crawford. 2000. *Digital Divide*. New York, NY: TV Books, L.L.C.
- Buckingham, David. 2000. *After the death of childhood: Growing up in the age of electronic media*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, Ltd.
- Burnett, Gary. 1994. "Technology as a tool for urban classrooms." *ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education*, Retrieved, from <http://eric-web.tc.columbia.edu/digests/dig95.html>.
- Callister, Thomas A. and Nicholas C. Burbules. 1990. "Computer literacy programs in teacher education: What teachers really need to learn." *Computers and Education*, 14(1), 3-7.
- Chakraborty, Jayajit and Martin M. Bosman. 2005. "Measuring the digital divide in the united states: Race, income, and personal computer ownership." *The Professional Geographer*, 57(3), 395-410.
- Cuban, Larry. 2001. *Oversold and Underused: Computers in the Classroom*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cuban, Larry and Heather Kirkpatrick. 2002. "High-tech high hopes meet student realities." *The Educational Digest*, 67(8), 47-54.
- Dede, Chris. 1998. The scaling-up process for technology-based educational innovations. In Chris Dede (Ed.). *Learning with technology yearbook* (pp. 199-215). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- DeFaveri, Annette. 2005. "Shedding our culture of comfort." *Felicitier*, (6).

Durán, Richard P. 2002. *Technology, education, and at-risk students*. In Stringfield, S. & Land, D. (Eds.) *Educating At Risk Students*. National Society for the Study of Education. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Epstein, Kitty Kelly. 2005. "The whitening of the american teaching force: A problem of recruitment or a problem of racism?" *Social Justice*, 32(3), 89-102.

Federal Communications Commission (FCC). 2001. *Children's Internet Protection Act*. Washington D.C. 2007.

Fetterman, David M. 1998. *Ethnography: Step by step*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Fleming, Michele and Debra Rickwood. 2004. "Teens in Cyberspace." *Youth Studies in Australia*, 23(2), 46-52.

Gee, James. 2003. *What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy*. New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan.

Grisso, Ashley D. and David Weiss. 2005. What are gurls talking about: adolescent girls' construction of sexual identity on gurl.com. In Sharon R. Mazzarella (Ed.). *Girl wide web: Girls, the internet and the negotiation of identity* (pp. 31-49). New York: Peter Lang.

Gross, Elisheva F. 2004. "Adolescent internet use: What we expect, what teens report." *Applied Developmental Psychology*, 25(6), 633-649.

Healy, Jane. 1999. *Failure to connect: How computers affect our children's minds - and what we can do about it*. New York, NY: Touchstone.

hooks, bell. 1994. *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. London: Routledge.

Jonassen, David H. 1996. *Computers in the classroom*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Merrill.

- Kvale, Steinar. 1996. *Interviews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Levin, Douglas and Sوسان Arafeh. 2002. *The Digital Disconnect: The widening gap between Internet-savvy students and their schools*. Washington, D.C.: Pew Internet & American Life Project.
- Linn, Eleanor, Alane Fagin, et al. 2004. *Cyberbullies cause real pain*. New York Times. New York: A18.
- Livingstone, Sonia. 2005. "Strategies of parental regulation in the media-rich home." *Computers in Human Behavior*, 23(2), 920-941.
- Magazine, Time. 2005. *You wanna take this online?* Time Magazine. 166: 52-53.
- Males, Michael. 2000. "Mythology and internet filtering." *Teacher Librarian*, 28(2), 16-18.
- Margolis, Jane and Allan Fisher. 2003. *Unlocking the clubhouse: Women in computing*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- McNair, Stephen. 2000. The emerging policy agenda. In Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (Ed.). *Schooling for tomorrow: Learning to bridge the digital divide*. (pp. 9-19). Paris, France: Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development.
- Means, Barbara, William Penuel, et al. 2001. *The connected school: Technology and learning in high school*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Miles, Matthew and Michael Huberman. 1994. *Qualitative data analysis*. London, UK: SAGE Publications.
- Mitchell, Kimberly, Janis Wolak, et al. 2003. "The exposure of youth to unwanted sexual material on the internet: A national survey of risk, impact, and prevention." *Youth & Society*, 34(3), 330-358.

Mossberger, Karen, Caroline Tolbert, et al. 2003. *Virtual inequality: Beyond the digital divide*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press.

National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE). 1983. "A nation at risk." *U.S. Department of Education*, Retrieved, from <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/>.

National Education Association (NEA). 2006. *E-rate*. Retrieved March 15, 2007.

Office of Technology Assessment, U.S. Congress. 1993. *Adult literacy and new technologies*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Oppenheimer, Todd. 2003. *The flickering mind: The false promise of technology in the classroom and how learning can be saved*. New York: Random House.

Pascopella, Angela. 2006. "Big brother gets bolder." *District Administration*, 42(6), 80-88.

Pawley, Christine. 2006. "Unequal legacies: Race and multiculturalism in the lis curriculum." *Library Quarterly*, 72(2), 149-168.

Peters, Dane L. 2002. "Internet abuse: Students in the middle." *Independent School*, 61(4), 42-46.

Rapacki, Sean. 2007. "Social networking sites: Why teens need places like myspace." *Young Adult Library Services*, 5(2), 28-30.

Robinson, Paulette. 1998. Equity and access to computer technology for grades k-12. In Bosah Ebo (Ed.). *Cyberghetto or cybertopia?: Race, class, and gender on the internet* (pp. 137-151). Westport, CT: Praeger.

Sandholtz, Judith H., Cathy Ringstaff, et al. 1997. *Teaching with technology: Creating student-centered classrooms*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Selfe, Cynthia L. 1999. *Technology and literacy in the twenty-first century*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Solomon, Gwen, Nancy Allen, et al., (Eds.). (2003). *Toward digital equity: Bridging the divide in education*. Boston, MA: Pearson Education Group, Inc.

Steidel, Stephen E. 2000. *Missing and abducted children: A law-enforcement guide to case investigation and program management*. Washington D.C.: National Center for Missing & Exploited Children.

Strauss, Anselm and Juliet Corbin. 1998. *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Tapscott, David. 1998. *Growing up digital: The rise of the net generation*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Thiel, Shayla Marie. 2005. "I'm me": Identity construction and gender negotiation in the world of adolescent girls and instant messaging. In Sharon R. Mazzarella (Ed.). *Girl wide web: Girls, the internet and the negotiation of identity* (pp. 179-201). New York: Peter Lang.

Tyner, Kathleen. 1998. *Literacy in a digital world: Teaching and learning in the age of information*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Venezky, Richard L., Daniel A. Wagner, et al., (Eds.). (1990). *Toward defining literacy*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Warschauer, Mark. 2003. *Technology and social inclusion*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Winkler, John D., Richard J. Shavelson, et al. 1985. "Pedagogically sound use of microcomputers in classroom instruction." *Educational Computing Research*, 1(3), 285-293.

Wolak, Janis, Kimberly J. Mitchell, et al. 2002. "Close online relationships in a national sample of adolescents." *Adolescence*, 37(147), 441-455.

Yin, Robert K. 2003. *Case study research design and methods*. Thousand Oaks, Ca: Sage Publications.

Ziegler, Susan G. 2006. "The (mis)education of generation m." *Learning, Media and Technology*, 32(1), 69-81.