

Web content filter guidelines

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Introduction

The University's web content filter checks every URL request against a blacklist of undesirable websites. If a requested URL is on the blacklist, the content filter returns a replacement page, informing the user of what has happened and why.

The suppliers of our content filtering software offer a range of criteria for blacklisting, including those relating to pornography and inciting illegal activity, and we receive regular updates to the blacklist from them.

When a website has been wrongly classified as unsuitable for University access we can remove it from the blacklist. Similarly, we can add URLs to the blacklist if we come across websites that have been missed.

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The basic criterion for blocking a web page

All use of University computing facilities is subject to the University's [Conditions for using IT Facilities](#). The basic criterion for placing a URL on the blacklist is that if, by knowingly accessing that URL, a user would breach these Conditions of Use.

Relevant extracts from the Conditions of Use include:

"Use of these facilities for personal activities (provided that it does not infringe any of the regulations, and does not interfere with others' valid use) is permitted, but this is a privilege that may be withdrawn at any point."

"You must not create, download, store or transmit unlawful material, or material that is indecent, offensive, threatening or discriminatory. The University of Aberdeen has procedures to approve and manage valid activities involving such material; these are available on the University website and must be observed"

Access for University purposes

It is acknowledged that some unfiltered web access may be necessary for academic purposes and, to cater for this, it is possible to apply for exemption from the web content filter. In such cases the research must have formal ethical approval from the relevant ethics committee.

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Categories of material which will be blocked

Pornographic and sexually explicit material

This is the most numerous category. "Sexually explicit" is defined as

- sexual intercourse, including genital-genital, oral-genital, anal-genital or oral-anal, whether between persons of the same or opposite sex;
- bestiality;
- masturbation;
- sadistic or masochistic abuse;
- lascivious exhibition of the genitals or pubic area of any person.

Inciting unlawful activity

This category includes sites which incite

- the use of illegal substances
- violence or public disorder
- sexual, racial or religious harassment
- illegal discrimination
- breach of copyright (e.g. offer downloads of copyright software or music)
- hacking

This is a less clear-cut category than the previous one as a distinction has to be made between sites which merely provide information on illegal activities and those which actively incite the viewer to engage in that activity. Thus, for example, a site describing the Ku Klux Klan and their activities need not be blocked whereas one promoting racial hatred and inviting the viewer to join the Klan would be a candidate for blocking.

Illegal material

This category covers sites which contain material which would be deemed illegal by UK law, most of which is already covered by the previous two categories, but also includes defamatory material.

Gratuitously visually offensive sites

This is the least easy to define, although most of the material in this category will also fall into one of the previous categories. Pages will be judged on the basis that they might be viewed in the relatively public environment of a computer classroom or Library. Examples might include a page displaying gratuitous violence or a page with obscenities displayed on a large scale.

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Requesting the unblocking or blocking of a URL or domain

Use the appropriate link below to request the unblocking or blocking of a URL or domain. You will be asked to give a brief description of the website and your reasons for asking it to be unblocked or blocked. These reasons should make reference to the criteria in this document.

The submission of your request will be acknowledged via email with a Service Desk 'call reference number'. Service Desk staff will review the request and respond to let you know whether it has been accepted. In the case where text on the website is in a language other than English, you may be asked to provide a translation of sections of the text.

- [Request UNBLOCKING of a URL or domain](#)
- Please email servicedesk@abdn.ac.uk

Refusal to unblock or block/Right of Appeal

When a request to unblock (or block) a URL is received, the contents of the web page and pages to which it links will be assessed against the above criteria. If the request is rejected, the person making the request will be informed of the criteria by which the blocking (or failure to block) was judged to be appropriate and will have the right to appeal against the rejection of the request.

Such appeals should be made, in the first instance, to Dean Phillips, Head of Relationship Management (email: d.phillips@abdn.ac.uk). If this appeal is unsuccessful, further appeal may be made to the Director of IT Services, whose decision will be final.

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