Web content filter guidelines

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Introduction

The University of Aberdeen applies a Web Content Filtering service to all web pages accessed from the undergraduate network and, voluntarily, to web pages accessed from the staff networks. The service operates by blocking access to any URLs matching a list of blacklisted addresses. The blacklist is assembled by a software robot. This software is designed to seek out websites with particular categories of content, such as pornography and incitement to unlawful behaviour. As is the case with all automated decision mechanisms, where the power of discretion is inherently limited by a formula, the software can cause some unnecessary blocking of URLs. Conversely, some URLs that ought to be blocked, escape the robot's notice.

In recognition of this, procedures are available for University of Aberdeen users to request removals from, or additions to, the blacklist. This document explains the criteria against which such requests will be judged.

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:

- (Paragraph 1) IT facilities are provided solely for University purposes, unless otherwise authorised as described in paragraphs 1.1 and 1.2 below. "University purposes" means use by employees in accordance with their normal duties of employment and by students in connection with their University education, but excludes personal use...
- (Paragraph 1.2) Some personal use of IT facilities may be permitted, provided that it does not inhibit the use of facilities for University purposes by other users and, in the case of employees, does not interfere with the performance of their University duties. Permission for personal use is at the discretion of the appropriate authority, is subject to guidelines provided by that authority, and may be withdrawn at any time, whether or not any breach of those guidelines is deemed to have taken place.
- (Paragraph 2) No use which brings or might bring the University into disrepute is permitted. In particular,... the deliberate access to, retention of or distribution of obscene, racist or offensive material will be treated as a contravention of these Conditions.
- (Paragraph 8) Users must comply with the provisions of any current United Kingdom or Scots law.
In the case of Web page access, the "appropriate authority" referred to in paragraph 1.2 is **IT Services** whose Guidelines for personal use of IT Services-administered facilities state:

- You must not use the facilities to create, access or disseminate material of a nature which might bring discredit to you and the University. This applies to material which is obscene (pornographic or sexually explicit), racist, threatening, inciting unlawful activity or deliberately offensive in nature.

**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.

**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.

**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 Web site 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 Web site 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
- Request BLOCKING of a URL or domain

**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.