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Viewing Porn in Academic Libraries: Critiquing ARL Member Library Policies

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Viewing Porn in Academic Libraries: Critiquing ARL Member Library Policies

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Plans for today:

- Introductions/acknowledgements
- Background
- Research process
- Think/pair/share–your experiences
- What we found
 - Examples
- Conclusions/discussion
- Possibilities for further research
- Q&A

Introduction

- Who are we?
- What happened at VCU
Libraries to raise the question
about pornography in academic
research libraries?

Why have a policy?



— Definition of pornography:

“the depiction of erotic behavior (as in pictures or writing) intended to cause sexual excitement”

Merriam-Webster Dictionary

Definition of sexually explicit material:

“...a film or video recording... the dominant theme of which depicts or describes nudity, including sexual or excretory activities or organs, in a lascivious way”

10 U.S. Code § 2495b - Sale or rental of sexually explicit material prohibited

Definition of obscenity:

“...a category of **speech unprotected by the First Amendment**. Obscenity laws are concerned with prohibiting lewd, filthy, or disgusting words or pictures.”

Legal Information Institute, Cornell School of Law

Research Process



Photo by Christina Morillo:
<https://www.pexels.com/photo/person-s-hands-on-top-of-macbook-air-1181307/>

Think/Pair/Share—porn edition!

Think

Have you ever had to confront a patron watching pornography in your library? What did you do?

Pair

Discuss with the person sitting next to you.

Share

If you're comfortable, share with the larger group.



Findings and Themes

- **Direct references to porn are rare**
- **Veiled references are more common**
- **Legal and illegal material lumped together**
- **Exceptions made for academic research**

“Viewing Sexually Explicit Material. The Library does not seek to censure what adults view on public computers. However, if a complaint is received regarding the material being viewed, we will investigate the situation.”

Oklahoma State University Library’s “Rules of Conduct”



Theme 1

- ➔ **Direct references to porn are rare**
- ➔ **12% of library websites we looked at had policies with direct references to pornography or “sexually explicit material”**

“Although the Libraries do not monitor or censor the information choices of JHU affiliated library users, the open display of some materials may create an intimidating, hostile or offensive environment for some library users.”

Johns Hopkins University Library's "What is Acceptable Use for the Internet in the JHU Libraries" policy



Theme 2

- **Veiled references are more common**
- **18% of library websites had policies with veiled/indirect references to pornography**

"Use of these resources [note: IT] for disruptive, fraudulent, harassing, threatening, obscene (including but not limited to racist, profane, and pornographic in nature), or malicious purposes is strictly prohibited."

University of Alberta Libraries' "Information Technology Use and Management Policy"



Theme 3

- **References to illegal material**
- **14% of library websites had policies that mentioned "child pornography" and/or "obscenity". Some of these lumped legal pornography in with illegal material**

“University IT resources may not be utilized: To access or view pornographic or obscene materials unless necessary for academic instruction or research.”

Florida State University Libraries’ “What are the policies surrounding the use of University Information Technology resources?”



Theme 4

- **Exceptions made for academic research**
- **A few policies, even when referencing “obscenity”, made exceptions for academic research**



Points for discussion

- **Ambiguity: helpful or harmful?**
- **Supporting front line staff**
- **Concerns about equitable application of policy (or lack thereof)**
- **Changing social norms and the Freedom of Speech**

Future Research Opportunities



Research by Nick Youngson CC BY-SA 3.0 Pix4free

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Q&A time!