

Minors and Online Activity: An Interpretation of the *Library Bill of Rights*

The online environment offers opportunities for accessing, creating, and sharing information. The rights of minors to retrieve, create, and interact with information posted on the Internet in schools and libraries are extensions of their First Amendment rights.

Schools and libraries should ensure that they offer opportunities for students to use social media and other online applications constructively in their academic and recreational pursuits. Students can enhance their social, interpersonal, and academic skills with the use of online applications.

Some examples include

- creating documents and sharing them online;
- uploading pictures, videos, and visual material;
- engaging in interactive games;
- classifying content and organizing information; and
- participating in online communities.

Online tools may help children and young adults learn about and organize social, civic, recreational, and academic activities. Many sites invite users to establish online identities, join networks, share personal information, and create web content. Library workers curate age-appropriate resources for academic and personal pursuits and teach children and young adults how to be safe online. Parents and guardians play a critical role in preparing their children for participation in online activity by communicating their values and guiding their children's use of the Internet. Libraries and their governing bodies shall ensure that only a parent or guardian has the right and the responsibility to determine what their child—and only their child—accesses online.

The use of social media and online resources poses two compelling intellectual freedom issues for minors: the right to free expression and the right to privacy.

Filters are often used in libraries and educational institutions to restrict access to online content, limiting access to information and social-media platforms beyond what is required by the Children's Internet Protection Act and similar state laws. These restrictions deny minors' rights to free expression online.

Protection of minors' privacy rights online is also paramount. In addition to concerns about the vulnerability of young people who post personally identifiable information online, other threats to minors' privacy cause libraries and educational institutions to restrict and monitor minors' online activities. Perceived safety threats, such as cyberbullying, also lead to restrictive policies. These actions not only deny minors' right to free expression, but may also deny their right to privacy.

Prohibiting minors from using social media or participating in online communities prevents youth from engaging in opportunities to learn and develop skills needed for responsible speech online, civil engagement, and personal-privacy protection. Instead, libraries and library workers should educate youth about online activities that are appropriate for their maturity level without blocking access for others. Furthermore, library workers should advocate for implementing privacy-protecting policies and technology in libraries and educational institutions that both empower youth to take personal responsibility for their online privacy and prevent the collection and use of information about minors and their online activities for marketing and for-profit activities.

The First Amendment applies to all forms of speech created by minors and posted online. Restricting access to social media in schools and libraries limits young people's right to free expression and violates the tenets of the *Library Bill of Rights*. Instances of inappropriate use of social media and online applications should be addressed as individual-behavior issues, not as justification for restricting or banning access to such tools. While other safety threats exist beyond schools' and libraries' physical space, these threats should not be a reason for limiting access for minors. Library workers, educators, and administrators have a responsibility to educate themselves about safety threats while continuing to advocate for the intellectual freedom of minors.

As defenders of intellectual freedom and the First Amendment, libraries have a responsibility to offer unrestricted access to online activity in accordance with local, state, and federal laws and to advocate for greater access where it is abridged. Of equal importance is the responsibility to advocate for minors' right to free expression and privacy online while using libraries of all types. In addition, library workers and educators should help young people learn digital citizenship skills that will prepare them to be responsible, effective members of a global society.

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