

**For Immediate Release:**

May 17, 2006

**Contact Information:**

Neema Trivedi, (212) 998-6153

Marjorie Heins, (212) 992-8847

Kafayat Alli-Balogun, (212) 998-6735

***INTERNET FILTERS SCREEN OUT POLITICAL, SCIENTIFIC MATERIAL  
WELL BEYOND STATED INTENT, REPORT FINDS***

**New York, NY** – Today, the Brennan Center for Justice released “Internet Filters: A Public Policy Report,” a detailed survey of tests and studies documenting how the widespread use of filters limits the free exchange of ideas necessary in a healthy democracy. The report shows that filters are an unreliable and inefficient means of preventing children from viewing material that their parents find offensive. Some filters censor political and other information, casting a net far wider than is necessary for any legitimate goal.

As a result of the “Children’s Internet Protection Act,” or “CIPA,” passed in 2000, filters are now required in most schools and libraries – for adults and minors alike. Yet because filters must, by necessity, search the web for potentially objectionable sites using “keyword” identification, they both “overblock” (censoring sites that are not objectionable) and “underblock” (failing to identify pornography or other material targeted by their various blocking categories).

“Internet Filters” updates and expands upon an earlier survey published by the Brennan Center’s Free Expression Policy Project (FEPP) in 2001. The new report describes the effects of CIPA and the deceptiveness of manufacturers’ claims to have improved the accuracy of filters with sophisticated “artificial intelligence” techniques. It then describes nearly 100 tests and studies up through 2006, with hundreds of examples of both deliberate and accidental overblocking.

For instance, one filtering program, SurfWatch, blocked the University of Kansas’s Archie R. Dykes Medical Library website upon detecting the word “dykes.” Cyber Patrol blocked a Knights of Columbus site and a site for aspiring dentists when set to block only “sexually explicit” materials. SmartFilter blocked the Declaration of Independence, Shakespeare’s complete plays, *Moby Dick*, and *Marijuana: Facts for Teens*, a brochure published by the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

Marjorie Heins, co-author of the report and founder of FEPP, commented: “Filters are crude and error-prone because they categorize expression without regard to its context,

meaning, and value. Although some may say that the debate is over and that filters are now a fact of life, it is never too late to rethink bad policy choices.”

The report’s findings demonstrate the problems that arise when filters block access to websites that discuss controversial topics like sex education, or provide information on health, religion, or politics. For example, when set to the “typical school filtering” option, Bess blocked a “Hillary for President” website and the homepage of the Traditional Values Coalition, a non-denominational church lobby. Though blocked because they contain keywords that someone deemed “harmful to minors,” or because a company staffer thought the site inappropriate, these sites often provide useful information, and serve as educational tools in schools and libraries.

The blocking decisions of some filtering programs reflect a particular ideological stance. For instance, when set to block “hate/discrimination” or “hate speech”, Bess and SurfControl blocked a website with curriculum materials on Populism because the site contained information about National Socialism. Symantec filters blocked the National Rifle Association’s homepage and other pro-gun websites but did not block sites associated with the Brady Center or other anti-gun groups.

To promote Internet safety without censoring useful research and debate, the report recommends: avoiding filters that use blocking categories that reflect a particular ideological viewpoint, choosing filters that allow for easy disabling and unblocking, and developing educational programs that promote online safety and media literacy in place of filtering.

*The report is available at [www.fepproject.org/policyreports/Filters2.pdf](http://www.fepproject.org/policyreports/Filters2.pdf)*

###