

Irresponsible Lawmakers and an Irresponsible Law

The Coeur d'Alene Press published two articles about the Idaho State Legislature passing H.B. 194 (September 25 and 26). Without providing associated funding, which could be considerable, the lawmakers decreed that publically funded libraries in the state (for this article, the Coeur d'Alene Public Library) must establish a system that will block library users from being exposed to "objectionable" content. The library must have this system in place by July, 2020.

I have the following objections to this law:

1. The library was not consulted about this major piece of legislation. It was not in the loop to help fashion a realistic deadline or even a realistic approach to the problem. The Press articles make it clear the library was "left in the dark" about the new law.

2. The law covers both wire-based and wireless networks. Even Fortune 500 companies wrestle with filtering content that is transported through wireless networks; especially if their employees use their own computers or smart phones, which is the situation with many CDA library patrons.

3. These large companies are staffed with communications personnel that likely outnumber all the CDA library employees combined. They have immense technical resources at their disposal. I do not know the staffing levels of the library, but I suspect H.B. 194 will impose a significant increase in the staff's workload.

4. Filtering content within an organization of employees' communications transactions is one thing. Filtering content of independent citizens is quite another. What is objectionable to one person is not objectionable to someone else. It appears the lawmakers want the library to get into the business of (drums roll) Orwellian oversight.

I joke, but it is not all that funny. The arbitrary nature of H.B.194 leaves the library hanging-out in the wind regarding Constitutional issues.

5. As stated, no funds are provided for an effort in which the lawmakers are clueless as to what it might cost the library directly.

6. ...And the taxpayer indirectly. We say there is no such thing as a free lunch. Of course, our library provides "free books," but saddled with ridiculous laws such as H.B. 194, for how long?

7. Why July, 2020? The deadline was established by lawmakers who have no idea if this deadline is feasible. How can a deadline be set to implement what will likely be major changes to existing systems, when it is not known (even in a general way) what the changes will be?

Mission Improbable

Perhaps our library can pull it off. Its leaders are likely working with other libraries and library associations to access the impact and (perhaps) develop a strategy to address what I believe to be a law created by ill-advised lawmakers. Perhaps non-advised is a better phrase.

The library states that at this preliminary stage, it might have to get inside its patrons' machines to manipulate software (TCP sockets for the geek reader). If this action is required, the effort would be a technical nightmare.

Even worse, the possible necessity (which I question as even possible) of accessing every laptop or smartphone that uses the library networks would be fraught with legal issues and major logistical problems. If this does come about, make the title above Mission Impossible.

The arbitrary nature of H.B. 194 that is being imposed by our state government on all publically funded libraries in Idaho demonstrates the obtuseness of some lawmakers. It also demonstrates their insensitivity to the real world.

The Coeur d' Alene library system is a gem. Its staff is efficient and patron-friendly. The facilities are a joy to use. I wish the library success in this effort. We citizens should hold our collective breaths that the lawmakers will back down and approach this situation in a more pragmatic manner.

Here is a radical idea: The focus of the law is to protect children from the big, bad Internet. Maybe we citizens and our lawmakers should leave the CDA library alone and place the responsibility of monitoring children's smartphone and computer content onto their parents.

Maybe parents should establish controls on their kids' systems **before** they use the library networks. (Most modern machines can perform filtering.) Yep, we would move responsibility to where it belongs: Not to a government, but to the family.

Dream on, Uyless

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