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L527: Management of Libraries and Information Centers  
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### Communication Assignment: Response to Library Crisis

#### Scenario 3: MN PL Staff Claim Harassment

##### Assumptions:

I assume that while abuse of the Internet does occur in the library, it does not occur so regularly or so flagrantly that the library has previously been pressured to change its policy. This letter to the newspaper came as a surprise in part because the administration had assumed the problem, while an issue, was not serious enough to warrant changing the open access policy. The director has considered staff disapproval as a minority opinion, and one based on a minority of occurrences (i.e., considered their position not entirely reasonable--thus the staff action).

I assume that the staff members who signed this letter to the *Star-Tribune* did so without having followed standard grievance procedures within the library. They made their views known in staff meetings, but they did not indicate in a formal way to the administration that their opposition to the policy was so intense as to motivate an "end run" action such as a letter to the newspaper. In this sense, the letter can be seen as a manipulative act to bring pressure to bear on the library from the community, which might otherwise not have been aware of any problem.

I assume that the governing officer is already aware of the many factors involved in the filtering controversy, and does not need the details (such as political bias in some systems, and the refusal of most filtering software designers to disclose their blocking criteria) explained to him or her.

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#### Response 1: internal memo to governing officer

Dear *Governing Officer*:

You are no doubt aware of the letter, signed by forty-seven members of the staff at the main library, which was recently published in the *Star-Tribune*. This letter protests the presence of terminals used by patrons to browse the Internet, claiming that these terminals are a source of harassment and intimidation to the staff due to the possibility of viewing offensive material. The letter proposes that filtering software should be used on all terminals located in high-traffic areas of the library.

As you know, our Internet access policy has been discussed in staff meetings, and has received the support of the library board. Apparently, despite these procedures and policies, these forty-seven staff members feel their views have not been adequately considered by the library administration.

Since the signers represent over one third of the staff at the main library, it is clear that this dissension presents a serious problem. However, I also consider it a serious problem that these staff members chose to go directly to the press with their complaint rather than following regular grievance procedures.

I feel it would be unwise to simply enforce current policy despite this opposition by a significant fraction of the staff. The concerns of these staff members must be addressed--and so must their decision not to follow library procedures in airing their complaint. I continue to believe that filtering software is not a proper compromise, given its potential impact on our patrons due to the inherent weaknesses in the technology. I anticipate your support in the upholding of established library policy on this issue.

I believe that acceptable compromise can be reached without the imposition of filters. I have initiated a series of staff meetings, first by department and then for the staff as a whole, to discuss all aspects of this issue. A committee will then be formed with representatives from each department, which will work out any changes that need to be made in Internet use policies and conditions in the library. I will encourage all staff members to be frank in expressing their views and proposals, and will assure them they can expect a considered response. The forty-seven signers of the letter have been informally reprimanded for disregarding grievance procedures, but no formal disciplinary action has been taken.

I have made it clear in an open letter to staff that I do not wish to consider filtering software as an option, but that the administration is open to compromise and willing to enact changes in the implementation of Internet access in the library. Available options might include changing terminal locations, posting and enforcing library rules for acceptable Internet use, and adopting the use of cubicles or privacy screens. I have also prepared a press release in response to the letter published in the *Star-Tribune* (see attached). In addition, I will invite written input from patrons via a Suggestion Box regarding these decisions, which will affect their access to information in the public library.

I look forward to resolving this incident and its implications with due speed and for the betterment of the library.

<signed Mary Lawson>

## Response 2: Open Letter to Staff

Dear Library Staff:

In a letter recently published in the *Star-Tribune*, forty-seven staff members of the main library signed a statement protesting the use of Internet access terminals in the library. This letter asserted that patron Internet use exposes staff to offensive material, thus creating a harassing, intimidating work environment. The letter went on to propose that filtering software should be installed on Internet terminals in high-traffic areas of the library.

The administration is concerned that this letter was sent to the newspaper before the signers had followed established library grievance procedure to make the severity of their complaint known. However, it is also clear that opposition to the established open access policy is stronger than had previously been taken into account, and that this opposition must now be considered and appropriately addressed. Clearly, something is wrong if those forty-seven people felt their views would not be heard or were not being respected within the library. By the same token, something is wrong if staff members felt they could not respect library policy, and had to take their grievance to the press. We must redress both of these problems, as well as the larger controversy.

Our goal now is to begin that process of redress through a concerted effort to re-open communications. We can work together to resolve these issues, and make the library a better place both for staff and for patrons. The library should not be an uncomfortable workplace. Neither should it be a place where access to information and diversity of opinion is restricted.

I believe that we can reach an effective, satisfying compromise on this issue without the use of filtering software. However, all opinions will be heard and considered as this process evolves in coming days. To that end, we will be holding a series of meetings to discuss our options. We will begin at the departmental level, where staff can discuss the issues and their implications with immediate co-workers and supervisors. We will then hold a staff-wide meeting in which each department will present its perspectives and propose its ideas for a solution. Each department will then name a representative to a planning committee which will work out the details of dealing with the problem of potential Internet abuse by patrons.

Our first and last duty is to the users of the library. That is why the public library is here, and why we all chose to work in the public library. How best can we serve them? How best can we meet their information needs? Principles of public service will always be our bottom line, in this or any other decision-making process.

I look forward to working with all of you to get past this controversy, and to making the library a better place for everyone. Your opinion matters, and we will need everyone's ideas and input to make this happen. Thank you in advance for your participation in the process.

Sincerely yours,  
<Director Mary Lawson>

### Response 3: Press Release

Andrew Carnegie said, "There is not such a cradle of democracy upon the earth as the Free Public Library". One of the hallmarks of democracy is free and open debate; one of the ideals of democracy is respect for diversity of opinion; one of the duties of democracy is protection of both the freedoms and the safety of the individual. Here at the Minneapolis Public Library we aim to prove Mr. Carnegie right.

Recently the *Star-Tribune* published a letter signed by forty-seven staff members of the main branch of our library. This letter protested the open access policy of the library regarding Internet use by patrons on public terminals in the library. The letter stated that this policy has resulted in an intimidating environment for staff, who can be exposed to offensive material being viewed by patrons on library computers. The letter went on to propose that Internet filtering software be installed on terminals in high-traffic areas of the library.

Within the library we are now working to address the concerns of these staff members. However, we do not feel that filtering software is the best solution to this problem. This new technology is flawed and imprecise, resulting in the counter-productive blocking of useful content while still allowing access to material that could be deemed offensive. We feel that if the library is to be a democratic institution, it should not rely on an intended safeguard that blocks public access to valuable information. Instead, we are reviewing our other options. These options include but are not limited to a revision of our "acceptable use" policy and enforcement of its terms, and physically arranging terminals so that screens are less visible to passers by.

The library administration respects the views of its staff, as well as the privacy and freedom of its patrons. The library should be a civil and a safe place for everyone in it, as well as a rich resource for the entire community. At the Minneapolis Public Library we are committed to meeting the needs and spurring the interests of all our patrons. The library administration invites written comment from users of the library in an Internet Suggestion Box which has been placed at the main reference desk in the main library. We look forward to resolving this issue, and to the ongoing process of making the library the best "cradle of democracy" it can be.