

Internet Safety, ILA, and MySpace:

The Nine-Month Process that Produced Not a Baby, but a Bookmark

It all started with the U.S. House of Representatives passing a bill on July 26, 2006, requiring schools and libraries receiving E-rate funds to block access to social networking sites, such as MySpace, as well as access to a wide array of other content and technologies, such as instant messaging, online e-mail, wikis, and blogs. The Deleting Online Predators Act, or DOPA, was the name given to H.R. 5319, which passed overwhelmingly in the House by 410 to 15. (The U.S. Senate never considered the bill.)

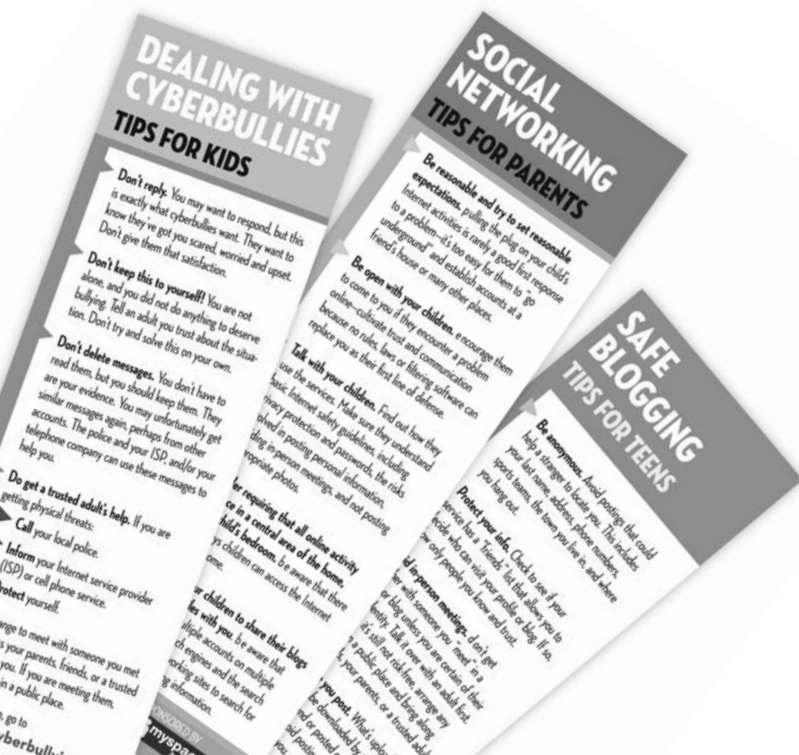
As is often the case, libraries found themselves in the crosshairs between legitimate concerns regarding “online predators” and access to information. The October 2006 *ILA Reporter* carried an article, “DOPA and the Participation Gap,” sharing concerns about the disproportional effect of the legislation on lower-income communities. The article offered alternative measures, such as “Basic Rules on Online Safety for Teens,” and talking points for librarians and others to use with the media, elected officials, and concerned citizens.

The article also proposed an emerging action plan to continue to address this legislation and its likely successors. At the September ILA Executive Board meeting, the action plan was approved. But the challenge remained. This was a piece of federal legislation that had passed by an overwhelming margin. How the heck were we going to do all of this?

As MySpace was at least as big a target as libraries in this situation, we wondered if they might like to partner in our educational efforts. ILA connected with MySpace’s Governmental Affairs Department, and in the ensuing conversation MySpace expressed interest in a cooperative educational campaign in response to the federal Deleting Online Predators Act (DOPA) and possible legislation in the Illinois General Assembly. But the ball was still in our court.

In November, the ILA Executive Board approved a concept to produce a large quantity—one million or more!—“Internet Safety” bookmarks for distribution to the general public and our elected officials. Several bookmarks were envisioned, targeted to specific audiences—kids, teens, and parents on specific topics, e.g., cyberbullying, preventive action, and social networking. The bookmarks would also be available on the ILA Web site to download and print locally. We figured if we could take a finished idea to MySpace, we had a better chance of getting them on board, so we developed the copy and got ready to go, with no clear idea of where we would find the funds to produce them.

Fast-forward to the new year. The U.S. Congress returned to Washington and on January 6, 2007, Senator Ted Stevens (R-Alaska) introduced Protecting Children in the Twenty-first Century Act (S. 49)—this bill was similar to the original DOPA bill that earlier passed the House. On February 16, Representative Mark Kirk (R-Illinois) introduced H.R. 1120—a reincarnation of the Deleting Online Predators Act (DOPA) of 2006.



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Meanwhile, in Springfield, on February 9, 2007, Illinois State Senator Matt Murphy (R-27, Palatine) filed Senate Bill (S.B.) 1682, banning social networking sites in Illinois public and school libraries. Proposed anti-social-networking legislation was also introduced in Georgia (S.B. 59) and North Carolina (S.B. 132). It was beginning to look as though legislation targeting social networking sites would be similar to filtering legislation, coming back year after year requiring energy and resources to fight both in the U.S. Congress and the Illinois General Assembly.

It was time for us to mobilize, to be proactive, and to launch a campaign to educate children, parents, and teachers on how to use the Internet safely. We placed editorials in newspapers across the state. We informed our elected officials that the library community is very concerned about the safety of children. We stressed that education is the key to safe use of the Internet, not laws blocking access. We blogged. We sponsored educational programs on this topic. We set an April 1 deadline to get the bookmark to the printer even if funding was not obtained. We wanted the bookmarks for Illinois Library Day on April 18.

We kept MySpace informed of these activities, and our networking and bridge-building paid off. On March 29, 2007, MySpace offered to pay for the printing and mailing of a total of 900,000 bookmarks. Three weeks later the bookmarks were printed and distributed through the Illinois library systems—400 of each, three different bookmarks, times 750 libraries! In addition, ILA paid for and printed 300,000 bookmarks to distribute at Illinois Library Day (3,000 bookmarks) in Springfield, the 2007 National Library Legislative Day (20,000 bookmarks) in Washington, D.C., the Reaching Forward Conference (3,000 bookmarks) in Rosemont, and to sell.

The success of this project resulted in the creation and distribution of one million plus bookmarks, which we are pleased to report in this article. Our greater goal in writing this article, however, is to emphasize the value of establishing partnerships to secure wider awareness and greater support for libraries, both political and fiscal. We have recorded here the timetable and steps required to fund this initiative noting that the steps taken are not always direct and involved some risk. Building a successful partnership is time-consuming, but if your potential partner is a logical choice and

you can demonstrate to them that the proposed project is mutually beneficial, your persistence will be rewarded.

The NetSafe bookmarks are having a positive impact in library communities all across the country. They are a demonstration of our commitment to the safety of children. We know there are legitimate concerns about the Internet. We know, however, that the best way to protect children is to teach them to guard their privacy and make wise choices. Education will promote safe use of the Internet, not laws blocking access. As the technological and political landscape of our challenges keeps changing, we must learn to quickly adapt our partnerships and tactics to advocate for libraries. Visit www.ila.org/netsafe to download the bookmarks today. Check this site for additional resources.



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