urfWatch 3.0
Published by: Spyglass, Inc.
Web: <http://www.spyglass.com>
List Price: $ 49.95 with free filter updates for one year

CyberPatrol 4.0
ublished by: The Learning Company
Web: <http://www.CyberPatrol.com>
List Price: $29.95
Price to subscribe to site update list: $19.95 (6 months)
$29.95 (12 months)

The best description I have ever heard of the Internet goes something like this: The Internet is just like a large city. While there is shopping, entertainment, education, cultural enrichment, and just plain fun waiting to be explored, there are also seedy back alleys where you would never want to go.

All of the value that the Internet provides us comes with a down side—easy access to pornography, extremist viewpoints, and dangerous information in the comfort of your living room. As a parent, I worry about what my son will see the day he surfs the Internet for the first time.

Apparently, I am not alone in this concern. To help allay parental fears, as well as to keep order at public Internet access sites such as schools, libraries, and Internet cafes, a number of software developers have produced programs to help block access to these potentially offensive sites.

While some, such as Net Nanny by Net Nanny Software, Inc., have not developed their product for the Macintosh, other developers have. We were able to get our hands on a copy of CyberPatrol by The Learning Company and SurfWatch by Spyglass, Inc.

The Products: an Overview

Both products work in pretty similar ways. Content editors at the software developers surf the net to locate sites which fall into several categories, which are usually sites which deal with Sexually Explicit materials, Violence, Hate Speech, Gambling, and Drugs or Alcohol. These are added to a list of restricted sites which are downloadable as filters. Great care is taken to selectively filter these sites, since globally limiting access to, say, sites which discuss 'breasts' could prevent access to something like a breast cancer support group. These lists of sites are updated periodically, as the number of new web pages which fall into these categories grows each day. Also, users can forward URL's that lead to pages which may have been overlooked by the company scanners for review.

CyberPatrol requires you to go to their Web site and download the new filters and install them, while SurfWatch runs a routine that prompts you to update its filters, then, once you are connected to the Internet, updates them every time you reboot.

According to the Learning Company, CyberPatrol allows parents to restrict access to the Internet to certain times of day, limit the total time spent on-line in a day, and block access to Internet sites they deem inappropriate. CyberPatrol also can be used to control access to the major on-line services and to local applications such as games and personal financial managers. Users can tailor the Internet filter to suit an individual child's age and maturity.

CyberPatrol comes loaded with Microsystems Software's "CyberNOT List," a listing of researched Internet sites containing materials which parents may find questionable as well as the "CyberYES List," a listing of researched Internet sites containing fun and educational material for children. Parents can choose to use either the CyberNOT Block List or the CyberYES Allowed Sites List according to the individual child's needs. Using the block list allows users to go everywhere except to prohibited sites. Using the allowed sites list restricts the user to only the sites on the list.

Cumulative duration of the use of the Internet and other applications is captured, allowing reporting. In addition to providing a useful overview of computer usage, these reports also can be used to verify on-line provider and telephone bills. CyberPatrol's multi-user capability allows on-line access to be customized for each member of the family. Parents can set on-line access according to individual interests, needs and ages.

yberPatrol also features a program called ChatGard, which enables parents to keep kids from keying in selected words, phrases or numbers while logged onto an online service, such as America Online, or directly onto the Internet.

Parents have the ability to stop their children from sending out their names, addresses and phone numbers online. Parents enter words or character strings on a ChatGard list. Then, when the child types these words or character strings, the listed words, characters or phrases are replaced by the equivalent number of nonsense characters. The nonsense characters, rather than the words or characters, go out online.

The ChatGard list also includes seven profanities so that children cannot send these words out online in search of sexually explicit sites or in conversations. Parents can add additional words.

Not to be outdone, Spyglass, Inc. offers SurfWatch, which employs an experienced team of Web surfers and advanced spidering technologies to constantly comb the Web for the latest sites to include in their filters. The program combines this with context-based pattern matching that blocks searches and thousands of additional sites, newsgroups, and chat channels containing objectionable material.

urfWatch created the Internet filtering market with its release of SurfWatch 1.0 in May, 1995. More than eight million copies of SurfWatch have been shipped or downloaded since.

According to Spyglass, some of the key features of SurfWatch include:

- Simple installation. Install and run SurfWatch in five minutes.
- Powerful filtering. Block 16 topics across the four core categories of sexually explicit material, violence and hate speech, gambling, and illicit drugs and alcohol.
- Easy customization. “Fine tune” Internet access by customizing your SurfWatch filtering and creating custom filters of your own preferences.
- Daily filter updates. Update your filters daily with the click of a button.
- SearchWatch. Restrict searching for objectionable material in all search engines.
- ChatBlock. Block access to Web-based chat sites and all Internet Relay Chat servers.

SurfWatch offers several customizable filtering options which include:

- None. Turns filtering off and allows access to the entire Internet.
- SurfWatch filtering. Blocks access to sites using the SurfWatch filters.
- Allow mode. Blocks access to the entire Internet, except for the sites you allow with a custom filter.
- Yahooligans! Blocks access to the entire Internet, except for the sites on the Yahooligans! list and sites you allow with custom filters.

One problem with the ChatBlock feature is that it is either all or nothing—either you block all IRC traffic, or none gets blocked. Also, SurfWatch filters sites for content, but does not feature the time-management aspects which CyberPatrol offers.

My Little Experiment

I tested these two products’ ability to filter prurient sites by setting up an experiment. I signed on and went to a randomly selected search engine. Within about fifteen minutes, I had collected a list of ten sites I would be ashamed to show my mother.

Three of these sites are run by the publishers of well know ‘adult oriented’ magazines (two were geared towards men, one was geared towards women), two are free pornography sites which were not allied with a print magazine, two sites with a ‘racial hatred’ theme, one militant pro-life site which offered graphic pictures to make its point, and one site which featured among its table of contents such topics as how to build pipe bombs, destroy cars, break into houses, and commit credit card fraud. A regular rogue’s gallery of the Internet’s offerings for sure.

I added to this list three sites which are not generally deemed to be offensive—Parent Soup, a well-known parenting site <http://www.parentsoup.com>, CNN Interactive <http://www.cnn.com>, and Disney’s site <http://www.disney.com>.

Finally, I added the CNN site which featured the Kenneth Starr report of the President

Clinton/Monica Lewinsky affair for good measure. Most people have questioned the explicit nature of the descriptions of the President's conduct, so I wanted to see if the screening software was able to prevent access to that as well.

It took only five minutes to install and configure CyberPatrol on my LC 580. Following a restart, I was asked to select a main password and was soon sent to an informative screen where I could control the times that the Internet and certain programs on the computer could be used. Settings for the amount of content one would wish to filter in several categories were also accessible at another screen. These settings would allow the person who sets the program parameters to, say, allow access to a site that dealt with nude photography, but still prevent the receiving of explicit pornography.

CyberPatrol fared well, allowing access to my three non-offensive sites. I was still able to access four of the sites, plus the Starr report. Since I had downloaded the latest trial version from CyberPatrol, I assumed that version offered up-to-date filters. However, had I gone to the trouble of downloading the latest filters, I may have gotten a better result. I did find it easier, as a typical parent probably would, to limit access to the Internet via the outstanding time-based controls offered by CyberPatrol to times where I knew I would be at home to supervise my children.

SurfWatch installed in a similar fashion. The first several times (over four hours) I tried to update the filters, I received a message stating that the update server was 'probably busy.' I pressed on, even with the outdated filters. SurfWatch still managed to block most of the sites, but allowed access to three of the sites and the Starr report as well.

SurfWatch did seem easier to configure, as I only had the option of, say, blocking access to Sexually Explicit sites, rather than fine-tuning the level of nudity I could allow the user to see. Additionally, it was a nice touch to provide access to the Yahooligan sites, which had already been screened for appropriate content. You could manually enter URL's or text strings to screen out, but people who put up these boards are very tricky with their naming strategies, and could concievably work around those strings.

Regarding the Starr report, both CyberPatrol and SurfWatch mentioned on their pages that they were not going to block access to the document, and cautioned parents to that effect.

Review Summary

So, what are my takes on the two programs?

CyberPatrol
Pros Very flexible screening criteria allows user the ability to fine-tune Internet access, Able to monitor time on and limit access to the Internet and other programs, ChatGard software allows for online chatting while preventing the dissemination of personal information.

Cons A little overwhelming for the first time user, filter updating a little arduous.

SurfWatch
Pros Easier to set up, Automatic filter updating, Setting to allow access to Yahooligans sites.

Cons No time access/monitoring feature, all-or-nothing blocking scheme, ChatBlock prevents all online chatting.

It's a tough call, since both products were pretty effective. If you are seeking ease of use and don't want to make too many judgement calls, SurfWatch is your best bet. However, if you have the time, interest, and know how to fine-tune Internet access for your children, then I'd suggest CyberPatrol.

One Final Thought

Even with all of these software packages, there is still no better way to safeguard your children while they are on the Internet than by surfing the Web together. You can direct the exploration of the Internet the way you deem appropriate, and you can answer any questions that your children may have as they see new things on line. As I wrote at the start of the article, there is a great deal to see and do on the Internet. Why not share the discovery of the Internet with your child?

As for my poor hard drive, well, the heck with merely erasing the data from my sample sites in my experiment. Some of the stuff I saw made me more than a little uncomfortable. I feel I may have to take the hard drive out of my computer and give it a good scrubbing in the kitchen sink.