Before delving into an examination of censorship we should look again at bias in information resources. There is an introduction to the concept of bias in Chapter 6 that should be reviewed as part of any censorship discussion. Princeton University's online dictionary WordNet defines bias (as a noun) as "a partiality that prevents objective consideration of an issue or situation." Any highly charged topic can provide an example of such "partiality." For example:

Those who strongly favor one sports team over another will skew their reporting to favor their team. Figure 7-5 shows a Chicago Cubs (baseball) fan site named Bleed Cubbie Blue with the headline, "Hey, Look! A Winning Streak!" The "streak" in the headline refers to the fact that the Cubs won two games in a row, hardly a streak from a more objective view.

![A Web Site Displaying Bias: A Preference for a Baseball Team](image)

FIGURE 7-5
A Web Site Displaying Bias: A Preference for a Baseball Team (Bias is not always negative.)

Another baseball fan who strongly opposes any success by the Cubs could agitate to have the Bleed Cubbie Blue Web site shut down because he finds it offensive. He is biased in the opposite direction, and should he succeed in eliminating the site, that would be censorship.

The type of censorship that students most often picture is the removal of a book from a library, especially a school library, because some parents object to its content. At a college level, discussions of censorship focus less on libraries and books:

A college librarian asked her students to go to the Web site of a white supremacy organization, using it as a discussion-starter. The issue under discussion was censorship. The students were all planning to become elementary and secondary school teachers. This is the scenario posed by the librarian:

You teach a class to sixth graders who are, on average, 12 years old. You have talked about slavery, the U.S. Civil War and the slow development of civil rights in the U.S. You ask your students to go to the Web site and decide whether organizations such as this should be allowed to have Web sites accessible by anyone. The students do a good job of
offering opinions and reasons and you feel the exercise was a success. The next day a furious parent appears at the close of the school day and demands that you accompany him to the principal’s office so he can describe what his son told him about yesterday’s class. The parent wants you fired for showing such material to sixth grade students; his son simply said they went to this “cool” site yesterday. (The graphics at the site were impressive.)

How would the education students handle this state of affairs?

The education students had never thought about this type of situation. In their view the Internet was not a place where censorship belonged. The students were divided about whether it was wise for the hypothetical teacher to show such a Web site to students of that age. And the discussion easily broadened to address students of any age and then whether anyone, parents or governments, should be able to dictate which Web sites were off limits. Censorship was hitting home.

In homes where children watch television, parents may impose censorship through the use of the “v-chip.” By law, the chip is integrated into new television sets built after 2000. It allows owners to use the chip to block reception of television programs based on a rating system. Ratings reflect the levels of violence, strong language and adult situations or themes. Parents may decide to filter what their children are able to watch in their own homes; that is a private decision and it can be done with or without use of the v-chip. Censorship on a public level is a different situation because it involves someone—a committee, a political body, an individual—dictating what is and is not available to all.

The Electronic Frontier Foundation, an organization devoted to issues of online privacy and freedom began a campaign in the late 1990s to label Web sites that support the efforts to keep access open. Site creators are encouraged to post a symbol on their sites, a blue ribbon to support free speech. Sites that carry the icon shown in Figure 7-6 have agreed to the concept. Check out the EFF site for information about the issue.

FIGURE 7-6
Eff’s Freedom of Speech Online Icon (Blue Ribbon Campaign)
Censorship of electronic resources has another facet. Public and school libraries in the United States, in order to receive federal funding to support Internet connections, are required to install filters on their Internet-access computers so that patrons do not have access to child pornography, obscene material, or information that may be considered harmful to minors. The law passed in 2000 that requires filters is the Children’s Internet Protection Act, or CIPA. Some libraries have decided to forego federal money and have not installed filters. Many other libraries depend heavily on federal financing to stay open and have installed the filters. The American Library Association, always at the forefront of censorship issues, opposed CIPA and sued, testing the law’s constitutionality. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled CIPA constitutional so that libraries must comply or lose the federal subsidies for their ISPs.

It is argued that filters block many sites that do not have any of the type of content described above. A site on breast cancer is not pornography but the word “breast” may cause it to be filtered by a public library’s filter. Can students do research on race horses if access to race tracks is denied by their school library’s filters because gambling sites may be dangerous to children? The law makes provisions for individual users to request that filters be removed while they are using a computer; many patrons are loath to make such a request because of the personal information they must divulge in order to do so.

Is CIPA censorship in the same way that it is censorship for a parents’ group to demand removal of the often-banned book, The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison, from their high school library? Should the government—from the public library board and the school district level all the way to the U.S. Congress and courts—be allowed to impose filters? Whose responsibility is it to ensure that children have no access to Web sites they find undesirable: parents or schools or libraries or . . . ? For more information about filters, go to a Web site such as Internet-filters.net but keep in mind what you now know about bias.

The Internet and the Web were described early on as great “democratizers” of information, allowing access by anyone to anything. Is that future view accurate today? Should open access to everything be a policy enforced by governments? These questions raise another information issue, that of the “digital divide.”