Filtering Overview

THE LABOR PARTY WENT TO THE 2007 ELECTION WITH A COMPREHENSIVE PLAN FOR "CYBER-SAFETY" - THAT IS, MAKING THE INTERNET SAFER FOR CHILDREN.

The centrepiece of this policy, and its most expensive component, is the controversial national ISP Internet filtering scheme. The filter was, in theory, to protect children by shielding them from age-inappropriate online content, and to prevent the spread of child-abuse material online.

The plan has since changed. In its current form, the plan requires that Australian Internet access be subject to a Government-controlled blacklist comprising content that would be "refused classification" under Australia's content classification scheme. This would certainly include illegal child-abuse material, but the category is much broader than that, including, for instance, content that deals with instruction in crime, drug use, and some adult sexual material. This mandatory filter, along with the new censorship powers behind it, was not an election promise. In the meantime, it has proven a distraction from the bigger priority of delivering faster and more affordable broadband for all Australians.

Despite its stated rationale of protecting children, the policy has been very controversial. Those criticising the filter include ISPs concerned about the technical problems and expense, civil-libertarians worried about the free-speech issues of regulating internet content, and analysts concerned at the expense and ill-defined policy goals.

Opponents don't dispute the worth of providing tools to help parents, but take issue with the expense, side-effects and manifest unworkability of this scheme. It is fair to say that the filter is no longer a cyber-safety tool at all, as the scope and size of the blacklist are too limited to bring parents any peace of mind. For instance, X-rated material will, by definition, not be included on the list. The implementation of such a list could only give parents a false sense of security. This calls the entire rationale for the scheme into question.

Furthermore, there are many concerns around the government administration of the scheme. Details remain scarce, but it is hard to imagine a mechanism by which a government agency could administer Internet content regulation in a transparent, efficient and timely manner, especially when the list is a secret one. In any case, as the Government admits, it will be possible for any motivated user to circumvent the filter if desired.

Instead of an expensive and unworkable national scheme, we propose a renewed focus on parental education and supervision combined with continued support by government and industry for PC-level filters that can be tailored to individual families as desired.

The real risks children face online - just as in the real world - stem from interactions with others. With the help of parents, children need education to become safe and responsible citizens online and off.

Main Concerns

- The filter will not protect children from inappropriate material

- The filter will not prevent criminals from accessing and distributing child sexual abuse material

- The filter will block access to material that is currently legal to possess and view, just not to sell and publicly display

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