Clampdown on child pornography used as pretext for state control of the Internet

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In early September law enforcement officers in 14 different countries, including the United States, Britain, Australia and Germany, simultaneously raided the properties of almost 200 suspected members of a global Internet child pornography ring known as the 'Wonderland Club'.

As part of this operation, Britain's National Criminal Intelligence Service (NCIS) took the unprecedented step of entering one of Britain's largest Internet service providers to seize computer logs and arrest a staff member. It was Britain's biggest ever Internet raid, but details were not publicised until a fortnight later.

The decision to delay news of the raid was due to the serious implications of such an action. The state is using public outrage over use of the Internet by paedophiles to justify a far-reaching attack on civil liberties and the right to privacy. Legal precedents are being set which can result in unrestrained state control and surveillance of the Internet.

The police have effectively granted themselves unrestricted powers to extract whatever information they see fit from Internet service providers. The raid occurred only days before a joint police, MI5 and Internet industry discussion on law enforcement access to private information about e-mail users' identities, activities and messages. It was a timely reminder to the Internet service providers that the state will bully them into an agreement if they do not accept full police access to Internet records.

The Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) and key Internet industry figures are currently holding seminars on computer crime in Edinburgh, Manchester and London to be addressed by police, industry and prosecution lawyers. The press, public and defence lawyers are excluded from attending.

ACPO wants Internet service providers to agree to the routine handing over of confidential e-mail records. They will receive electronic demands under the Data Protection Act, stating that the police need information for the prevention or detection of crime. This information could then be used for other unrelated investigations. This can be demanded by any police inspector. Internet service providers would be transformed into appendages of the police and security services.

This initiative by ACPO will mean that e-mail, unlike postal mail or telephone communications, can be intercepted and read without a warrant from the Home Secretary. Such information could then be used as evidence in court. At present postal mail intercepts or phone taps are supposedly inadmissible as evidence in ordinary criminal cases.

In an attempt to soften the impact of these measures in the mind of the public, police representatives have said they would not expect unauthorised access to e-mail as it was being sent, only to e-mail stored on computers. To intercept e-mails as they are being sent would still require a phone-tap warrant.

This fig leaf will be, in all likelihood, blown away when Home Secretary Jack Straw reviews the Interception of Communications Act in light of the draconian measures introduced in last month's emergency debate on terrorism.

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