

Australia: Growing opposition to Labor's Internet censorship

Our reporters

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More than 2,000 opponents of the federal Labor government's plans to censor the Internet rallied in cities across Australia on December 13—the second national protest in the past two months. The demonstrations, which were convened by the Digital Liberty Coalition (DLC), are another indication of the growing concern of industry technicians, scientists and a broad range of ordinary people over the government's attempts to control and regulate Internet access in Australia.

Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and his Minister for Broadband and Communications Stephen Conroy claim that two-tier Internet filtering measures announced last year will protect children from pornography and X-rated violence.

The measures, however, have little to do with protecting children but constitute a direct attack of freedom of expression and other basic democratic rights. Its real purpose is to establish the framework for government censorship of Internet sites.

Despite the broad-based opposition, Labor announced it would start "live testing" of its dual-level filtering system in mid-January. The first level will block websites named in a secret blacklist maintained by the government's Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA). The second level involves an optional filtering system that Labor claims will only block child pornography and other material it deems inappropriate or illegal for children. Those not wanting to be subjected to second-level filtering will be forced to lodge a special "opt out" request with their Internet Service Provider (ISP).

Most of Australia's largest Internet providers, including Telstra and Internode, have attacked the government and refused to participate in the testing.

Telstra's chief operating officer Greg Winn declared that Labor's measures were the equivalent of "trying to boil the ocean" and doomed to fail. IiNet managing director Michael Malone described Conroy as "the worst communications minister we've had in the 15 years since the [Internet] industry has existed".

IT industry technicians have said that the filtering could be quickly and easily bypassed by anyone with rudimentary computer skills. In fact, the ACMA conducted Internet censorship filtering in 2001, 2003 and 2005 before abandoning the system as "unworkable". IT experts have also pointed out that the filtering

will drastically slow Australia's already poor quality broadband connection speeds.

Last Friday the System Administrators Guild of Australia (SAGE-AU), which represents IT professionals, issued an open letter calling on Labor to abandon its plans. The letter pointed out that the system would slow Internet speed by up to 87 percent and could block at least one in twelve legitimate websites.

One of the most serious aspects of the plan is the lack of public oversight of the Internet filtering tests or even a public list of banned sites. According to the media, the ACMA has a list of 1,300 sites currently being blocked but during testing will censor an additional 10,000 websites.

The names of these sites will be kept secret by the Labor government and the blacklist exempted from all Freedom of Information requests. The list has been developed in consultation with the Australian Federal Police and various international police agencies, including Interpol and the FBI. The government refuses to provide any means for banned sites to challenge their blacklisting.

Legislation imposing the system has yet to be passed in the federal parliament and, although the Greens and Liberals have said they will reject it, Labor has won the support of right-wing Senator Stephen Fielding from Family First and Senator Nick Xenaphon, an anti-gambling candidate from South Australia. The only other public supporters of the government measures are right-wing religious groups such as the Australian Christian Lobby and Child Wise.

While sections of the media, for their own business reasons, have been critical of the Internet censorship plans, they have not challenged Labor's claims that its only motivation is to protect children from pornography and have reacted nervously to the street protests. On December 20, the Murdoch-owned *Australian* newspaper, for example, described those participating "ageing hippies" and "young firebrands".

The principal concern of the corporate media and the Rudd government is not child pornography but the danger posed when masses of people begin using the Internet to find alternative

sources of news and information and begin organising politically and globally to challenge government policies and the entire official set-up.

Protesters denounce government

More than 300 people rallied at the Sydney Town Hall on December 13 to oppose the government's Internet censorship. Danny Yee from Electronic Frontiers Australia told protestors he had been involved in demonstrations that had pushed back similar censorship moves by the former Howard government.

"Little had changed" with the election of the Rudd government, he said. "Once they've got this system in place, there's nothing to stop them getting any other types of content blocked they want."

DLC coordinator Sam Russell warned those in attendance that the Labor's Internet censorship plans would be "far worse than China" and open to future abuse, including the banning of websites providing information on breast cancer, adult sex problems, anorexia and other health issues.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with demonstrators outside Sydney Town Hall about the government attack on democratic rights.

Andrew Manzo said: "I was born in Santiago, Chile. In 1973 they changed our laws and before we knew it, we had a fascist government. I've experienced what it's like and I don't want my children to experience it here. There is a slippery slope that comes with censorship. You might think they are censoring the right stuff at the moment but they could start censoring stuff that you don't know about.

"The government is saying that it wants to get rid of pornography, illegal material, etc., but it's not telling us what it will do in the future, so whatever it doesn't like it'll censor. I think it's a Christian fundamentalist agenda and if we don't stop them now, in a year's time, Marxism, which these Christians don't like, won't be allowed on the Internet."

Eddie Chan said he strongly opposed government intervention on the Internet and said it represented an attack on freedom of the press.

"I hate the way they brand everyone opposed to Internet censorship as a child pornographer, but it probably does hide a deeper agenda," he said.

"I'm really worried about this being the thin edge of a wedge. What's next? They could tap my phone without a warrant, and all my communications online. They can do all that already but this is not East Germany, it's not China, this is Australia. Once this sort of

censorship is in place then who decides what we look at? It's child pornography today but anything anti-government next."

Derek, an IT worker said: "This is the first time I've protested against anything but I've come here because this idea of filtering the Internet is a dumb idea on so many levels.

"They want to filter the Internet but we don't know in what way. One thing we do know though is that the list of what they are going to be filtering will be secret and so we'll never know exactly what they're filtering. It's all very crazy."

Stuart Hargreaves: "Every country in the world has been going backwards in terms of fundamental human rights and this is just another example of that. I'd be interested to see if the government had another reason, apart from Senator Fielding, to implement this, because this filter hasn't been imposed anywhere else in the world except for countries such as China, Iran, Burma. These are the only countries in the world that have a compulsory filter on the Internet."

Amy Gunson: "I've come here today to stand up for free information on the Internet in Australia. In the early 1990s the US went through a period where the government tried to censor our Internet with the Communication Decency Act and we stood up then and that bill was eventually shot down.

"There's a lot of misunderstanding in the government about what information is on the Internet, how people are accessing it, but I think it's their way of imposing control."



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