

Australian government pushes ahead with internet censorship

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The Australian government has stepped up its efforts to censor internet content, announcing on December 15 that it plans to introduce laws for mandatory filtering before next year's federal election. The measures would be activated in 2011 and force all Australian internet service providers (ISPs) to block sites from a secret black-list maintained by the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA).

The Rudd government's censorship measures, which have been compared with similar censorship filtering regimes in China, Saudi Arabia and Iran, constitute a major attack on democratic rights. The Labor Party would be responsible for introducing the harshest internet censorship regime of any so-called western democracy.

Announcing the policy, Communications Minister Stephen Conroy claimed that the legislation was designed to "increase cyber-safety for Australian families". Labor would ensure, he declared, that access was denied to all websites containing "child sex abuse, bestiality, sexual abuse and the detailed instruction of crime and drug abuse. It is important that all Australians, particularly young children, are protected from this material."

Conroy claimed that Denmark, Belgium, Finland, Italy, Germany and The Netherlands already operated similar ISP filter systems but failed to mention that in those countries the filters were voluntary.

Labor's internet censorship has nothing to do with "protecting children". Copies of the ACMA black-list, which were leaked in March, revealed that half the sites blocked in trials were not related to child pornography.

They included YouTube links, gambling pages, a Queensland dentist and a tour operator. One of those targeted was a site devoted to discussing the geo-political causes of terrorism. It was banned because it included extracts from material written by terrorist groups.

Numerous IT experts have pointed out that technically competent users could easily circumvent the filtering. Child pornographers and paedophiles can bypass internet censorship via peer-to-peer exchanges and other digital distribution methods.

Regardless of the pretexts, Labor's measures establish the legislative framework to censor oppositional political voices and website material deemed to threaten the current socio-economic order. Like its counterparts around the world, the Rudd government is nervous about the ready access to alternative news and commentary on the Internet and its increasing use as a tool for organising politically, particularly by young people.

While the government can already force ISPs to take down Australian-hosted content from sites on the ACMA's black list, the latest measures go much further in establishing a method for blocking material hosted in other countries.

As well, Conroy announced funding for 91 additional federal police to be devoted to internet censorship and "consultative arrangements" established with "industry, child protection bodies and children... to identify possible areas for further action."

Under the planned laws the federal government can

add to the ACMA black list based on information provided by Interpol, the FBI and other “international agencies”. The secret list will be exempted from all Freedom of Information requests.

The Rudd government will also establish a “public complaints process” allowing individuals and organisations to demand that other sites be added to the black list. This material will be categorised under the government’s so-called Refused Classification (RC)-rating system.

RC-rating is notoriously ill-defined and can be applied to a range of literature, film, art and/or politically controversial publications. Sites that provide educational content and advice on safer drug use and euthanasia, for example, are already banned under the RC-rating. During the last century, hundreds of books and films were banned in Australia via the so-called “public complaints” mechanism.

The “public complaints” framework will provide inordinate political power to right-wing minority formations and other conservative lobby groups. The Rudd government is calculating that the new legislation will help secure support from right-wing Christian groups during the next federal election.

Labor’s censorship plans have been widely condemned. Hundreds of thousands have signed online petitions; others have voiced their opposition in letters to the press and internet blogs. Reporters without Borders and other organisations defending freedom of expression have publicly denounced the measures.

Various IT scientists and some media commentators have declared that Labor’s censorship is “unworkable”, will slow internet speed, be bad for business, and predict that the government will have to withdraw its plans. This is a serious miscalculation. In fact, the Rudd government has made clear that it has no intention of backing away from its anti-democratic measures.

When Labor first proposed internet filtering in December 2007, it claimed the measures would not be mandatory and that adults could register and “opt out”

to secure uncensored internet material. Six months later Communications Minister Conroy said there would be no “opt out” provision. And when the ACMA’s secret black list was posted on the internet in March this year, one of the websites publishing the material was subjected to a government take-down directive and threatened with \$11,000 fines per day until it complied.

Another aspect of Labor’s policy that has received little comment is that internet filtering widens the ability of the state to spy on its citizens. Its introduction will mean that every site visit, and who is accessing it, will be logged by ISPs. Government authorities with access to this information will be able to monitor the activities of anyone using the net.

On December 15, when Conroy announced Labor’s latest internet censorship proposals, he declared that the measures had nothing to do with suppressing political opposition. “We will never support that, and if someone proposes that, I will be on the floor of parliament arguing against it,” he told the media.

These assurances are entirely hollow. Under the guise of protecting children, the Labor government is introducing a far-reaching system of controls that can be readily extended to other areas, including political opposition, without informing the public. The ACMA’s black list is being kept a carefully guarded secret. This violation of the basic principles of freedom of speech and expression is part of the government’s ongoing agenda of strengthening the state apparatus, increasing the surveillance of ordinary citizens and deepening other attacks on basic legal rights.



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