UK government moves to clamp down on Internet, citing child pornography

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A new clampdown on the internet has been authorised by the British government under the guise of the fight against child pornography.

Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron hosted an "internet safety summit" last week, with the support of Google and Microsoft. Ahead of the summit, Google's CEO Eric Schmidt authored an op-ed in the *Daily Mail* in which he said his company had developed new algorithms to block searches that could pertain to child abuse.

Schmidt said that Google would target a massive 100,000 search terms that "might be related to the sexual abuse of kids."

The restrictions, which will first apply in English-speaking countries, will be expanded to all other languages over the next six months.

In the case of 13,000 terms, a warning will appear advising that child abuse material is illegal. Google has also developed the ability to tag videos deemed illegal so that they can be removed from the internet. Similar measures are being imposed by Microsoft, which runs the search engine's Bing and Yahoo.

Cameron claimed a personal victory, and the *Daily Mail* trumpeted its involvement through its campaign to Block Online Porn. Microsoft and Google account for 95 percent of all searches.

In July, Cameron had announced a new agreement according to which internet service providers will apply filters blocking access to online pornography unless customers state they wish to access it. The claim was made that this was necessary to prevent anyone under 18 from accessing adult content. Cameron piously said that husbands would have to "have a discussion" with their wives if they wish to turn off the preset filter. Nine out of ten companies are set to introduce the new filter.

Simultaneously, there are plans for banks to police their customers' use of the internet, with credit card payments to adult sites blocked if they are considered accessible to anyone under 18.

Cameron had threatened that if companies failed to do "enough" to block illegal images, he would "bring forward legislation that will ensure it happens." But as *Techdirt* pointed out, "No effort along these lines will ever be able to completely block illegal images, so this legislation is all but inevitable."

As numerous experts have pointed out, child pornography is rarely accessed through Google and other main search bars—so the measure will have little or no effect in this regards. What it will do is severely restrict users from accessing legal content and create the precedent for government-sponsored screening of the internet.

An anti-pornography campaign is the moral banner for this particular crusade, but its objective is to further entrench state censorship. Feminist organisations have long campaigned for a ban on "lads' mags," while women's groups such as End Violence Against Women (EVAW) demand a ban on extreme porn. Such campaigns have been utilised by Cameron to justify the latest actions.

However, as the *Motherboard* site noted, Cameron's claim that the 100,000 search terms targeted by child protection experts are "unambiguous" is "frankly impossible" given that "for comparison, the second edition of the Oxford English Dictionary contains 231,100 entries."

Numerous "innocent" terms are to be filtered out or subject to restrictions. In addition, regarding the "detection and removal" of child sexual abuse imagery, Schmidt acknowledged that "because computers can't reliably distinguish between innocent pictures of kids at

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bathtime and genuine abuse... we always need to have a person review the images."

The argument that the measures do not go far enough will only be used by the government to justify further intrusion. New terms are to be added to those blocked, as the filter is designed to pick up on new "code" words or terms that paedophiles might adopt to evade detection. Dr Joss Wright, a research fellow at the Oxford Internet Institute at the University of Oxford, told the *Telegraph,* "If you block a certain word people will find a way around it. If you look at China, every time they block a word a new one pops up.

"It is an endless spiral and it is an ongoing process of change. The trouble really comes when the amount of things you have to block to be up to date means you start to ban innocuous things."

Once such algorithms have been developed and employed, the terms to be blocked can in effect be extended at will—providing endless possibilities for censorship.

The analogy with China is telling. The UK government is deliberately utilising the emotive issue of child pornography and paedophilia to legitimise the involvement of British and US spy agencies in monitoring the internet, just months after whistleblower Edward Snowden disclosed their involvement in massive and illegal surveillance operations.

Snowden's disclosures have already revealed that Microsoft, Google and other companies are part of a state-intelligence-corporate nexus engaged in the systematic and illegal violation of the democratic rights of the world's peoples—helping the National Security Agency (NSA) and Britain's Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) tap into the internet backbone, gathering data from customers and breaking their own encryption codes.

Now Google and Microsoft are to work directly with Britain's National Crime Agency and the Internet Watch Foundation to develop a plan to target file sharing networks, and a joint Anglo-American initiative is to be set up to target child pornography involving the FBI.

The NSA and GCHQ are also to be given free rein to "hunt" the so-called "dark web."

"There's been a lot in the news recently about the techniques, ability and brilliance of the people involved in the intelligence community, in GCHQ and the NSA in America," Cameron said. "That expertise is going to be brought to bear to go after these revolting people sharing these images [of child abuse] on the dark net, and making them available more widely."

"You use technology which is able to get into the dark internet, that is able to decrypt encrypted files, and that is able to find out what is going on," he said.

The term "dark web" is habitually used to depict a shadowy gathering of paedophiles and major crime gangs, trying to hide their illicit activities. In reality, many use encryption to try and avoid the illegal spying activities of the British and US governments. *Techdirt* spelled out the implications of the NSA/GCHQ being unleashed against the dark web, stating, "Once they're in there, it's a free-for-all. Suspects will be brought to trial only to find out the evidence against them can't be revealed for 'security' reasons, leaving them under-equipped to mount a credible defence. This would also play into the agencies' mindset that those utilising privacy protections and encryption are 'criminals/terrorists' because using either means they've got 'something to hide'."

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