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Toowong Q 4066

16 October 2008

Mr Stephen Conroy
Minister for Communications, Broadband and the Digital Economy
Level 4, 4 Treasury Place
Melbourne VIC 3002

Dear Mr Conroy,

As an Australian internet user and a firm believer in the right to freedom of speech, I was dismayed when the Labor Party announced its plan for mandatory internet filtering. Moreover I was alarmed at recent media reports indicating that, contrary to the Government's earlier statements, it will not be possible for Australians to opt out entirely from the filtering service.

In your media releases you continue to use the word "filtering", but a more accurate term for this planned scheme is "censorship".

As an IT professional, I have witnessed first-hand how troublesome and costly web censorship software is to administer, and how ineffective it is in achieving its stated purpose. Censoring internet traffic at the ISP level poses an unacceptable cost, in terms of network performance and administrative overhead, with no real benefits in improving "cyber-safety".

Neither the Department nor the ACMA's web sites give any specific details about the censorship scheme which the Government is committed to implementing. For this reason, I have listed some of the questions I have about the scheme:

1. How has the Government determined that a majority of Australians want mandatory censorship of internet traffic?
2. In recent media releases you have referred to the blocking of "illegal and inappropriate content". Precisely what definition of "illegal and inappropriate content" will be used when the scheme is implemented? And by what means can this definition subsequently be changed? (For example, would it require an Act of Parliament to change this definition, or would it be at the discretion of the Department or the ACMA?)
3. What is the estimated annual cost to taxpayers in maintaining the list of "illegal and inappropriate content"?

4. If ISPs are expected to bear the cost of implementing the censorship scheme, how do you expect them to recover this cost, apart from passing it on to customers in the form of price increases?
5. How is the censorship scheme more effective at improving “cyber-safety” than the Government’s existing NetAlert initiative, which already provides free, customisable content filtering software to Australian households who want it?
6. When the censorship system incorrectly blocks my access to legitimate material, what procedure will I need to follow in order to have the material unblocked? Can you guarantee the timeframe by which it will be unblocked? Can you guarantee that the material will not later become (incorrectly) blocked again?

Given the Department’s dedication to “ensuring the telecommunications sector meets the needs of all Australians”, I am confident that you and your staff have carefully considered these issues. I therefore anticipate your return letter answering all of the above questions.

Sincerely,

Dan Callaghan