

Australia abandons mandatory Internet filter plan

November 9 2012, by Rod Mcguirk



Australia on Friday scrapped a controversial plan to filter the Internet, saying it will instead block hundreds of websites identified by Interpol as among the worst child abuse sites.

The Australian government has abandoned its 5-year-old pledge to mandate a filter blocking child pornography and other objectionable Internet content.

Communications Minister Stephen Conroy said Friday that instead of a compulsory filter being imposed, Internet service providers have agreed to block 1,400 child abuse websites on INTERPOL's "worst of" list.

Three of Australia's largest [telecommunications companies](#)—Telstra, Optus and Primus—have been blocking the listed sites since 2010.

"We've actually reached agreement with the industry to block child pornography and we think that is a significant step forward," Conroy told Australian Broadcasting Corp. radio.

Critics had said the proposed legislated filter would have put Australia in the same censorship league as China. Even the U.S. State Department expressed concerns about the proposed regulations, which would have been some of the most restrictive among the world's democracies.

The new plan has a narrower focus on child abuse. The government's proposed compulsory nationwide filter would have also banned a regularly updated list of sites that also carried [extreme violence](#) as well as detailed instructions in crime, drug use or terrorist acts.

Opponents argued that the filter would slow Internet speeds, erroneously block harmless sites and restrict free speech.

Anti-censorship campaigner Geordie Guy welcomed the government reversal. He said the new agreement will have little impact on the availability of child abuse material which isn't traded on the [open Web](#).

"While this is a much better result than any of the previous proposals that the government came up with, it's still really unlikely to do much good," Guy told ABC.

The Internet Industry Association of Australia chief executive Peter Lee

said he was "pleased that the government has now moved on" from the filter and had narrowed its focus to illegal [child abuse](#).

The Australian Electoral Lobby said the government's agreement with ISPs fell short of its cyber safety pledge made during the 2007 election campaign.

"The government's decision not to legislate to the full extent of the commitment is a great disappointment," the Lobby's Managing Director Jim Wallace said.

But the opposition said the government realized it had no hope of getting the filter legislation through Parliament. The Greens party, a key government ally, joined the opposition in condemning the mandatory filter proposal as a serious restriction of free speech.

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