

TECHNOLOGY

The great porn war

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Clive Hamilton is keen to establish he is not a wowser. He did, after all, strip naked at Jim Cairns's Down to Earth hippie festival in 1974 and fought the good '60s fight against "neurotic Victorian sexual mores" in his younger years. He even volunteers that he has no problem with non-violent erotica. "If it treats all parties in a non-objectified way, then tell me where I can get it."

But Hamilton, a prominent left-leaning intellectual, wants the Rudd Government to crack down on what he sees as the virtual Wild West - "a cowboy culture that thinks itself beyond the reach of normal social control".

After investigating internet porn with Michael Flood in 2003, a shocked Hamilton called for serious action to shield young people from the extreme and violent porn swirling around the internet. He may just be about to get what he wants.

Stephen Conroy, the Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy, is pushing hard to introduce mandatory filtering at the internet service provider (ISP) level. A live pilot study into such a scheme's viability is under way.

The proposed filtering system would have two tiers. The first mandatory tier would block illegal material, chiefly child pornography. The second voluntary tier would block pornography that is legal but inappropriate for children.

The Rudd Government miscalculated if it thought public outrage over Bill Henson's photographs of nude children would help strip political downsides from a debate about making the internet a more child-friendly place - or that those opposed to filtering would be too intimidated to demur for fear of being labelled soft on pedophilia.

Several ISPs - including Australia's largest, Telstra - have declined to take part in the content filtering trial. The adult industry lobby group Eros, describing internet filtering as "the last straw", has launched the Australian Sex Party. The Greens and Liberals have stated they will almost certainly block any legislation to introduce mandatory filtering. And who knows how many netizens, incandescent with cyber-rage at the prospect of the Government deciding what they can and can't see, have mobilised on- and offline in ways not seen before?

The online activist network GetUp! was overwhelmed by protesting phone calls and emails. Eighty-five thousand people have signed an online anti-filtering petition and \$40,000 has been donated to fund an online ad campaign against mandatory filtering.

Jerry Hutchinson, the national resources manager for the Digital Liberty Coalition, which organised public protests across capital cities last Saturday, says: "Grassroots organisations have sprung up all around the country over this."

Much of the debate has centred on effectiveness. Not only is the filter an act of censorship, say critics, but it won't work and, indeed, will make the internet less effective because it will slow it down. Critics claim it will inevitably block sites that shouldn't be blocked and fail to block sites that should be blocked.

Pro-filtering advocates such as the Family First senator, Stephen Fielding, aren't dissuaded by technical difficulties.

"We need to make sure we don't have a situation where the internet is so slow that no one uses it, but the other extreme is that we shouldn't filter anything. That's just ridiculous. This is material that is already illegal according to the classification board which, in any other medium, would automatically be blocked. Family First has been pushing for this for years.

"At least this Government is prepared to trial it and the technology over the coming years will get better and better."

This isn't ultimately a debate over whether a filtering system can or can't be made to work effectively. It's a power struggle, with profound social, political and economic implications, over whether the internet in Australia will remain far less lightly regulated by the state than preceding forms of media.

"It could go either way," says Colin Jacobs, the vice-chairman of Electronic Frontiers Australia, a group that has been promoting free speech on the internet since 1994. "Either this is the last gasp of government attempting to censor the internet - and it is going to run into the same sorts of technological and legal brick walls previous attempts have - or the Government will have succeeded in getting their hooks into the internet.

"And then you can be absolutely sure that every special interest group will be lining up to have their particular bugbear dealt with. The copyright lobby will be first in line to have file sharing websites banned. Then you've got two gentlemen with significant influence due to the balance of power in the Senate - Senator [Nick] Xenophon, who is against internet gambling, and Senator Fielding, who would be against all adult material on the internet. It's not panic mongering to say that; these people are on the record."

GetUp!'s Ed Coper agrees. "Part of the reason we got involved in this was defending our turf in terms of online freedoms. We are an online advocacy organisation and rely on an accessible, unimpeded internet to allow Australians to have their say on a range of important issues.

"Even before the testing began we heard talk of things like euthanasia, anorexia and online gambling websites being raised as bargaining chips between the key members of the Government and the Senate."

Hamilton regards as overreaction the often-levelled charge by bloggers that Australia is on a slippery slope to Chinese-style censorship. "I'm not saying there aren't some legitimate concerns but some of the claims are so over the top that it makes you wonder what is really going on with internet libertarians," he says.

Conroy, a socially conservative Catholic, and his urgers on the religious right may be doing some cost-benefit analysis, assessing the future electoral consequences of having so antagonised the nation's previously quiescent porn consumers.

Fiona Patten, chief executive of Eros, says 1500 people have signed up as members of the Australian Sex Party since its launch last month. "Most of them [are] under 30 and half of them [are] women.

"Four million Australians consume porn and we've got 1000 sex shops across the nation that we hope to set up as branches of the party. Community attitudes to sex have relaxed enormously but politicians' attitudes have if anything tightened. Well, we've learnt our lesson from Family First. We're going to be running candidates for federal and state upper houses and making sure our constituency's voice is heard."

There is also the question of whether Labor has needlessly wedged itself over filtering, upsetting its tech-savvy, educated, middle-class constituency over an issue that has so far barely registered with the Howard Battler mums and dads it was presumably hoping to impress.

"The ALP has got to be very careful about not alienating that [progressive] supporter base on these kinds of issues," GetUp's Coper observes. "What you might term the wet liberal voters are up for grabs. A lot of them walked away from the Howard government and will now be asking themselves, given the Rudd Government's social conservatism, where they have left to turn."

Censorship battles always generate strange alliances and unpredictable political dynamics. Many members of the business community, worried about degrading the effectiveness and speed of the internet, have lined up with the blogosphere and civil libertarians, as has Nick Minchin, Conroy's opposite number and the Coalition leader in the Senate.

"That's the problem with having this sort of highly centralised, Government-mandated nationwide filtering system," he recently told the *Herald*. "The argy-bargy that would result over what is in and what is out strikes me as being almost impossible to manage."

Minchin would be mindful of the ridicule heaped on his former colleague Richard Alston for boasting in 1999 that he had banned porn on the internet after making it illegal for Australian adult websites to be hosted inside this country. The websites simply arranged to be hosted overseas, illustrating the difficulties any national government faces in trying to control the World Wide Web.

So far, Conroy's public backers are mostly limited to conservative Christian organisations such as the Australian Christian Lobby and some child protection groups such as Child Wise. And Hamilton, who is frustrated he is the only significant figure on the Left currently arguing against the "unthinking libertarianism" unleashed in '60s and '70s.

In the past, Hamilton could have relied on anti-porn feminists lining up with him. When mass dissemination of the VCR enabled easy access to porn movies in the mid-'80s, feminists in and outside government successfully campaigned to severely restrict the legal availability of X-rated videos. Those restrictions remain in place, if little enforced, to this day.

Similarly, in 1992, Australia's censorship board, the Office of Film and Literature Classification, clamped down on porn magazines after a picture of a woman in what appeared to be a dog collar on the cover of *People* magazine prompted feminist uni students to protest in the streets. But as both sides of the argument acknowledge, gen Y women - born after 1980 - consider internet porn, by and large, as unremarkable and unobjectionable. Says Catharine Lumby, feminist academic and pornography researcher: "There's strong evidence the young generation of women are far more comfortable consuming non-violent sexual material. The figures suggest that around 25 per cent of porn consumers in the 18-30 age range are female." Hamilton concedes gen Y is "much less exercised about porn" than previous generations.

Which rather raises the question of whether the fight over internet censorship is an ironic restaging of the generational battles of the late '60s with Boomers now in the role of The Man.

Coper is not convinced that is the case, pointing out many of GetUp!'s members are baby boomers. "The internet has been very liberating because it is completely democratic; everyone can be equal online. There's a proliferation of voices, especially new, young voices, rather than just the few voices that have traditionally dominated society.

"That is by its very nature threatening to the established power structure," Coper says. "But society has a constant struggle in terms of governments responding to changing social norms and desires. In the '60s those battles were pitched in the streets. Now they're fought on the internet."

Conroy's office refused several *Herald* invitations to discuss the filtering system.
