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Editorial

From child porn to China , in one Cleanfeed

Few people seem to have noticed an apparently routine parliamentary question reported in May, about controlling access to child porn on the Internet. By the end of 2007, said the Home Office, all ISPs offering broadband are to block access to all websites containing illegal images of child abuse, identified by the Internet Watch Foundation. If this target is not met voluntarily – then, it is heavily hinted, mandatory laws will be put in place.

In fact, all of the biggest ISPs, representing 90% of broadband domestic connections, are already voluntarily blocking access to the IWF list - so mandatory rules may not be needed. This looks like good news. Child pornography is illegal in the UK, but still often accessed from sites abroad. Who could object to it being blocked from entering the country?

But that isn't quite the whole story. ISPs block access using filtering technologies like Cleanfeed, rolled out by BT Internet eighteen months ago. If all ISPs adopted Cleanfeeds, the state could in theory not only order child porn to be blocked – but any other site or type of content, legal or illegal. The IWF hit-list is not released to the public, for obvious reasons, so transparency is non-existent .No safeguards exist to

stop the state, potentially, adding non-porn sites. The Home Office has already admitted that it considered asking ISPs to block sites that "glorified terrorism", even before such content was criminalised by the Terrorism Act 2006 – and that it likes to retain “flexibility” for such action. If Cleanfeed-style technology is imposed on all UK ISPs - by law or voluntarily – it could be the most perfectly invisible censorship mechanism ever invented.

This censorship needs no laws to be passed, no court to rule, with the publicity that entails. It only needs the collaboration, forced or otherwise, of ISPs. ISPs are not public bodies; their acts are not subject to judicial review. Nor are they traditional news organisations; their first concern (quite properly) is for their shareholders and their own legal and PR risks, not for values like freedom of expression. Research has shown that most ISPs, asked to remove or block objectionable, but not illegal, content, or face legal pressure, tend to take down first, and worry about human rights afterwards. And even those ISPs who might have fought against censorship will have no choice after 2007.

Does this all sound familiar? It should, because it's exactly what Google recently faced media outrage over, when they agreed to censor their own search engine to fit the requirements of the Chinese government. Here in the UK, the state itself, not a private company, proposing China-style censorship tools as part of a compulsory package for all ISPs, doesn't seem to have raised many eyebrows. Today child porn; tomorrow, China?

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Correction

This correction was received from Clive Feather, of Demon Internet and
THUS:

"Cleanfeed" is a trademark of the THUS group of companies and describes a
VOLUNTARY content filtering service. See <<http://www.cleanfeed.co.uk>>. "

We apologise for any confusion caused by using "cleanfeed" as a general term for ISP filterware.

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