

[Communications Minister] Conroy coy on filtered web content

by Fran Foo via Kismo - The Australian *Wednesday, Nov 12 2008, 7:39am*

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THE federal Government has been urged to come clean over grey areas in its internet filtering plan after Broadband and Communications Minister Stephen Conroy pointed to "unwanted content" being censored. On Monday, the Government released details of its long-awaited call for expressions of interest on internet content filtering trials that will involve ISPs and mobile phone operators.



Errand boy Conroy lunges at manhood but misses

During question time yesterday, Senator Conroy was unclear on the exact type of content that would be blocked during the trials.

"The pilot will test filtering specifically against the ACMA blacklist of internet prohibited content, which is mostly child pornography, as well as filtering of other unwanted content," he said in response to a question by Greens Senator Scott Ludlum.

The Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) has 1300 illegal web pages on its blacklist.

There were 1000 pages on the ACMA blacklist at the beginning of the year and has since increased by 300 URLs. The list is compiled based on complaints from the public (see image).

Senator Ludlum urged Senator Conroy to specify what he meant by "unwanted content".

"Will the minister provide a definition of unwanted content and where we might find a definition of unwanted?" he asked.

"Will the minister acknowledge the legitimate concerns that have been raised by commentators and members of the public that such a system will degrade internet performance, prove costly and inefficient and do very little to achieve the Government's policy objectives?"

"Furthermore, the Government's proposal for dynamic filtering is equivalent to the Post Office being required to open every single piece of mail."

Senator Conroy said he couldn't answer all the questions in under a minute. "I will happily get you some further information on that very long list of questions," he told Senator Ludlum, who is the Greens Communications spokesperson.

Senator Conroy's lack of clarity during question time adds more confusion to the discussion -- as ACMA blacklist's comprises illegal websites containing child pornography, X-rated and violent material, among others, it is unclear if he was referring to these sites specifically.

The Government plans to have two streams of filtered content -- the mandatory portion will comply with ACMA's blacklist, while an optional clean feed of URLs would automatically censor content, mostly adult material.

While the ACMA blacklist contains around 1300 URLs, the pilot will test filtering for a range of URLs up to around 10,000, Senator Conroy said. "This is so that the impact on network performance of a larger blacklist can be examined."

The live pilot would provide valuable real-world evidence of the potential impact on internet speeds and cost to industry, he said.

"It will help ensure we implement a filtering solution that is efficient, effective and easy for Australian families to use."

Senator Conroy acknowledged expert technical advice that such a filter was not feasible, and would slow down internet access speeds, but said that was the reason for conducting a pilot.

"We are seeking to test the (technical) claims, and they are many and varied - that is why we are conducting a live trial."

The pilot was intended to take a flexible approach and cover a range of different ISPs and types of connections.

"The technical testing framework indicates a range of speeds will be tested based on what most households can currently access ... this range is not a hard and fast limit," he said.

"Some people do currently have connections above 12 meg and the framework notes that consideration will also be given to testing performances above 12 meg. Should an ISP wish to extend the pilot beyond 12 meg, they are invited to put this forward in their expression of interest."

Senator Conroy described the pilot as an opportunity for industry to come forward and engage directly with the Australian Government in the development of ISP filtering.

"I'd like to emphasise the fact that we have taken a consultative approach with industry, we've invited them to participate in the trial and we have asked for the industry to work with government," he said.

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