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Media release

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No technological barriers to ISPs filtering porn

Contrary to claims by industry and parliamentary spokespersons, there are no technological barriers to Internet Service Providers filtering pornography, according to The Australia Institute.

The Australia Institute has proposed that all ISPs in Australia be required to filter pornographic content, although adults could 'opt out' of filtering to view R- and X-rated content.

"Some spokespersons for the internet industry claim that this strategy is not technologically feasible. Yet the Government's own recent report on internet regulation clearly states that ISP-based filtering is practical," said Institute Executive Director Dr Clive Hamilton.

The report, commissioned as part of the review of the Online Content Co-regulatory Scheme by the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, states that filtering technologies that exclude 'blacklists' of websites and web addresses are "technically feasible at the ISP or server level". The DCITA review is available on the Department's website.

Because of increases in computer processing power and search algorithms, "index filtering" does not slow down computer response times and has become more feasible and effective. The report also says that more complex methods of filtering, which analyse the actual images and text on web sites, will be practical at the ISP level by 2007 or 2008.

The DCITA review, released in June, estimates that a national system of ISP-based filtering would impose additional costs on ISPs, and obviously some ISPs do not want this. The DCITA report notes that for all but the smallest ISPs, costs per subscriber would range from \$6 to \$9 for initial set-up and \$3 to \$9 for annual maintenance. Some will pass these costs on to consumers, although they are lower than the typical costs borne by end users in purchasing filters.

"This seems a small price to pay to significantly reduce a major problem, one that many parents are extremely worried about," said Dr Hamilton.

"Rather than pretending that ISP-based filtering cannot work, let's debate how it should work and what materials should be filtered."