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More nations bid to block Internet

CENSORSHIP: Opponents argue money allocated to filter the Internet would be better used to fund child protection authorities and police
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More governments are looking at ways to censor Internet content. Australia and China have plans to install Internet filters to block access to certain sites.

In Australia, the proposed filter would block unsuitable subject matter such as child pornography and violence.

There would be two levels to the Australian system. The first would require Internet service providers to block sites considered unsuitable for children. This first level would allow people to opt out by contacting their Internet service provider. The second level would block sites considered unsuitable for adults. This level would not allow opting out.

Various organizations, including the child-protection group Save the Children and lobby group GetUp!, argue that the money allocated to the proposed filter would be more effective if used to increase funding for child-protection authorities and police. There is the concern of freedom of speech potentially being limited due to selective blocking of sites.

GetUp! Agrees with Save the Children's child rights spokesperson Annie Pettit, who said, "We believe it's really better to teach children so that they have the ability to recognize and steer clear of inappropriate online content for themselves."

Groups such as the System Administrators Guild of Australia and Electronic Frontiers Australia argue that the proposed filter will unjustly control access to the Internet in Australia, slow the speed of the Internet and increase the cost of Internet access.

Critics state the filter's effects will be limited, since it will not be able to block e-mail distribution lists, file-sharing networks or chat rooms used for the distribution of illegal Internet content, including child pornography.

Since May 2009, the government has been conducting a trial of the filter.

In China, the government plans to require all computers sold in China to install Internet-filtering software called Green Dam-Youth Escort.

Critics of the Chinese Internet filter argue that the image and keyword filter blocks political content and monitors individual Internet behaviour.

The Obama administration sent a warning to China that the filter will violate free-trade agreements. And the European Union has stated that the software sets limits on free speech.

Beijing had a set deadline of July 1 for all manufacturers to install the Green Dam software on all new computers, but enforcement was delayed due to heavy resistance from home and abroad.

Like Australia, China sells the idea of the filter as an attempt to eliminate pornography and violence to protect minors.

On July 1, a government official stated that the Green Dam Internet filter on all new computers would go ahead. The official said it was only "a matter of time" before the software would go into all computers sold in China.

Internet filtering has drawn heavy criticism from many and varied sources -- even from groups who promote measures for child protection.

While it may be a tempting remedy for real issues, in the end, it is a crude, imprecise, and ineffective tool with more factors against it than for it.