Our Veiws on Internet filtering

Wednesday, December 16, 2009 at 10:02 AM

At Google we are concerned by the Government's plans to introduce a mandatory filtering regime for Internet Service Providers (ISP) in Australia, the first of its kind amongst western democracies.* Our primary concern is that the scope of content to be filtered is too wide.

We have a bias in favour of people's right to free expression. While we recognise that protecting the free exchange of ideas and information cannot be without some limits, we believe that more information generally means more choice, more freedom and ultimately more power for the individual.

Some limits, like child pornography, are obvious. No Australian wants that to be available   and we agree. Google, like many other Internet companies, has a global, all-product ban against child sexual abuse material and we filter out this content from our search results. But moving to a mandatory ISP filtering regime with a scope that goes well beyond such material is heavy handed and can raise genuine questions about restrictions on access to information.

The recent report by Professors Catharine Lumby, Lelia Green, and John Hartley, Untangling The Net: The Scope of Content Caught By Mandatory Internet Filtering, has found that a wide scope of content could be prohibited under the proposed filtering regime. Refused Classification (or RC) is a broad category of content that includes not just child sexual abuse material but also socially and politically controversial material -- for example, educational content on safer drug use -- as well as the grey realms of material instructing in any crime, including politically controversial crimes such as euthanasia. This type of content may be unpleasant and unpalatable but we believe that government should not have the right to block information which can inform debate of controversial issues.

While the discussion on ISP filtering continues, we should all retain focus on making the Internet safer for people of all ages. Our view is that online safety should focus on user education, user empowerment through technology tools (such as SafeSearch Lock), and cooperation between law enforcement and industry partners. The government has committed to important cybersafety education and engagement programs and yesterday announced additional measures that we welcome.

Exposing politically controversial topics for public debate is vital for democracy. Homosexuality was a crime in Australia until 1976 in ACT, NSW in 1984 and 1997 in Tasmania. Political and social norms change over time and benefit from intense public scrutiny and debate. The openness of the Internet makes this all the more possible and should be protected.

The government has requested comments from interested parties on its proposals for filtering and we encourage everyone to make their views known in this important debate.

Posted by Iarla Flynn, Head of Policy, Google Australia

Updated: December 16, 2009 at 5:00 PM
* Germany and Italy have mandatory ISP filtering, however in both cases they are of a clearly limited scope. In Germany, the scope is child abuse material and in Italy, it is child abuse material and unlawful gambling sites. Australia's proposed regime would uniquely combine a mandatory framework and a much wider scope of content, the first of its kind in the democratic world.