



Filtering laws set for failure

A group of Australian technology experts says the Government's proposed internet censorship will not be effective.



AUSTRALIA'S PEAK technology experts group, SAGE-AU, warns that the Federal Government's internet filtering laws – which aim to protect children from cyber stalkers and inappropriate content – will fail to work because the technology was only tested on slow broadband services.

After the recent announcement that the Federal Government will mandate internet filtering next year based on 'successful' trials, SAGE-AU has disputed the validity of the results because the trials did not test ISP-level filtering on internet access speeds faster than eight megabits per second (Mb/s).

SAGE-AU is a not-for-profit professional organisation representing Australia's system administrators, the technology experts who keep computers and networks running.

SAGE-AU President Donna Ashelford told ASM that internet filtering threatened potential degradation at ADSL2+ and fibre speeds.

"The trial results provoke more questions than they answer," she said.

"The decision to proceed with internet filtering based on evidence from the trials is incompatible with the Government's aims for the National Broadband Network (NBN).

"While the NBN aims to provide access to users at 100 Mb/s, no test result was at speeds

faster than 8 Mb/s, despite the criteria for testing to be up to 12 Mb/s and higher. The likely degradation of higher internet access speeds needs to be adequately tested."

SAGE-AU cites Australian Bureau of Statistics research from June 2009 which reported that more than 2.2 million Australian broadband subscribers had access to speeds of 8 Mb/s or faster.

Ms Ashelford said the report from the internet filtering trials was unclear about sample sizes, which were vital to understand if its results were statistically significant.

"Large numbers of participants would obviously have a greater impact on performance than a smaller number," she said.

"The only widely quoted figure from a test participant was a handful of clients, which did not produce any significant load. Significant sample sizes are essential to understand the effect that internet filtering may have on service performance," she said.

"Another concern is that the report admits that 'a technically competent user, could, if they wished, circumvent the filtering technology'. Anybody who uses Google could find ways to access censored content."

Ms Ashelford said every filtering solution tested had failed under 'heavy traffic' sites on the internet, including YouTube videos already blacklisted by the Australian Communications & Media Authority (ACMA).

"The results show that none of the filters coped with widely used technologies such as peer-to-peer, chat rooms or instant messaging," she said.

"No false-positive data was provided for ISPs which were only blocking ACMA-prohibited URLs, which was in the terms of reference."

She said that despite the Government's

decision to proceed, internet filtering would be ineffective either to protect children from inappropriate content or to stop distribution of illegal material.

"SAGE-AU believes the funds allocated for internet filtering would be better spent on activities that are proven solutions to the problems identified by the Federal Government," she said.

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Ms Ashelford said those solutions were:

- Encouraging 'family-friendly' ISP services - SAGE-AU proposes that the Government support and promote the Family-Friendly ISP program, under which ISPs offer 'clean feed' services to customers who desire them for several years. These family-friendly ISPs build their brands around their filtering services.
- Improved parent education - ongoing education by Government to assist parents to ensure their children are not exposed to objectionable material.
- More rigorous enforcement - SAGE-AU supports increased budgets for ACMA and the Australian Federal Police to identify and remove illegal content from Australian hosts. ■



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