

Sex & Censorship

Defending Free Speech and Sexual Freedom in the UK

Dear Claire, About Those Filters...

🕒 December 19, 2013 📁 Politics 🔍 censorship, claire perry, object, porn filter

Dear Claire Perry MP,

I know you remember me – we’ve met twice. The first time, I was a witness at your parliamentary inquiry into “protecting children online” – although of course, we all knew that was a euphemism for justifying Internet censorship. I was shocked, but not surprised, to hear the torrent of anecdote and misinformation that passed for “evidence”, and was duly noted by the MPs.

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If the event hadn’t been so serious, it would have been comical. Jacqui Smith (whose expertise in pornography extended as far as accidentally claiming for some on expenses) was sure that porn was leading more people to try anal sex – although she apparently had no evidence that this was true, and didn’t explain why it might be a bad thing anyway. The anti-sex group [Object](#) was, of course, represented, and of course furnished the inquiry with horrific (but vague) tales of rape caused by porn. But then, Object are as fond of linking everything to rape as the [Daily Mail is of linking everything to cancer](#).

I did my best to point out that, if there is any link between porn and sexual violence at all, [evidence suggest a benign one](#): increasing sexual freedom and openness (including easy access to pornography) correlates with a decline in sexual violence. And [psychologists are increasingly coming to the conclusion that porn isn’t harmful](#) – although conservative sexual attitudes probably *do* cause lasting damage. But puzzlingly, the MPs showed fairly little curiosity, and seemed to note down wild claims just as easily as they did hard evidence. There already appeared to be a general acceptance that *something must be done*.

I was especially worried to be the only person defending the basic concept of free speech (although I discovered later that Jim Killock of the [Open Rights Group](#) had appeared in another session). Free speech was once something Britain prided itself on, and still today, many Britons live in the mistaken belief that our country is founded on this idea. But the reality is otherwise: for decades, Britain has been easily panicked into surrendering rights in exchange for (false) promises of greater protection for our children. I was proud to defend free speech in Britain’s historic Parliament, but I felt that myself and Jim should not have been left to fly that flag alone.

Although you made a good show of listening carefully to all the arguments, it was already known at that stage that you favoured an Internet filter. To my eyes, it seemed that you had reached your conclusion and were going through the process of gathering evidence before you announced your support for a filter. And so it turned out.

You had been warned that the first experiment in filtering for “child protection”, on mobile networks, had been a catastrophe. It is simply not possible to classify hundreds of millions of websites as either “safe” or “over 18” without making vast numbers of mistakes. Yes, it’s pretty easy to block most commercial porn (in fact those sites voluntarily self-label as adult content), but in between kink.com and disney.com there is a near-infinite amount of hard-to-classify content.

Much of the content and many of the forums on sex education, sex advice, gay and lesbian advice, information on sexual infections, and so on, is aimed at teenagers, and yet has been largely blocked from mobile phones held by under-18s. But that’s just the tip of the iceberg. All sorts of content has found itself blocked on mobile networks. The Open Rights Group even found a site selling engraved silver gifts that had been blocked because it sold cigarette lighters – classed as “tobacco products” and therefore censored by the blind, dumb filtering software.

And these sites aren’t just blocked for children: millions of adults too have found themselves unable to reach “over 18” sites. There are many reasons why some adults don’t want to contact their provider and ask for the block to be removed; and even among those who do, some have found the block replaced a day later, presumably through some technical error.

This isn’t “filtering”, it’s censorship, and it already affects the way millions of people see the Internet. And now you want to repeat an experiment that has failed catastrophically, but on a far greater scale. Home connections, unlike mobile connections, are shared. Now, as well as asking their ISP for the right to look at “adult content”, people have to ask their parent, their landlord, their flatmate, their partner.

The second time we met was in the Sky News studio. I know you remember me, because you described me as a “responsible pornographer”. I felt dirty. I tried to put two questions to you, but you talked over them, as politicians are trained to do. So here are those questions again:

1. I’m a parent: are you suggesting that my partner and I should censor our home Internet connection because we happen to have a child in the house? Should parents set their filters on or off?
2. How can you prevent a repeat of the huge overblocking problem that already appears on mobile networks?

Since you wouldn’t answer these, I will: 1) There is no sense in a filter that affects a whole household rather than individuals; 2) You can’t prevent overblocking. You can promise to, just as you can promise to stop the tide. But you can’t. It’s impossible.

And now, the ISP filters are here. And guess what? **Overblocking has already been reported**. Of course, you (and the ISPs) will dismiss these as teething problems, but unlike teething problems, they ain’t going away.

We shouldn't worry about teens though. They have doubtless already downloaded the [Pirate Browser](#), or bought themselves a [USB key that bypasses the filter](#). The net result is that nobody is safer, but many people have had their view of the Internet censored. The genius of your approach – bullying the ISPs – is that you have done all this without the messy business of passing a law or having a debate in parliament! Who needs democracy anyway? The Chinese and Iranians are, no doubt, taking notes.

I look forward to our next meeting.

Regards
Jerry Barnett
Founder, *Sex & Censorship*

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6 thoughts on “Dear Claire, About Those Filters...”



December 19, 2013 at 6:31 pm

An excellent letter. Well argued !

JonFuller



December 19, 2013 at 7:38 pm

Such policies should always be evidence-based. Sadly politicians only care about the evidence of their own supporters' morals and mores. Britain is heading backwards.

Sara Bella

December 19, 2013 at 9:05 pm



mark
truman

i bet the response she give's (if anything) will be patronising and just her constantley astablishing that she is right and everyone else is wrong.

personaly i want to know if anime and manga website's have been blocked, people will be angry if crunchyroll.com is blocked, because that dosen't have porn, infact the majority of anime and manga isn't, but people tend to think it is.



peter

December 19, 2013 at 10:22 pm

Dear British people, why are you so shameful of sex and porn! It's really, really painful to watch.

Nearly all people have sex drive, nearly all people love porn, for god's sake stand up for your right to enjoy it!!



Terry
Stephens

December 20, 2013 at 9:46 am

I hope she reads this and takes it on board because it makes perfect sense but I doubt it. You had to write this because you know full well she is obsessed with the filters as a way of leaving her mark that she actually did something about "the porn problem" while only just messed the proverbial bedsheets up a little without actually making the bed like that other pointless organisation trying to "regulate the internet" called ATVOD

Pingback: [Negligent Blocking...Newsnight investigates the crap internet blocking systems used by ISPs for parental control | Melon Farmers Blog](#)

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