

The Rhetoric of Internet Regulation: how language is framed in a changing media landscape

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Abstract

The digitisation of media presents unprecedented challenges for developing an effective and dynamic regulatory framework. All governments are equally challenged by the changed context in which they are forming and putting into practice regulatory policies and structures. How governments and particular politicians communicate to the public about policies (and how the media then reports on these) makes a difference to the discursive field and meaning-making potential of the public sphere around specific issues and policy initiatives. This article adopts a critical discourse analysis based on Robert Entman's theory of framing in order to understand the role played by discourse in dialogues surrounding the regulation of the Internet by identifying the ideologies and values imbedded in a text and their mobilisation within these dialogues. The framing analysis is applied to the case of the 'Net Filter', a debate in the media that took place between 2008 and 2010 on the proposal by the then Rudd Labor government to introduce mandatory web filtering at the Internet Service Provider level. The paper argues that the powerful value-laden frames that emerged from both the proponents of and opposition to the Net Filter dominated the discussion and created an overarching narrative based on a good-evil dichotomy. This narrative monopolised the debate and passively excluded more complex responses to a complex and wide-ranging issue – the regulation of media during a period of flux caused by digitisation and convergence. Future responses to this issue of Internet regulation, and a shift to a digital paradigm more broadly, will be informed by past and ongoing deliberations among legislators and civil society. Consequently, an understanding of the role that discourse plays within these deliberations is paramount for developing an informed citizenry and effective policy to deal with the issues arising from digitisation and convergence.

Introduction

As digitisation and convergence continue to shatter the 'one-to-many' model of traditional media, the current media regulatory paradigm has found itself in a state of flux as governments attempt to adapt existing legislation to the emergent environs of the new media landscape. Our success at developing a framework that can function effectively within this landscape is predicated upon public understanding and negotiations surrounding issues of policy that concern the regulation of the Internet. This paper examines how media discourse on Internet regulation in Australia affects the discursive potential for rational-critical debate in the context of this digital paradigm shift.

Of particular concern is the role played by discourse in meaning-making around specific policy issues. This paper argues that the role of discourse needs to be more explicitly recognised if we are to pursue a goal of a discursive democracy based on rational-critical debate. The 'Net Filter'

debate, which took place between 2008 and 2010 over the Australian Labor government's efforts to implement mandatory web filtering by Internet Service Providers (ISPs), will be used as a case study for a framing analysis. This constitutes an empirical test of the presence of particular ideologies in discourse as a result of rhetorical devices. This test is used to articulate an argument and determine the breadth of discussion.

The paper begins with an exploration of the context in which the Net Filter debate took place. This includes a consideration of the factors that led to this shift in the regulatory paradigm as well as the three broad approaches to online regulation. The following section analyses the selected texts and considers the ways that discourse constructs and reinforces the various frames adopted by the media throughout the Net Filter debate. The paper concludes with an exploration of the implications of this research for current and future technology debates.

As various digitisation projects are rolled-out by government and industry, a regulatory framework is required which can adapt to the changing production, distribution, and consumption of media. In order to design this framework, a multitude of stories as well as voices must be present in the public sphere. There must, therefore, be recognition of the potential for particular types of discourse to exclude other narratives and of the implications of this exclusion for achieving a deliberative democracy.

Situating the Net Filter debate in a shifting media paradigm

The debate surrounding ISP filtering in Australia is but one part of a broader contestation of the role of government and regulation in a new media landscape. This contestation is at the focal point of a clash between a desire to reconcile past and present approaches to the role of government in the regulation of media with the actualities of modern usage of digitised media.

Most research suggests that the digitisation of information and the rapid uptake of new media fundamentally challenge existing paradigms of communications regulation (Gillett, 1999; Hitchens, 1997; Longstaff, 2000; Prosser, 1997). Digitisation has resulted in the ability to transmit and store data of substantial volumes with little discernible loss of quality, while convergence has streamlined access to this data by making more types of media available via a single medium – digital technology. The new types of media consumption that emerge as a result of these two factors have radically transformed the media environment.

In this environment, the relatively structured, central domination by a few sources has been replaced by a model that promotes a general empowerment of individuals to gain the information that they want, when they want it, and in a multiplicity of formats, media, and quantities. Naturally, a regulatory mechanism based on the former model is incapable of dealing with the environs that develop as a result of the latter.

In a convergent and digital world, content can be broadcast via several media. For example, televisual content can be broadcast through TVs, delivered via the Internet, and to mobile phones. While the content being delivered may well be the same, the rules dictating each medium are different. Lumby and Crawford (2011) argue that, so far, the response from government has been incremental and reactive, without a consideration of how to 'fully amalgamate broadcasting and telecommunications with an understanding of the ways the internet is changing the end user's experience' (2011, 14).

It is in this complex, shifting regulatory landscape that the Australian Labor Party (ALP) revealed the main features of the Net Filter. Firstly, it would be mandatory for all users in Australia and secondly, it was intended to block all overseas-hosted material deemed Refused Classification (RC) by the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA).

The Net Filter represents one approach to addressing the changing and highly dynamic regulatory environment that is the result of convergence and digitisation. This approach – one of three distinct camps – emerges from the notion that extending pre-existing policies and regulatory frameworks is sufficient for tackling the issues that have and continue to arise from this new paradigm. I term this approach the ‘If it ain’t broke’ approach for this reason. It emerges from the traditional role of the government as an arbiter for communications as well as for morals, defining what content is legally allowed to be broadcast.

Unsurprisingly, it is an approach typically favoured by governments, especially those with a propensity for state intervention or a socially conservative bent. It is for this reason that a policy for government regulation of the Internet has formed part of the opposition coalition Liberal National Party’s (LNP) platform as well. Indeed, it was the LNP who originally brought the Internet in line with other Australian mass media by including it within the complex regulatory scheme in 1999. Peter Chen (2000) argues that this amendment, the Broadcasting Services Amendment (Online Services) Act 1999 was an example of ‘symbolic politics’ – the desire of decision-makers to appear active on an issue when they are not (Edelman, 1971).

The second approach, that I label ‘Hands off our Internet’, does not see a major role for government regulation in the new media environment. Though there has always been top-down hierarchical regulation of the Internet exemplified by the DNS system and the activities of ICAAN, cyber-libertarianism can be considered the default ideology of cyberspace (Myszewski, 2003; Kamiya, 1997). Cyber-libertarianism is a collection of ideas that link enthusiasm for digitally mediated forms of communication with radical libertarian ideas about the definition of freedom, social life and politics (Winner, 1997, 1001).

The Electronic Frontiers Foundation (EFF) is the most visible cyber-libertarian organisation and it has played an active role in defending the Internet from perceived incursions from government. The Australian arm of the foundation – the EFA – has been an outspoken critic of the Net Filter and is ‘resolutely opposed’ to content regulation of any sort (EFA, 2011). The EFA partnered with the progressive advocacy group GetUp!, another outspoken critic of ISP filtering, to launch a publicity campaign in opposition to the proposed legislation.

The third approach, which received little coverage in the public discussion of the Net Filter and penetrated very little into civil society, encourages a complete reconsideration of the framework that underpins the new regulatory paradigm. Popular among academics (Hitchens, 1997; Gillett, 1999; Longstaff, 2000; Verhulst, 2002; Lessig, 2006; Solove, 2007; Lumby, 2009; Lumby, 2011), this view acknowledges the need for some sort of regulation within the new media landscape, but urges a reconsideration of the current regulatory framework. Generally, this approach proposes a unified regulatory framework, malleable enough to cater for the frequent changes in distribution and consumption that coincide with innovations in technology and production. The argument is that the current framework is too static and antiquated to address the issues that arise from a digitised, convergent, and networked society. Extending the current framework would only further complicate a system that is already characterised as a patchwork of different codes of conducts and legislation stretching across multiple state and federal jurisdictions. It is

for this reason that proponents of this approach advocate a complete reconceptualisation of the regulatory framework.

Despite its popularity among academics, this view is drowned out by the proponents of the first two approaches, which tend to polarise the public sphere into competing frames that, while of significant import, also appeal powerfully to the emotions and values of the public, not allowing space for other issues to be discussed. This removes the capacity for views in the intermediary, such as this third approach, from being heard and considered.

The significance of the debate surrounding the Net Filter cannot be understated. As the latest major public discussion on the role of the Australian government in the regulation of the Internet it sets the precedent for future discussions surrounding this topic. With the roll-out of the National Broadband Network (NBN), come new debates regarding the role of government in regulating digital technologies. Whilst the debate surrounding the NBN currently focuses on the developmental impact and economic potential of the project as it moves from a network-in-construction to a network-in-use, discussion could quickly refocus on the new media spaces that the NBN will afford. With rapid speeds and more reliable and penetrating connectivity, the existing regulatory framework will become further out-dated and impotent to address the manifold issues that will arise in the shift to a new media paradigm.

The discourses surrounding the Net Filter debate that are critiqued in the following section do not belong to a single, anomalous event. The issues and values that emerged in this debate will continue to pervade future discussions on convergence, digitisation, and regulation of media content, especially regarding the Internet.

Methodology

Robert Entman's (1993) theory of framing provides the means to analyse the discourse of the ISP filtering debate. The construction of a frame is reinforced by the use of various rhetorical devices including metaphors, exemplars, catchphrases, euphemism, dysphemism, and hyperbole (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989).

George Lakoff (1980) posits that power comes from the persistent ability to control the language of key issues and highlights the centrality of the metaphor in establishing and maintaining this control. This bears some resemblance to Foucault's (1972) theory of discourse as a medium by which power relations produce speaking subjects. A framing analysis based on a Foucauldian definition of discourse provides the most appropriate method for analysing the Net Filter debate as it allows one to empirically consider how language is affected by particular ideologies. I will adopt Habermas's (2009) categorisation of speakers into three categories: centre, functional system, and civil society. The centre comprises the heart of the political system: politicians and political parties. The functional system comprises lobbyists and interest groups, aimed at influencing public opinion and, to an extent, government policy. Civil society is made up of the uncategorised masses.

This categorisation of speakers within the debate allows us to track the effectiveness of a frame or rhetorical device, as we can measure how successful a frame is by its prevalence in the third category, civil society. This demonstrates how well a frame has filtered from the 'frame creators' (politicians and lobbyists) to the 'frame consumers' (the voting public and civil society who the frames are aimed at). The samples are drawn from a variety of media to give substantial voice to

speakers from all three of Habermas's angles and they represent a combination of both traditional and new media sources.

This study does not constitute an exhaustive enquiry into the broader public sphere, but, rather, constitutes a focused analysis of the dominant mainstream debate surrounding the Net Filter. As such, the sources are drawn from major print and television outlets as well as prominent figures and organisations that discussed the proposed filter publicly and with a guise of primarily influencing public opinion as opposed to government opinion. Consequently, there are a number of sources that were excluded from the analysis. For example, submissions to the government enquire into transparency and accountability with regards to the Net Filter, while valid sources that clearly fit within Habermas's three-pronged model, are excluded from this analysis due to their relative inaccessibility so far as the general public is concerned.

Framing Analysis of the Net Filter debate

The framing analysis that was conducted on the discourse surrounding those opposed to and the proponents of the Net Filter revealed two broad frames being used by each party. On both sides, one frame was more dominant than the other. The opponents relied on a dominant 'tyranny frame' while also evoking the minor 'technology frame', while the proponents made extensive use of the 'child protection frame' while the 'not-so-bad frame' formed the secondary lens.

Opposition to the Net Filter

The most dominant frame adopted by the opponents of the Net Filter is labelled the 'tyranny frame' as it casts the Internet as a positive tool of democracy and freedom; ISP filtering as a breach of human rights which destroys the freedom afforded by the Internet; and the government proposing the filter as a dictatorial regime with no accountability to those it governs. The primary rhetorical devices employed in this frame are metaphor, exemplars and the repetition of value-laden terms.

The most pervasive examples of metaphor are dysphemistic in nature (the practice of deliberately adopting a harsher or more offensive term instead of a neutral or polite term). Examples of dysphemistic metaphor by those opposing the Net Filter include the term 'censorship' (and derivations thereof) and 'blacklist', both of which appear in every source analysed. Conversely the Internet is portrayed positively as a democratising force in its own right through the use of metaphor, described as 'a democracy in its own right' (ABC TV, 2010) and a 'global phenomenon across multiple cultures and beliefs' (Various, 2009b).

Exemplars are examples from which lessons can be drawn and were used extensively to reinforce the tyranny frame. References to tyrannical regimes, existing (China, Iran, Burma), historical (Nazi Germany), and fictional (George Orwell's *1984*), strengthen the use of terms such as 'censorship' and 'blacklist' as they become associated with explicit and demonstrable forms of tyranny and human rights abuse.

The repetition of value-laden terms such as 'freedom' and other like terms to characterise a society free from oppression are primarily used in contrast to the proposed Net Filter; indeed they are often portrayed as being at risk from filtering. On the other hand, the repetition of 'secrecy' represents the list of websites classified as Refused Classification and posits the list of banned content in opposition to a free and open society.

While less frequently invoked than the tyranny frame, the technological efficacy of the filter constitutes another broad frame that manifests in opposition to the Net Filter. Though not a value frame in and of itself, particular values such as the importance of child safety were embedded in the technology frame in order to reinforce the technological flaws of the proposed policy. The frame is reinforced using catchphrases, dysphemism and hyperbole, as well as the repetition of value-laden terms.

Catchphrases such as ‘child protection’ (and derivations thereof) were used in order to highlight the extent to which the Net Filter would be unable to protect children. For example, the EFA’s (n.d.) fact sheet reads quite plainly, ‘The filter will not protect children from inappropriate content’. Dysphemistic hyperbole were used in order to take the potential repercussions of the filter to an extreme by suggesting that the Net Filter is tantamount to child abuse: ‘supporters of internet censorship filters are therefore directly supporting child abusers; in effect they are essentially child abusers themselves’ (Various, 2009b). Finally, the repetition of the term ‘parent’ was used to highlight that legal guardians are best placed to protect the children under their care rather than the government.

Proponents of the Net Filter

The ‘child protection frame’ appealed to the idea that the Internet both promotes child abuse through the availability of child abuse material, as well as contains material that is harmful to minors due to its explicit and offensive nature. It was reinforced by the use of repetition, catchphrases, and dysphemistic exemplars. The repetition of value-laden terms was used to emphasise the variety of offensive materials available on the Internet and to highlight those who are most at threat from these materials – namely minors. The references to these materials reinforce the notion that the Internet hosts content which runs counter to social conventions and norms of what is currently permissible by law. The repetition of ‘children’ emphasises the fact that it is this group most at risk and, as such, it is the responsibility of adults to minimise this. ISP filtering, it can be extrapolated, is a means by which this risk can be minimised.

The use of catchphrase to reinforce the child protection frame was the most prominent rhetorical device employed by the proponents of the Net Filter. The catchphrases ‘child abuse’, ‘child pornography’, ‘child protection’, and ‘cybersafety’ appear throughout the source material and are used to emphasise the notion that the Internet is a potentially unsafe place for children as well as a medium by which material that exploits children is distributed.

The use of dysphemism alongside metaphor and exemplar was less prominent than other rhetorical devices, though these techniques effectively reinforce the child protection frame due to the significant impact of the statements. For example, a panellist on ABC TV’s Q and A claims that an absolute right to freedom of speech is compatible with the distribution of videos of Josef Fritzl’s crimes.

The ‘not-so-bad frame’ is so-named as it downplays the introduction of ISP filtering through euphemism and repetition, emphasising its similarity to the regulatory framework already in place. Euphemism is used to downplay the negative connotations of filtering. Where the opposition makes use of negative terms such as ‘ban’ and ‘censor’, the proponents use terms such as ‘block’ and ‘filter’ instead. These two terms are more positive than the former terms, carrying connotations of defence against a threat or attack and implying a purifying effect,

cleansing undesirable contamination. The repetition of the term 'existing' underlines the stance that no law is going to be changed and the side-effects on citizens will be negligible.

The 'Strict Father': How frames can undermine deliberative democracy

Both the opposition and proponent frames enabled the first two approaches to online regulation outlined in the first section of this paper to emerge in public discourse and, more importantly, combined to form a single cohesive narrative that worked to exclude other frames and limit the influence of other approaches. For those opposed to the Net filter, the frames correspond to the second position named – 'Hands off our Internet'. This approach is articulated through value-judgements about three principal objects of the debate: the Internet is characterised as a beacon of freedom and a tool for democracy; the Net Filter as a malignant force running counter to democracy; and lastly, the actor responsible for the policy, the Australian government, is regarded as despotic and tyrannical.

On the other side of the debate, the proponents of the Net Filter deploy frames that reinforce a more traditional stance on media regulation, outlined previously as the 'If it ain't broke...' approach. This approach identifies the Internet as transgressing social mores and the existing regulatory framework. The Net Filter and government are regarded as means by which to re-establish the order of this existing framework.

In both cases, a good-evil dichotomy is established, the opponent and proponent frames coming together to create a single, unified story of the role and nature of Internet regulation in society. George Lakoff (2002) articulates this good-evil dichotomy using a model for conservative moral metaphor – the 'strict father', who conceives of the world as inherently full of evil and his children as in a constant state of temptation. It is the role of the authoritarian father to either beat-back this evil, or encourage self-discipline in his children.

This scenario emerges in both proponent and opposition frames, with the opponents using the tyranny frame to portray the Net Filter and the government responsible for it, as 'evil', and the Internet as an inherently 'good' technology. The government is to be feared and the Internet protected. On the other side, but in a similar vein, the proponents of the Net Filter cast the Internet as full of evils, from which children must at all costs be protected.

The rhetorical techniques used by the opposition that were considered in the previous section characterise the online environment as exceptional and beyond the jurisdiction of government. This positive characterisation reinforces the attacks on government that, in turn, form the basis of the tyranny frame.

The contrasting depictions of the Internet and the Australian government are prime examples of this good and evil dichotomy. Terms such as 'blacklist', associated most frequently with the House Un-American Activities Commission that created a blacklist of communist sympathisers in Hollywood, framed the Net Filter as a sinister problem; judged negatively those responsible for it; and associates it with violations of the principle of freedom of speech.

This moral evaluation is highlighted by the use of exemplars that associate the ISP filtering scheme with totalitarian regimes. It is important to note that the principal exemplars – China, Nazi Germany, and 'Big Brother' in 1984 – are known for human rights violations that go well beyond the right to freedom of speech. For example, the attempted extermination of the Jewish

people is intrinsically tied to the allusion to Nazi Germany. By linking ISP filtering with attempted genocide, the narrative makes overt claims about the morality of the participants involved – namely, they are evil.

After such explicit rhetorical devices are used to frame the position against the Net Filter, the repetition of terms such as ‘secrecy’, ‘mandatory’, and appeals to ‘freedom’, ‘liberty’, and ‘democracy’ fall into place in order to further reinforce the good-evil dichotomy. This repetition threads the tyranny frame throughout the discourse on the Net Filter, a constant reminder of the oppressive nature of both the proposed Net Filter and the government responsible for it.

The good-evil dichotomy is just as prevalent in the proponents’ frame for the Net Filter, with the Internet cast as a shelter for ‘evil’ content such as child-abuse materials and the Net Filter identified as a social ‘good’ that will protect children. When spokespeople for the government list the most offensive and colourful material that is considered RC, they are personifying the Internet as a host to content which runs counter to what is socially accepted, to the point that the Internet itself is evil. In this context, the Net Filter is offered as a remedy, and a public good. This in turn reinforces the idea that the traditional framework is a sufficient and just response to the current need for regulation.

The Internet as ‘evil’ is foregrounded when Clive Hamilton details the hypothetical example of a child who accidentally stumbles across a picture of a ‘woman defecating into another’s mouth’ and ‘a woman and a horse’ among other things (Hamilton, 2009). The profanity of the material is second only to the innocence of the child, a goodness that it is the moral duty of society to uphold. Similarly, the use of catchphrases ‘child abuse’, ‘child pornography’, and ‘child protection’ highlights the goodness of the child and the goodness of a regulatory scheme which sets out to protect innocence and childhood itself.

The problem with the good-evil dichotomy, ‘strict-father’, model is that it is exclusionary in nature. At its base, the strict-father model rejects and excludes any discourse emerging from an alternate worldview as toxic and alien. Lakoff argues that this rejection of an alternate worldview stems from the belief that people who have different moral values are ‘enemies to be demonised’ (2002, 127). When pitted against frames that adopt recognisable metaphors such as Nazi Germany and paedophilia as symbols for the enemy, the third approach (The Absentees), lacking the mobilising metaphors, tends to be drowned out. This is reflected in the relative absence of discourse emerging from this third approach from the mainstream Net Filter debate, as this narrative is found almost exclusively within academic texts.

Corridor of mirrors

While the principal frames of each side, ‘tyranny’ and ‘child protection’, are in essence a single story of good and evil, there are minor frames adopted by each side that do not simply align with this narrative. In both cases, far from breaking down or challenging the model of the strict father, both the ‘technology’ and ‘not-so-bad’ frames are essentially responses to the primary frames in play. That is to say, the minor frame of one side attempts to address the concerns that are raised by the major frame of the other. I term this phenomenon, The Corridor of Mirrors effect, as the terms of debate bounce of each side in the same way a beam of light bounces through a corridor of mirrors (Figure 3.0).

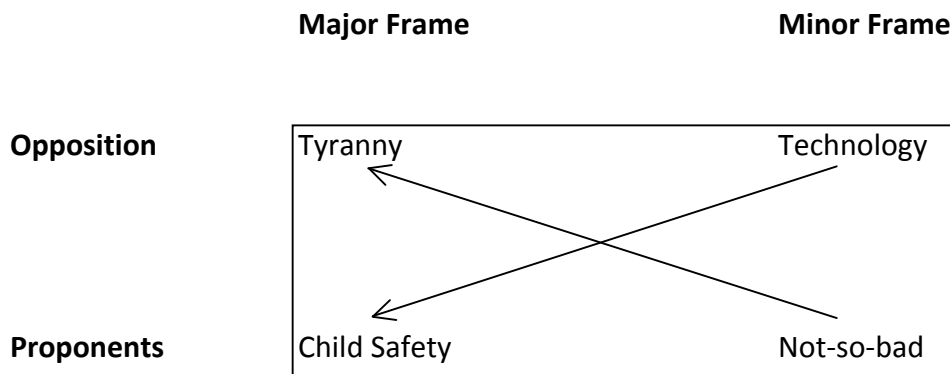


Figure 1.0—The Corridor of Mirrors Effect

The technology frame, operating primarily through a child-safety frame, can be seen as a response to the child-protection frame of the proponents. The narrative that emerges from the technology frame is that the Net Filter will not protect children, in fact it has the potential to exacerbate any threat that they would currently face. Examples of this are as plain as the EFA’s statement that ‘The filter will not protect children from inappropriate content’ (EFA, n.d.) but stretch to the hyperbolic accusation that ‘supporters of internet censorship filters are... essentially child abusers themselves’ (Various, 2009b).

Faced with the prospect of appearing or being cast as ambivalent towards the wellbeing of children, the opposition adopted their own child safety frame in order to ensure that the proponents did not have a monopoly over this type of discourse. In this way, the child protection frame adopted by the proponents of the Filter is negated and potentially reversed, leaving more space for the opposition’s primary frame, tyranny, to dominate the public discussion.

The not-so-bad frame, adopted by the proponents of ISP filtering, can be regarded as an attempt to address and, to an extent, mitigate the primary frame of the opposition – the tyranny frame. The frame stresses the notion that the Net Filter is part of an ‘existing’ regulatory framework and does not represent an expansion of government powers. As well as the aforementioned repetition of ‘existing’, the repetition of euphemistic terms ‘block’ and ‘filter’ are substituted for the more abrasive opposition terms ‘censor’ and ‘ban’. The not-so-bad frame represents the clearest articulation of an approach to regulation in the new media environment. By stressing the fact that the Net Filter is simply an extension of the existing regulatory framework, the frame reinforces the perception that the existing regulatory framework is the most desirable mechanism for addressing the issues that arise as a result of digitisation and convergence.

The implication of this effect is that the discourse never escapes the Corridor of Mirrors. It is the product of the two major frames—tyranny and child safety. As the debate became condensed into, essentially, an argument between child-protection and freedom of speech, a binary develops and discourse becomes stuck or boxed-in, bouncing between frames. Discourses which do not command as much power as the frames operating within the binary are excluded from the debate.

Sticky frames: the movement of meaning in the public sphere

Of all the frames that were considered, which ones passed most easily from the centre and functional systems to civil society? Painfully obvious is the fact that the third approach to content regulation does not appear in any significant form outside academic literature. So what did occupy the attentions of civil society? To put it bluntly, it is the tyranny frame. The appearance of rhetorical devices associated with this frame among civil society outstripped even the functional system. The reason for this is the power imbued within the frame of tyranny.

As a frame is constructed by the speakers with the largest soapboxes—politicians and lobbyists—its success at mobilising civil society can be measured by the rate at which it is adopted by the wider public. Testament to the penetration of the tyranny frame is the fact that rhetorical devices that reinforce it are adopted by proponents for the filter. When official government sources, the DBCDE and Stephen Conroy, adopt the term ‘blacklist’ as many times as the centre and functional systems of the opposition combined, or Clive Hamilton attempts to articulate the merits of ‘censorship’ they consolidate the tyranny frame. This has implications for meaning-making as the public’s consideration of the topic is predicated upon the value-laden terms that have become imbedded in the debate.

The frames that dominate the public sphere surrounding the Net Filter controversy are supremely successful in mobilising support and excluding divergent voices. The use of the ‘strict-father’ model enables overt claims to be made about the Internet, the Net Filter and the government. This narrative reinforced the first two approaches to media regulation at the expense of the third approach that was unable to command the value-laden narrative that effectively rallies civil society and dictates the character and terms of debate.

Recommendations and conclusion

The narrative that dominated and controlled the discourse surrounding the proposed Net Filter worked to exclude alternate narratives that would otherwise have contributed to a more robust and diverse debate and public understanding of a complicated subject: the effective regulation of a highly dynamic media landscape that is in a period of significant flux.

A recent development at a federal level regarding the shifting media landscape ought to be discussed. The Australian Law Reform Commission conducted a review into the National Classification Scheme and the final report was released in February 2012 (ALRC, 2012). It is promising that the review encouraged the submission by any one of a plethora of ideas and approaches to regulation in the new media landscape, furthermore, the tyranny and child-safety frames that dominated the debate surrounding the Net Filter are present, though do not, in any way, dominate the discussion. However, in the months that have followed the release of the report, the coverage of the story in the mainstream media has been underwhelming.

A possible reason for the lack of uptake by popular news outlets is the very lack of conflict or controversy as well as the density of the report. At over 400 pages, it is inaccessible to the general public. This is not just a problem of the press being either unwilling or unable to cover the story; it is widely understood that news outlets have a responsibility to shareholders and their bottom line. It is an ailment that afflicts the research and academic industries more broadly: the means by which researchers communicate their theses are not appropriate for the public and, furthermore, journalists and newspaper editors are unwilling to transform these theses into a more accessible form.

If the goal is to pursue a deliberative democracy based on rational and critical debate, then it is the responsibility of researchers and academics to communicate their ideas to a broader church. If they do not, more populist narratives, such as that of the strict father, will continue to dominate public debate.

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