

The People's Pornography?

The United Kingdom has recently taken steps toward limiting people's access to online pornography. Though online pornography will not be banned outright, Prime Minister David Cameron is working to make it exceedingly difficult—especially for children—to access the material. Cameron's plan involves setting up filters that will block out certain restricted content. Though families can opt out of the plan, the filters will remain active unless Internet subscribers choose to de-activate them. The plan also blocks certain violent content, material involving alcohol, smoking, and firearms, and "extremist and terror related content."¹

Some people think that habitually watching pornography and other material that has been deemed harmful has a detrimental affect on children's moral development and subsequent behavior. For example, viewing pornography may dispose one to see others as sex objects rather than persons, and viewing scenes of gratuitous violence is likely to have a desensitizing effect. If pornography and other related content corrupt the innocence of childhood, then one could argue that the government and Internet providers have a duty to block or restrict inappropriate content.

Critics of Cameron's plan, however, contend that this policy limits freedom and amounts to nothing short of censorship. Even though users can opt out of the plan, opponents of Cameron's plan claim that relatively few people will actually do so. As a result, whatever is deemed "restricted content"—content that, as critics highlight, includes much more than pornography—will be increasingly difficult to access. Moreover, Cameron's opponents argue that any online filter, regardless of its level of sophistication, will inevitably block access to legitimate content. Free speech advocates decry the plan as limiting certain fundamental liberties. Finally, some critics argue that in deciding whether or not online material is appropriate for children's viewing the government is overstepping its legitimate boundaries. It has been argued that such decisions are better left to families.²

Study Questions:

1. What role, if any, should governments have in deciding whether content is morally acceptable for children?
2. Granting Mr. Cameron's argument that pornography is morally corrosive to children, how should the UK balance claims of the greater good against free speech and other rights?
3. Is the UK case an instance of the greater good being at odds with human rights and liberty? If so, how should societies go about balancing these competing claims?

¹http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/07/29/uk-internet-filter-block-more-than-porn_n_3670771.html

²<http://www.ibtimes.com/internet-porn-filters-coming-uk-critics-cry-web-censorship-955748>

