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Internet filter proves its worth

Child protection agency, ECPAT Child ALERT, says an Internet filter, operated by the Department of Internal Affairs is making a valuable contribution towards reducing access to illegal child sex abuse sites.

Introduced 12 months ago, the Digital Child Exploitation Filtering System (DCEFS) is made available voluntarily to Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and focuses solely on websites offering clearly objectionable images of child sexual abuse that comprise a serious offence for anyone in New Zealand to possess. The system is currently servicing [six ISPs](#) and the Department is in talks to provide the DCEFS service to additional service providers.

ECPAT Director Alan Bell commended the work being carried out by dedicated Internal Affairs' personnel who work consistently to protect children from sexual exploitation.

“The provision of this filter is an effective contribution to the overall efforts being made by agencies and individuals to combat those who choose to abuse children for their own pleasure and profit,” Alan Bell said.

“As the Department has said, the expansion of the Internet led to many positive developments. But the fact remains that criminals – individuals as well as organised groups – are also using this technology to produce, collect and distribute images of child sexual abuse.

“Child sexual abuse images are not ‘just images’ but evidence of actual criminal activity. The possession and distribution of this material creates an international market that supports and encourages further abuse. The children who are victims of this activity sometimes suffer the psychological effects of their abuse for many years after the physical offending has ended. Images that are distributed on the Internet never go away. With each download the person involved is re-victimised.”

Over 4 million requests to access illegal child sex abuse sites were recorded during the filter's first year of operation.

Steve O'Brien, manager of the Department's censorship compliance unit says while this number may seem very high, it is important to understand what it represents.

"It is not related to unique users or unique requests, but the total number of requests filtered during the particular period," he said. "A user could be responsible for a large number of filtered requests in a day. For example, by accessing a page with links to multiple blocked sites a user can generate several filtered requests.

"Additionally the number also includes 'requests' as a result of website pop-ups, pop-unders and spam-related content which are not generally user requested."

The DCEFS is designed to assist in combating the trade in child sexual abuse images by making it more difficult for persons with a sexual interest in children to access that material. The system complements the Department's enforcement activity, including online investigations into the trading of objectionable images on peer-to-peer networks and the prosecution of offenders.

However, website filtering is only partially effective in combating the trade in child sexual abuse images. There also needs to be ongoing education and public awareness to acquaint computer users with the risks so that informed choices can be made when accessing websites on the Internet.

The focus of international enforcement will continue to be the identification and rescue of victims, and ensuring that illegal websites are quickly shutdown and their owners identified and prosecuted.

More information about the Internet and website filter is available on the [Department's website](#).

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