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Protecting children's innocence online: competing constructions of childhood in the Australian internet filtering debate

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The question of whether or not classification criteria and restrictions should be applied to internet content as a matter of policy (i.e. via mandatory ISP network-level filtering) has been contentious in Australia. Since the mid-1990s, successive Australian governments have politicised concerns about 'inappropriate' or illegal content online, and this has been manifested either by recourse to enforcing existing legislation or through the implementation of neoliberal public-private regulatory strategies. In policy debates on internet filtering the rights of adults may assume greater prominence in media coverage. However, closer examination of the arguments made by policy stakeholders reveals that concerns about ensuring children's safety and protection from online risks constitute the central axis of this debate. This paper explores the competing constructions of childhood advanced by influential stakeholders in support of or in opposition to calls for increased internet regulation as a means of protecting children online. The discussion in this paper is informed by interviews with a range of experts among Internet Service Providers (ISPs), online content producers, child advocacy NGOs, government and law enforcement officials, many of whom were influential in the recent Australian internet filtering debate (2007-2012).