



No Child's Play: Mandatory Online Age Verification and Child Protection
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The debates and legislative action surrounding child safety online in the UK have so far mainly focused on combating child sexual abuse images on the internet. In contrast, the issue of protecting children from exposure to (legal) adult pornography has received little attention until recently. In the summer of 2013, the Prime Minister announced a series of proposals aimed at preventing children from accessing adult pornography on the internet, including the use of filters and 'family friendly' wifi in public spaces. The government has just launched a public consultation with proposals to introduce a regulatory framework that would require all commercial providers of pornography to establish mandatory age verification mechanisms in order to ensure that children do not access such material. It is also suggested, *inter alia*, that payment service providers would be brought within the proposed framework, enabling them to withdraw services from websites that are in breach of the law.

There are a myriad of legal and practical issues stemming from a mandatory age verification model as envisaged by the proposed reforms, and the regulation of adult pornography on the internet generally. This paper considers the issues and challenges of regulating adult internet pornography from the perspective of child protection, and analyses the complexities of a mandatory age verification regime including its impact on fundamental freedoms, data protection issues and the efficacy of civil and criminal sanctions. Analogies will be drawn to similar, but unsuccessful, legislative attempts in the United States nearly twenty years ago and the paper sheds light on the lessons that can be learnt from that experience. Whilst the paper acknowledges that the state has a compelling interest in protecting children, it also points out that regulation needs to be meaningful and fit for purpose, without which it will neither be workable nor command the respect and obedience of cyberspace users.