

# [Global internet censorship](https://assignbuster.com/global-internet-censorship/)

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What aspects of the internet make globalcensorshipdifficult? Why might a government be inclined to impose internet censorship on its citizens? Is global internet censorship moral? Internet Censorship has been a topic of much debate and growing concern in the past decade. According to the OpenNet Initiative, the number of countries seeking to control access of content on the internet has been rising rapidly (Documenting Internet Content Filtering Worldwide n. d). Reporters Without Borders published a list of thirteen countries as ‘ internet enemies’ in 2006.

The list consisted of Belarus, Burma, China, Cuba, Egypt, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Vietnam (List of the 13 Internet Enemies in 2006 Published 2006). The Chinese government has restricted internet access so heavily that it is called the ‘ Great Firewall of China’ (Healy, 2007: 158). Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) also have heavy restrictions on gambling, pornography, homosexuality and anti-Islamic sites.

According to the OpenNet Initiative, the four main reasons why a government imposes censorship are securing Intellectual Property (IP) rights, protecting national security, preserving cultural norms and religious value and shielding children from pornography and exploitation (Documenting Internet Content Filtering Worldwide n. d). Global censorship may not be as easy as it sounds. Many aspects of the internet make global censorship difficult. The absence of a centralized hub is one of the main reasons why global internet censorship may not be feasible.

As of now only individual countries have imposed censorships through their Internet Service Providers (ISPs). The internet is extremely vast and there is no way people can be employed to check on every single content that is put up on the web. Automated checking tools are not as effective and can only filter content to some extent. The internet is a many-to-many media and people all around the world can post web pages. It is thus quite difficult for one agency or government to curb all activities on the internet that may be deemed offensive to them.

Along with all its benefits the internet also brings with itself a lot of harms. Hacking, identity theft, pedophilia etc are just some of them. In September 2006, Time. com reported that Brazilian prosecutors claimed that a number of pedophiles, anti-Semites and racists lurk around the country’s most popularsocial networkingsite, Google’s orkut (Downie, A. 2006). There has been a recent uproar in Dubai, regarding orkut where some members of the public questioned why the site was not banned and that certain communities were posting immoral material. Dubai-based lawyer Abdul Hamid Al Kumity, of Al Kumity Advocates, said according to Article 15 of the UAE's cyber crime laws, people risked a jail term of between six months and three years, and a fine of up to Dh30, 000, for making, constructing, exhibiting, showing, circulating, inducing or impelling people to watch a website with obscene, immoral, pornographic or erotic material. Article 15(4) puts those who publicise such websites for others to watch or attract people to such websites at risk of a fine or a jail term.

According to Article 13, anybody who allows youngsters to access such websites or helps them in viewing them will be punished with a fine or a jail term of up to five years’ (Bardsley 2007). Thus after a huge public uproar, orkut has been blocked by the country’s most popular ISP – Etisalat. The main reasons why a government might be inclined to impose internet censorship on its citizens are to protect the regional moral values, to protect children and to protect the country.

Preserving moral values of the country would include the censorship of any site deemed offensive in the context of religion, cultureand relationships. Homosexuality is considered an offence in the UAE and all sites related to the topic are blocked in the region. Most dating service sites are also blocked. Anti-Islamic and Pro-Christian sites such as those preaching conversion to Christianity are also blocked by the ISPs. The second reason of protecting children would include keeping adult content from children and keeping the children safe from paedophiles.

National security is the other main reason why a country would be forced to impose internet censorship. The political sentiments of a country are likely to be kept a secret by the government. On the other hand we do have countries like China whose suppression of important information has led to not only national but international problems. ‘ The SARS crisis in 2004, and the contamination of the Songhua River in 2006, which affected millions of lives in China and Russia, serve as particularly deadly examples’ (New HRIC Report Details State Secrets System 2007).

Terrorismis another reason. The governments of most countries are keeping a strict watch out for any material posted on the internet linking to terrorism. ‘ The National Institute of Justice defines computer crime as any illegal act for which knowledge of computertechnologyis used to commit the offence’ (Stamatellos 2007: 11). On the fifth of July 2007, three “ cyber-jihadis” who used the internet to urge Muslims to wage holy war on non-believers were jailed for between six-and-a-half and ten years in the first case of its kind on Britain (Gulf News, 2007: 20).

The governments also censor content to protect the political sentiments of the country. In Belarus, for example, ‘ in March 2006, several websites critical of President Alexandre Lukashenko mysteriously disappeared from the Internet for several days’ (List of the 13 Internet Enemies in 2006 Published 2006). Similar acts by the governments are seen in most other countries listed by the Reporters Without Borders. Governments also impose censorship so that none of its secrets are disclosed. The governments do so to control and maintain their power.

People around the world, adults and teenagers alike have created virtual characters or avatars for online gaming purposes. Sites like ‘ Xfire’ and games like ‘ World of WarCraft’ have people from around the world addicted. These games have led to crimes in the real and virtual worlds. There was an incident of a murder in Shanghai over a virtual sword used in the online game ‘ Legend of Mir 3’. When the dispute had started between the two individuals, the authorities were informed but they could not acknowledge virtual properties.

In South Korea these kinds ofviolenceand murders are so common that the police call it ‘ offline PK’ which stands for offline player killing. The game ‘ Lineage: The Blood Pledge’ is so popular in South Korea that the number of acts of violence aggravated by this game came to a point where the authorities had to create a special cyber-crime unit to patrol both online and offline. These interventions of the government are totally justifiable since the safety of the public is at stake. ‘ Kantian ethics is the moral theory of Immanuel Kant or any theory that ncorporates some of Kant’s central claims or claims similar to Kant’s. Kant’s most basic claim is that nothing can be conceived to be good unconditionally and without qualification except a good will’ (Werhane et al. , 1998: 356). From the Kantian perspective, internet censorship is legal in the sense that the government is only protecting its citizens from possible harms and other data that maybe be deemed sensitive or offensive as far as the religion or the governing body of that country is concerned.

In the above mentioned example of setting up online communities on orkut in Dubai, most people in Dubai do not know the laws against it and they think that they are anonymous on the Internet whereas that is not the case. The government can get the IP addresses from Google server and track down the person easily. Since the main intention of the government is to protect the people, from the Kantianism point of view, internet censorship is moral. Contractarianism has been identified to have its origins from Plato’s ‘ Republic’ (Sayre-McCord, 2000: 247).

Social Contract Theory which is a part of contractarianism is based on rights. People have a right to information which is blocked by the government. Along with offensive sites, the governments also block sites which may be educational or useful otherwise. The government of UAE, for example, has blocked Yahoo’s web album site Flickr due to some indecent content, but most people use the site to share photographs with friends andfamilyaround the world. In addition to right to privacy internet censorship denies people their freedom of expression.

According to a report by Reporters Without Borders, 52 people in China were in prison for expressing themselves too freely online at the time of publishing the report (List of the 13 Internet Enemies in 2006 Published 2006). Thus self-censorship would also be in full-force, in addition to all the other governmental censorship. From the citizen’s perspective, evaluating with the social contract theory, global internet censorship is immoral. Frey defines Act-Utilitarianism as a view that ‘ an act is right if its consequences are at least as good as those of any alternative’ (2000: 165).

The main advantages of global internet censorship may be protecting children from inappropriate content, protecting moral values of the general public, protecting individual countries and their political sentiments and securing IP rights. The main harms may include the fact that important information that the public deserves to know may be with held. Secondly blocking sites such as Flickr due to some explicit content may not be justified keeping in consideration the public at large because most people use it to share photos with their kith and kin around the world.

Thirdly sometimes biological information may be with held because it is deemed explicit. Sometimes sites related to topics that are acceptable in some countries may be blocked because they are considered offensive in other countries. Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) sites such as skype was banned by the UAE’s ISP Etisalat so that the people are forced to use their telephone for long distance calls and they would not lose out on their profits. This is also a harm in the sense that the government is denying the public of new technology for monetary benefit.

Since the harms of internet censorship outweigh their benefits, internet censorship is immoral. ‘ Rule-consequentialism holds that any code of rules is to be evaluated in terms of how much good could reasonably be expected to result from the code’ and good stands for whatever has non-instrumental value (Hooker, 2000: 183). According to him Utilitarians are the most prominent type of consequentialists and they believe that utility is the only thing with non-instrumental value. ‘ The term “ rule-utilitarianism” is usually used to refer to theories that evaluate acts in terms of rules selected for their utility – i. . for their effects on social well-being’ (Hooker, 2000: 185). From the rule-utilitarian point of view, the main benefits remain the same, securing IPs, protecting political sentiments, protecting children and protecting religious and moral values. The harms, on the other hand, are violation of the public’s right to information, their right to freedom of expression, their right to decide for themselves as to what is right and what is wrong and their right to new technology. Moreover in a few years time, it is possible that people will be relying completely on the internet for news and entertainment.

So the laws pertaining to newspapers should be applicable to the internet as well. Thus since the harms outweigh the benefits, global internet censorship is immoral from the Rule-Utilitarian perspective. We have seen that all countries do not filter the same content. When China filters out all pro-democracy sites, the concept is unthinkable of by most other countries. When homosexuality and same-sex marriages are acceptable in countries like UK and some states of the US, it is looked down upon by most other parts of the world. Thus filtering these content on the internet may not be accepted by all.

What may be normal in some countries may be completely offensive in some other. Therefore global internet censorship is not a panacea. References Bardsley, D. , 2007. Orkut users should report offensive material. Gulf News, 4 July. p. 2. Downie, A. , 2006. Google and the Pedophiles. Time [online] 6th September, Available: http://www. time. com/time/nation/article/0, 8599, 1531986, 00. html, [cited 4th July 2007] Frey, R. G. , 2000 ‘ Act-Utilitarianism’ in The Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory [e-book] ed. Lafollette, H. Blackwell Publishers, Malden Massachusetts USA, pp. 165-182 Available: http://www. etlibrary. com [cited 29th June 2007] Healy, S. , 2007. ‘ The great firewall of China. (Looking at the Law)’ SocialEducation[online] 71(3), p 158 Available from ExpandedAcademicASAP via Thomson Gale http://www. galegroup. com [cited 28th June 2007] Hooker, B. , 2000 ‘ Rule Consequentialism’ in The Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory [e-book] ed. Lafollette, H. Blackwell Publishers, Malden Massachusetts USA, pp. 183-204 Available: http://www. netlibrary. com [cited 29th June 2007] N. A, 1998 The Blackwell Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Business Ethics [e-book] ed. Werhane, P H. & Freeman R. E.

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