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" To curtail free expression strikes twice at intellectual freedom, for whoever deprives another of the right to state unpopular views also deprives others of the right to listen to those views," said Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.(Censorship and the U. S. Government 1). I completely agree with Mr. Holmes, and when the question of censoring the Internet arises, I cringe. Governing the Internet dominates many debates, censorship leading the fight. The Internet is the largest and most accessible form of mass media available today. It allows anyone with a few simple tools to consume, and produce, information and ideas to hundreds of people at a practically non-existent cost. Numerous factors indicate censorship of this force is not possible, and not the government's place. It should be left up to the users to decide what is broadcast. Most importantly, censorship of the Internet impairs the expression of ideas and infringes against the First Amendment of the Constitution.

First of all, censoring the Internet as a whole is not possible, so why even try? Cyberspace is the most decentralized form of communication today making policing the Internet a virtually futile task. Unlike television or radio, the Internet consists of thousands of individual computers and networks, with thousands of speakers, information providers and information users, and no centralized distribution point (ACLU vs. Reno Brief 1). No guards watch to see who goes where and if that place is appropriate. The Internet has grown to be a global network. Just because one country deems something inappropriate does not mean that another will comply with the

decision and follow the ruling. If posting pictures of bestiality was banned in China, for example, someone in Switzerland could post those pictures and the Chinese would have access to every single bit of data. Another example, this being completely factual, occurred in Ontario concerning the Karla Homolka/Paul Bernardo trial. The courts decided that in order not to influence the jurors outside of the courtroom that a gag order would be put on media coverage of the trial. Conventional media complied, but an Internet site appeared. This was in turn shut down by the police, but still another appeared (Censorship and the Internet 1). There exists today no way of effectively tracking and determining from where a bulletin was posted, especially with the automatic dialing and encryption technology available. Thus even trying to censor the Internet as a whole would be only an exercise in futility.

Although pornography and potentially destructive material exist on the Internet, not all potentially offensive material shows violent sex acts with children or instructs one how to make bombs. Many users transmit important health-related information about sex. Some relate their views using strong language that may be considered unsuitable. Still, some convey news and information about human rights and civil liberties (ACLU vs. Reno Brief 1). Every user has the right to such communication. Recently, while doing a presentation, for a history class, concerning the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), I accessed the KKK home page. At this site I found a plethora of information detailed with their beliefs. If censorship, such as that desired by some government officials, was in effect, a site, such as above, would never have

been available and my most abundant source of information would have been gone. Hate literature and pornography do exist, but it is insignificant to the legitimate applications of the Internet. Banning of material that may be offensive to one, but may be quite valuable to another, deprives people of their civil right to information.

Pro-censorship advocates argue that some child might unsuspectingly stumble upon unsuitable information. This is not true. Online users are not bombarded with grotesque pictures and hate groups' paraphernalia. One has to deliberately go into such a site, and there exists software to protect children from such occurrences. Often times pornography sites will ask for a registration and a major credit card number. Forms are sent in the mail and logging onto a pornography site can be quite time consuming. Also, parents can take an active part in the censoring of their own children's online activities. They should manage their child's Internet usage as they would determine the kinds of movies available to be watched. (Censorship and the Internet 1) This can be done with software, not government intervention. As stated in "Censorship and the U. S. Government," "Censorship, like charity, should begin at home, but unlike charity it should end there" (Censorship and the U. S. Government 1), technology makes this possible. Internet providers, such as, America Online, Prodigy and CompuServe offer child functions to restrict sites determined by keywords, subject matter, or specific sites. Such software as "SurfWatch", "NET NANNY", and "CYBERSitter" offer a variety of options including blocking of specific sites, preventing children from revealing personal information, and keeping a record of the places

visited while on-line (Censorship and the U. S. Government 1). These restraints are not 100% effective but are a powerful force when combined with common sense and a strong family atmosphere. This reinforces my belief that government does not need to censor the Internet. We can do it ourselves.

Most importantly censorship " refers to the suppression of information, ideas, or artistic expression by anyone whether government officials, church authorities, private pressure groups, or speakers, writers, and artists themselves"(Censorship 1). The First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America guarantees the right to express oneself, essentially the freedom of speech. If we lose our First Amendment rights what will follow? I thoroughly follow the belief, as stated in the ACLU Vs. Reno Brief, " The loss of the First Amendment freedoms, for even minimal periods of time, unquestionably constitutes irreparable injury"(ACLU vs. Reno Brief 1). The only communications that may be banned are those considered " indecent" or " patently offensive"(ACLU vs. Reno Brief 1), yet the question arises, what is " indecent" or " patently offensive"? According to the ACLU vs. Reno Brief, a communication is " measured by contemporary community standards, sexual or excretory activities or organsa^!in context, depicts or describes, in terms patently offensive as measured by contemporary community standards, sexual or excretory activities or organs"(ACLU vs. Reno Brief 1). Each person should be able to decide for himself what is acceptable to express and what is not. Hate literature and such has just as much of a right

to be posted on the Internet as does the book of Genesis. If Neo-Nazis do not have the right to express themselves, then I have no right to express myself.

As one can see, censorship is driven by the fear of the unknown. The unknown, in question, may or may not be beneficial. Still, we have no right to suppress the expression of such ideas. Foul language, pornography, and hate groups may exist on the Internet, and yes, children may be exposed to this, but the government forbidding the viewing of this information by anyone is a direct violation of the First Amendment of the Constitution. A concerned reader should e-mail his Congressman, expressing his views, join Internet discussions on this topic, or become more aware of the danger of Internet censorship faced by the citizens of this country and the world. He must not wait for the problem to fix itself, but rather act now!

Works Cited

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