Censorship of the internet research paper examples

Technology, Internet

The internet is a wonderful source of information and means of communication. Never again in the history of mankind has global communication being so easy yet so beneficial. For instance, medical professionals can discuss the latest operating techniques with their colleagues in distant places. Students can access millions of books on the internet while shoppers can buy exotic goods over the same platform without leaving the comfort of their couches at home. This is the beautiful face of the internet. The ugly side of internet is rife with people who use this wonderful innovation to conduct illegal activities. These range from distribution of materials that are objectionable to minors and the general public to cyber crime which manifests itself in various forms such as money laundering and hackings. The simplicity and access of using the internet is increasing day to day exposing millions of children to entirely all the content in the internet. The question begs, should the internet be censored? This is a controversial question because censorship bears on morality. Some people argue that censorship is against the provisions of the First Amendment and the freedom of speech while others opine that it is immoral to let children view obscene and possibly dangerous content on the internet. This essay explores how censorship can work in some cases while in others it can be detrimental to societal growth.

Internet censorship

Internet censorship is the suppression or control of publishing of, or the access to information available on the internet (Chawick, 2009). Internet censorship takes the form of site blocking or content filtering. The practice may be carried out by governments or private organizations on their own

initiative or on behalf of the government or regulators. Primarily, internet censoring or the regulation of cyberspace is defined by state-controlled internet filtering. Individuals and private entities may engage in self-sponsorship for various reasons. Some of the reasons for self-censorship are religious beliefs, moral standings, business reasons, conformance to societal norms or even intimidation and fear of legal consequences (Faris & Villeneuve, 2011).

Internet censoring takes various forms. The earliest form was IP-(Internet protocol) address in china in late 1990s. In early 2000, China intensified its censoring technologies by implementing two advanced technologies. One was hijacking the DNSs (Domain Name System) while the other was dynamic filtering of internet data flow. These systems were hacked as people developed anti-blocking software. Today most organizations or governments that censor the internet use GFW (Great FireWall) technologies. Shapiro (2000) advises that it is important for organizations or governments to conduct comprehensive tests before launching them because they can get tricked by hacker and anti-censorship campaigners to block themselves or unintended sites.

The first and almost universally acclaimed basis of practicing internet censorship is exposure of children to objectionable content. These include exposure to pornography and their exposure to sexual exploitation. Objectionable content refers to access to gambling sites, sites that include hate speech (Nazi ideologies), political satire, criminal activities, violence, and illegal drug us (Bush et al. 2009). Other includes sites that contain

defamatory, blasphemous, libelous or even slanderous contents. Most governments have illegalized the exposure of children to some or all of these sites. The commonest age limit to the access of these sites in most countries is 18 years. Conviction with a crime touching on children and the content on the internet ranges from fines to varying jail terms.

Some controversy still reigns over the legislations to regulate exposure of children to indecent acts. In US the Communications Decency Act (CDA) which was signed into law in 1995 was later nullified by the courts. The Act outlawed deliberate transmission of indecency acts to any person under the age of 18. According to Shapiro (2000) one of the reasons cited by the US Supreme Court while dismissing the act was that technology capable of screening kids did not exist. Lessig (1998) counters this argument by stating that children are less likely to afford materials fit for censorship and cannot dress up like adults in order t disguise themselves. The truth however is that children still find easy access to materials they are not supposed to see at will. Innovations requiring people to provide credit card numbers to access certain cites acts to deter minors since few of them hold bank accounts. Although this poses the danger of money laundering and cyber theft, it achieves the censorship of sites for child protection to a significant extent.

Private organizations censor by filtering access to their sites to protect themselves from malwares or to guard their reputation in case hackers use their sites to commit crimes such as sexual harassment. Internet censoring based on these grounds is also widely supported especially if the sites exist for the common good of the society. The censorship of access to information

in the sites of international financial organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and other organizational sites such as the European Union can gain considerable societal support (Shavitt & Zilberman, 2011). Moreover, these organizations have the ability to hire and maintain people knowledgeable on information technology. This gives them an edge to block access to their databases for instance.

Censorship can also work if it targets at promoting the security of the society. If secrets about government and state security operations are revealed to the general public, the security of the people may be compromised. Bush et al (2009) assert that it is for this reason that only a small portion of the information in websites of security agencies such as the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Internet filtering to control activities of insurgents, extremist groups and terrorists often enjoys widespread public support (Chadwick, 2009). Examples of such censorships include blocking of sites used by the Al Qaeda, the Muslim Brotherhood, Wikileaks as well as 4chan which is associated with the group Anonymous.

Censorship can also work if it targets sites that share or violate copyrights and other intellectual property rights (Cowie et al 2003). The United States and Europe are at the frontline in the protection of intellectual property rights and internet censoring is one way they achieve this. One of the motivations for doing this is the protection of existing economic interests like low cost telephone services over Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP). Interference with these services can lead to reduced customer base levels

for telecommunication companies. Since most governments sponsor and control most of these organizations which enjoy monopoly it becomes necessary to exercise some form of censorship (Faris & Villeneuve, 2011). Examples of censorships on these grounds include pee-to-peer (P2P) and related sites such as the pirate bay and skype.

The censoring of websites that have overwhelming public support is bound to meet substantial resistance, mass protests or even ultimate failure (Cowie et al, 2003). These include censoring search engine sites such as Google and bing. The Chinese and Cuban governments tried this drawing widespread public protests and international condemnation. Others include censorships on web hosting sites such as hostgator, bluehost and hostmonstor. Other censorships are also applied on media sharing sites such as YouTube and flickr, social networks such as facebook and MySpace, blog hosting sites such as BlogSpot, Wikipedia among other websites experiencing massive traffic and where people can share information.

It is important to highlight the danger of censoring social networking sites for whatever the reasons governments or organizations may have. Facebook currently has about 900 million registered users with more than 500 million active users! If facebook was a country it would be the world's 3rd most populous country after China and India! The site has been blocked in China, Iran, Pakistan, Syria, Bangladesh and Uzbekistan. The site was censored for containing anti-Islamic and religious material that is biased and anti-Islam (Fonseca, 2007). However the events of the Arab uprising seem to defy these grounds for censoring the site in these countries. Millions of Muslims

took to social networking sites specifically facebook to vent their anger and to press for their leaders to relinquish power. This they did with satisfactory outcomes in Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen where they managed to out their leaders and agitate for a change in leadership and increased democracy.

The most controversial reason for censoring the internet is for political reasons. Governments censor the internet because they do not have free and fair elections or where rulers are trying to hold onto power in spite of being widely unpopular. The government blocks sites that criticize, rebuke it is policies or contradict what it has told the people. In some cases, the government can censor sites that bear religious information which people may use to rebel or topple them. In most cases the government succeeds to censor the internet for some time. The emergence of charismatic leaders in those societies, international pressure and advancements in technology and education usually results in such oppressive governments lessening their censorship over the internet (Shapiro, 2009). This results in more people getting information and demanding their rights of speech and expression.

The Arab Uprising in the spring of 2011 which started in Tunisia and spread to Egypt, Yemen and Libya is a classic example of how the government attempt to censor the internet for political reasons can spectacularly fail. In all four countries, the leaders were ousted. Social networking sites like facebook and twitter take substantial credit for fuelling uprisings in the Arab world. To date, the uprising has spread to more than 14 other Arab countries such as Jordan, Algeria, Morocco, Bahrain, and Syria among others.

While some countries practice partial censorship others take it further and limit the access to information such as news while some governments suppress the discussions among their citizenry especially through Social Networking sites. Moreover, governments can initiate internet censorship in anticipation of events likely to draw the interests of the masses such as elections, riots and protests (Lessig, 1998). The best example of internet censorship on this basis is the events of the Arab uprising. Governments in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen and Libya attempted to curtail discussions among their populace by censoring social networking sites notably Facebook and Twitter.

There are several socio-economical implications of censoring the internet. Building and maintaining censorship systems is expensive. Thousands of websites are launched every day and it therefore becomes hard to monitor and censor the content in these sites. This makes the censorship process hard and compels governments or organizations to invest heavily in developing softwares to block the sites or filter the content displayed in those sites.

Censorship softwares achieve their purpose by hiding where a user is visiting, hiding where the content is hosted or hiding who the user is (Chadwick, 2009). The systems deployed for censorship purposes are themselves subject to abuse. They can for instance be hacked to block the sites that are not intended to or get used to get to the databases of the sensitive information which a government or organization is trying to censor. In some cases of censorship programmers develop softwares that block out

sites that contain some words. For instance, the mention of the word " sex"
or " breast" blocks out all sites containing the words. This can limit research
to sites providing botanical or biological information. The censoring of these
sites can for instance block information about breast cancer or sex
education. This has the potential to achieve the opposite of what it was
designed to protect in the first place.

Conclusion

The innovation of the internet tremendously improved communication and
the sharing of information. While some people put the internet to good use
such as research and to ease their lives by for instance shopping from home,
others use the platform to commit crimes. The question of censoring the
internet bears on morality and is therefore controversial. Internet censoring
takes the form of blocking certain websites or filtering the content accessible
through certain websites. Governments as well as private entities engage
censorship based on moral standings, business among other reasons. There
are three primary reasons as to why censorship occurs. Firstly is for political
reasons where oppressive and unpopular governments want to remain in
power, interference with elections, protests among others. Secondly
censorship occurs for security reasons where the governments censor
websites used to spread terror or incite violence by extremist or terrorist
groups such as Al Qaeda. Lastly censorship can be fueled by moral or
religious reasons. In this case the exposure of sexual or mentally torturous
content to children is censored. Moreover, the government can censor the
internet when some sites share copyrights and other intellectual property

rights. In this case the government aims at guarding economic interests of individuals as well as those of the country. Cases where censorship occurs to protect children from indecent exposures have gained massive public support. Internet censorship for security purposes is still a controversial issue. Some governments especially those facing opposition from their citizenry, outlaw access to some websites claiming they are run by groups that pose security threats to the state. On the contrary they could be targeting at limiting their peoples' freedom of speech and expression through certain groups such as the Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood for fear of being toppled. The case of internet censorship for political purposes gone awry is best illustrated by the spring 2011 Arab uprising. The uprisings, fueled through popular social networking sites; facebook and twitter saw the ousting of leaders in four Arab countries while 14 others experienced protests from their populace. These among other reasons elaborate why censorship of the internet can work in some cases while in others it can lead to the detriment of the very society it aims at protecting.

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