

# Internet censorship

## 3450



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The Internet is a wonderful place of entertainment and education but like all places used by millions of people, it has some murky corners people would prefer

children not to explore. In the physical world society as a whole conspires to protect children, but there are no social or physical constraints to Internet surfing. The Internet Censorship Bill of 1995, also known as the Exon/Coats Communications Decency Act, has been introduced in the U. S. Congress. It would

make it a criminal offense to make available to children anything that is indecent, or to send anything indecent with “ intent to annoy, abuse, threaten, or harass” (“ Stop the Communications ...” n. p.). The

goal of this bill as written(though not as stated by its proponents) is to try to make all public discourse on the Internet suitable for young children. The issue of whether is it necessary to have censorship on the Internet is being argued all over the world. There are numerous homepages on the World Wide Web

discussing this issue, or asking people to sign the petition to stop government

censorship. The Internet was originally a place for people to freely express

their ideas worldwide. It is also one of America's most valuable types of technology; scientists use email for quick and easy communication. They post

their current scientific discoveries on the Usenet newsgroups so other scientists in the same field of study all over the world can know in minutes.

Ordinary people use the Net for communication, expressing their opinions in the

newsgroups, obtaining up-to-date information from the WWW, acquiring files by

using FTP, etc. Censorship would damage the atmosphere of the freedom to express

ideas on the Internet; therefore, government should not encourage censorship. In

the Internet community, there is a large volume of technical terms. For this reason, it is first necessary to examine the terminology specific to Internet.

The Internet is a world wide computer network. The “ Net” is frequently used in place of Internet. In the words of Allison and Baxter, two experts on Internet Censorship at the Monash University, “ the Internet is comprised of various digital media subsuming many of the distinct roles of traditional

media” (Allison and Baxter 3). Electronic mail (email), which is one component of the Internet, approximates person to person letters, memoranda, notes and even phone calls. Sound and pictures are sometimes sent along with text. Email is mainly for private communication. Electronic mailing lists are rather like club newsletters and readers have to contract-in or subscribe to a list. Another term that is often used is electronic news (enews/Usenet), enews is a broadcast, free to the Internet medium. It has some properties of radio or television, particularly talk-back radio or television, in that the destination is indiscriminate. The term FTP is also frequently used. File transfer protocol (FTP) started as an Internet archival and retrieval medium, somewhat analogous to traditional libraries. Files can be retrieved from distant computers using a traditional text-based interface. The world-wide web (WWW), which is another component of the Net, can be used to “publish” material that would

traditionally appear in journals, magazines, posters, books, television and even

on film. The term UNIX, “ a widely heard computer term, is a multi-user, multitasking operating system originally developed by Ken Thompson and Dennis

Ritchie, at AT&T Bell Laboratories, in 1969 for use on minicomputers”

(“ UNIX” n. p.). To understand the background of the controversy, it is also necessary to give a brief history on the Internet. The Internet was created

about twenty years ago in an attempt to connect a U. S. Defense Department

network called the ARPAnet and various other radio and satellite networks. The

ARPAnet was an experimental network designed to support military research; in

particular, research about how to build networks that could withstand partial outages (such as bomb attacks) and still function. At about the same time the

Internet was coming into being, Ethernet local area networks (“ LANs”)

were developed. Most of these workstations came with Berkeley UNIX, which

included IP (Internet Protocol) networking software. This created a new demand:

rather than connecting to a single large timesharing computer per site, organizations wanted to connect the ARPAnet to their entire local network. The

demand keeps growing today. Now that most four-year colleges are connected to

the Net, people are trying to get secondary and primary schools connected.

People who have graduated from college where they have used the resources of the

Net in classes, know what the Internet is good for, and talk their employers into connecting different corporations. All this activity points to continued growth, networking problems to solve, evolving technologies, and job security

for net-workers (Willmott 107). The Internet can also be compared to a church.

In many ways the Internet is like a church: it has its council of elders, every member has an opinion about how things should work, and they can either take

part or not. It's the choice of the user. The Internet has no president, chief

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operating officer, or Pope. The constituent networks may have presidents and

CEO's, but that's a different issue; there is no single authority figure for the Internet as a whole. As stated by Frances Hentoff, the staff writer for The Village Voice and the author of First Freedoms, "on an info superhighway driven by individuals, there are no cops preventing users from downloading" (Hentoff 1). Internet users can broadcast or express anything they want. The fact that the Net has no single authority figure sets forth a problem about what

kind of materials could be available on the Net. The U. S. government is now trying to pass bills to prevent misuse of the Net. The Internet Censorship Bill of 1995, which has already been discussed earlier, was introduced to the U. S.

Congress. Under the Censorship Bill, a person breaks the law if he/she puts a purity test on a web page without making sure children cannot access the page.

Also, if a person verbally assaults someone on IRC, he/she breaks the law. If a

university, where some students may be under 18 years old, carries the alt. sex.\*

newsgroups, which contains adult material, it breaks the law. According to George Melloan from the Wall Street Journal, a censorship bill was passed by the

Senate 84-16 in July, and an anticensorship bill was passed by the House 420-4

in August. There are now four different sets of censorship and anticensorship language in the House and Senate versions of the Telecomm reform bill, which

contradict each other and will have to be reconciled (Melloan, n. p.). In order to understand the need for the ever-growing body of legislation, it is important

to explore the controversy, and the current problems involved with the Net as it

exists must be introduced. The problem that concerns most people is offensive

material such as pornography. As pointed out by Allison and Baxter,

“ Possible (offensive) topics are behavior (drugs, ... ), nudity,

political/economic/social opinion, violence, racial/ethnic, religious, coarse

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language, sexual/gender orientation, [and] sexuality” (Allison and Baxter

3). Since the Internet is open to everyone, children are very easily exposed to

such material. According to Allison and Baxter, “ the information provided on the Internet, particularly through the WWW, ranges across train time-tables,

university lecture notes, books, art exhibits, film promotions, the wisdom and ravings of individuals and, yes, pornographic pictures” (Allison and Baxter

3). Moreover, many high schools in the United States provide Internet access to

students, which is very useful for looking up information, but if a student

intends to look for inappropriate material, he/she is very likely to find such

material simply by doing an Internet search. Another crucial Internet crime is

the theft of credit card numbers. Companies do business on the Net, and credit

card numbers are stored on their servers; everyone with the necessary computer

knowledge could hack in and obtain such databases for illegal purposes. To cite

an instance, the most infamous computer terrorist, Kevin Mitnick, “ waived extradition and is now in jail in California, charged with computer fraud and illegal use of a telephone access device. The list of allegations against him include theft of many files and documents, including twenty-thousand credit card

numbers from Netcom On-Line Services, which provides thousands with access to

the Internet” (Warren 52). Americans have to come up with a solution in order to keep children away from inappropriate material and to prevent misuses

of the Net. One reaction to this inapplicability has been the “ Censor the Net” approach (the censorship bill), which is being debated worldwide.

First, the meaning of “ Censoring the Net” must be explained. Simply, it is the banning of offensive material. To see if the government should censor

the Net, it is imperative to list the advantages and disadvantages of the “ censor the Net” approach. The advantage of government censorship is that ideally, children and teenagers could be kept away from unsuitable

material. However, many experts have pointed out that government censorship is

not possible. Howard Rheingold, the editor of the Whole World Review, observes

that, “ the ‘ censor the Net’ approach is not just morally misguided. It’s becoming technically and politically impossible” (Rheingold n. p.). First,

it is not fair to exclude the freedom and damage the atmosphere of freely expressing ideas just for the safety of children. Corn-Revere, an expert on

Internet censorship at the Howgan & Harson Law Firm, points out that

“ the purpose of indecency regulation is to keep adult material from falling into the hands of kids. When he first introduced a similar bill last year, Senator Exon said he was concerned that the Information Superhighway was in

danger of becoming an electronic ‘ red light district’ and that he wanted to bar

his granddaughter’s access to unsuitable information” (Corn-Revere 24). It

is clear that Senator Exon introduced the bill to prevent minors from viewing

unsuitable material on the Net. In addition, Meleedy, a computer science

graduate student at Harvard University, questions that if “ the Internet

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makes democracy this accessible to the average citizen, is it any wonder

Congress wants to censor it?" (Meleedy 1) Allison and Baxter assert that,

" the most significant new properties of the Internet media are the

diversity of information sources and their ability to reach almost anywhere in

the world. Authors range from major corporations such as IBM and Disney to

school children" (Allison and Baxter 3). As predicted by Corn-Revere,

" At the very least, the law will force content providers to make access

more difficult, which will affect all users, not just the young"

(Corn-Revere 70). Censoring the Net is technically and politically impossible;

it will damage the atmosphere of freedom and free idea expression on the

Net;

therefore, government should not encourage censorship. Most Internet users

are

enjoying their freedom of speech on the Net, which is supposed to be

protected

by the First Amendment of the United States. According to Corn-Reverse, " it

has been suggested that, ' on-line systems give people far more genuinely

free

speech and free press than ever before in human history'" (Corn-Reverse

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71). Rheingold predicts that “ Heavy-handed attempts to impose restrictions on the unruly but incredibly creative anarchy of the Net could kill the spirit of cooperative knowledge-sharing that makes the Net valuable to millions” (Rheingold

n. p.). The freedom of idea expression is what makes the Internet important and

enjoyable, and it should not be waived for any reason. Additionally, only a very

small portion of the Net contains offensive material, most people do not use the

Net for pornography. Caragata from Maclean’s magazine observes that, “ it is

pornography that stirs the most controversy. But while there is no doubt that pornography is popular, it amounts to a trickle compared with everything else

available on the Net” (Caragata 51). The Net is mostly being used for

communication and information exchange, and only a tiny portion of the Net contains pornography and other offensive material. It must be understood that

censoring the Net is technically impossible. According to Allison and Baxter,  
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“ in principle, it is impossible to monitor all material being transmitted on the Internet. Considering the difficulties with international boundaries, a licensing system faces many obvious practical hurdles” (Allison and Baxter 6). As described by Allison and Baxter, “ Any good Computer Science graduate can create a completely secure encryption system for concealment purposes. The material can even be disguised, for example hidden ‘ inside’ a perfectly innocuous picture” (Allison and Baxter 6). Therefore, if a person wants to publish offensive material, he/she can design a formula to change the material with respect to a key, and secretly tell other users what the key is. In this way, they can retrieve the same material and pass through the government censorship. While people are concerned about Internet pornography, it should be recognized that pornography is sometimes legal; for example, pornography is legal in video and magazines. Therefore, it is inconsistent to ban the Internet equivalents. According to Rheingold, “ Citizens should have the right to

restrict the information-flow into their homes. They should be able to exclude from their home any subject matter that they do not want their children to see.

But sooner or later, their children will be exposed to everything from which they have shielded them , and then they will have left to deal with these shocking sights and sound in the moral fiber they helped them cultivate” (Rheingold

n. p.). The Internet is definitely not the only medium for teenagers to find inappropriate material. Even if the Net does not have any, teenagers could also

be exposed to indecorous material in many other places. For example, Allison and

Baxter say that, “ most authors using electronic media do not produce material that is any ‘ worse’ than that available from news agents, video shops,

or mail-order sources” (Allison and Baxter 8). On that account, if the purpose of censoring is to prevent minors from being exposed to indecorous material, not only the Net has to be censored. Censoring the Net will only

eliminate one single medium for minors to find irrelevant material.

## Government

censorship is not the solution to the problem, and alternatives measures that have same effects as censorship can be practiced. There are many alternative

measures to government censorship which would prevent misuse of the Net and

would have the same effects as censorship. According to Hentoff, “ there are ways to protect children without the Act’s intervention: blockage of certain areas, passwords, parental supervision. And adults-under protection of the First Amendment-can remain protected from government thought control. However,

if the censorship bill is passed, the First Amendment may effectively be excluded from cyberspace” (Hentoff 1). It is very important for parents to provide moral guidance for their children, and parents should have this responsibility. Moral guidance is the foremost long-term solution to the problem. Rheingold believes that, “ this technological shock (pornography on the Net) to Americans’ moral codes means that in the future, Americans are going



to have to teach their children well. The only protection that has a chance of working is to give their sons and daughters moral grounding and some common

sense” (Rheingold n. p.). In America, minors can be exposed to sexual material in many media. Providing children with moral guidance is the foremost

solution to the problem. However, at the same time that parents carry out moral

guidance, Americans have to come out with some short term approaches to solve

the problem in a more efficient way as well. An alternative to government censorship is the technological fix, which would prevent misuse of the Net and

would have the same effects as government censorship. This involves the design

of intelligent software to filter information. There is a rush to develop

information filtering software and get it to market. One example of

technological fix is the “ SurfWatch” software, as described by Allison

and Baxter, “ SurfWatch is a breakthrough software product which helps

parents deal with the flood of sexual material on the Internet. By allowing parents to be responsible for blocking what is being received at any individual

computer, children and others have less chance of accidentally or deliberately

being exposed to unwanted material. SurfWatch is the first major advance in providing a technical solution to a difficult issue created by the explosion of technology. SurfWatch strives to preserve Internet freedom by letting individuals choose what they see” (Allison, Baxter 6). The SurfWatch vendor intends to provide monthly updates to cope with the fast changing Internet.

Also, commercial Internet service providers, such as “ America Online”, allow parents to control what Internet relay chat (IRC) sessions are available to their children (Cidley 59). Parental Control is a feature in many commercial

Internet service providers, users can turn on the Parental Control function, and

they will automatically be kept away from offensive words in IRC. In this way, children can be kept away from offensive material and adults can continue to enjoy their Internet freedom. Another technological fix is for parents and

guardians to have a separate “ proxy server” for their children’s web browser. A “ proxy server” is a program that disallows uses of some specified Internet sites or Usenet newsgroups. The parents need to actively select sites their proxy server can access. Parental control tools is a very possible solution to the problem, as stated in the “ Communications Decency Act Issues Page” by the Center for Democracy and Technology, “ what will help parents control their children’s access to the Internet is Parental Control tools and features, such as those provided by several major online services and available as over-the-counter software” (“ Stop the Communications ...” n. p.). Tools for controlling Internet access by children are widely available, and parents can already control their children’s access to the material on the Net. There are no computer programs to automatically and reliably classify material; only people can do it. As a result, while practicing technological fixes, the classification of the contents of the material when posting is very important. Nowadays, most Internet users classify their postings with standard categories, and leave signatures at the end of postings. According to Allison and Baxter, “ items are signed with a

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secure digital signature that can be traced to a real person, company or organization” (Allison, Baxter 4). The strengths of the material are often classified as “ strong” or “ weak”, and attitudes of a given document towards a topic are often classified as “ advocates”, “ discusses”, “ deplores”, or “ does not discuss”.

Additionally, in order to reduce the effort of classifying many individual items, particularly in the case of FTP and WWW, classifications are often attached to directories and inherited by subdirectories and documents. In this

way, readers can make informed decisions regarding access of Internet material,

and the programming of intelligent software will be much easier: just by recognizing a small number of terms of classification. As a matter of fact, the classification of material has already been done on the Net for a period of time. Most Internet materials are well classified, and people will have an idea of what they are going to see beforehand. For instance, the articles in a particular Usenet newsgroup can be accurately predicted by the name of the

group. For example, soc. culture. hongkong. entertainment contains discussion of

the entertainment industry of Hong Kong; alt. binaries. sex. pictures contains encoded binary files of dirty pictures. Internet users know what they are approaching beforehand, and minors know that they are not supposed to browse

those alt. sex.\* newsgroups. The combination of the installation of censoring software and the classification of material is a much better solution than government censorship. Hentoff mentions that “ flexibility of interactive media...enables parents to control what content their kids have access to, and

leaves the flow of information free for those adults who want it” (Hentoff

1). This prevents unwanted material from reaching children and allows adults to

continue enjoying their Internet freedom. The problem of the Net is that it is easy for minors to obtain inappropriate materials. The American government came

up with a proposal to censor the Net, but as proved earlier, the “ Censor the Net” approach is both technically and politically impossible. The

foremost solution to the problem is for parents to provide moral guidance for their children. At the same time they are providing moral guidance for their children, Americans also need short term technical solution. Intelligent censoring software and proxy servers can let parents disallow their children access to certain sites. In this way, parents can keep their children from the offensive materials on the Net. “ Like other dilemmas and unanswered questions of the digital age, traditional approaches (government censorship) simply won’t work. Americans are going to have to accept less intrusive, probably more exotic solutions, such as providing intelligent software filters to those who want a version of Internet Lite [sic]” (Baker 65). For intelligent software and proxy servers to operate successfully, it is necessary to classify the information available on the Net, and the classification of materials has already been done by Internet users for years. Parents can then censor the Net for their children, and adults can continue to enjoy their Internet freedom. This will provide the same effect as government censorship,

but will not damage the atmosphere of free idea expression and freedom on the

Net. Moreover, indecorous materials are not only on the Net, minors can obtain

such materials without accessing the Internet at all. Internet censorship is not

the solution to keeping minors away from sexual material. The real and foremost

solution to preventing minors from viewing sexual material is for parents to

take a stronger role in their children's viewing. " This technological shock

(pornography on the Net) to Americans' moral codes means that in the future,

Americans are going to have to teach their children well. The only protection

that has a chance of working is to give their sons and daughters moral grounding

and some common sense" (Rheingold n. p.).