Lesson 4: Internet Censorship (Part 1)

Internet Censorship: Protecting the Population or Suppressing Freedom?

From communication to entertainment to easy access of information, the internet has become an integral part of daily life for billions of people worldwide. In the last 20 years, internet usage has increased more than 1000%, simplifying tasks in personal, social, and economic domains. Instantaneous access to limitless amounts of news and information, though convenient, is also cause for debate. As in the past, when certain books, plays, TV, films and radio were restricted in order to protect the public from offensive or objectionable content, the internet is currently the subject of censorship.

What is Internet Censorship?

Internet censorship is the restriction of what can be published or viewed online. Not only does censorship seek to protect citizens from harmful or sensitive content, such as child pornography or graphic violence, it also aims to protect copyrighted content, promote specific political views, control internet-related crime, and monitor the varying ideas and opinions of the vast number of internet users. The degree to which internet content is monitored and suppressed varies from country to country. While most democratic countries have some degree of online censorship, dictatorial and repressive regimes often go so far as to block information that runs counter to the ideals of the regime.

When did internet censorship begin?

Historically speaking, the evolution of the internet is relatively recent. The original internet, motivated by the need to share expensive resources, got its start in 1958, in the United States. It began as a series of interconnected computer networks designed by the Department of Defense to help protect the country. Over time, the number of computer networks grew and in 1990, the World Wide Web was introduced, a system created to make navigating the internet much easier. In 1991, the internet was introduced to the general population. Since that time, numerous efforts have been made to both spread and control the spread of information. As the number of internet users grew exponentially, concerns with increased criminal activity, privacy, and the airing of diverse political views began to develop. These concerns led to policies enacted to protect privacy and online content. In 1995, the American Navy developed something called "onion routing," an early encryption tool that allowed the sending of private data over public networks. In the following years, many jurisdictions introduced legislation to limit the kinds of content that could be disseminated or viewed online. The Communications Decency Act of 1996 in the United States banned the posting of anything indecent or offensive. In 1998, four years after the internet arrived in China, the Chinese government launched the "Great Firewall of China," an internet censorship program designed to block access to foreign websites and information.

Currently, countries vary in their use of censorship technologies to limit or block content in order to protect their citizens. For example, France and Germany have banned all online hate speech, and the United Kingdom and Sweden have ordered internet providers to block all child pornography. Countries with stricter censorship systems include China, North Korea, and Iran, to name a few. China blocks many foreign sites including YouTube, Facebook, and Wikipedia, and provides its citizens with its own tightly controlled video platforms and search engines. In North Korea, the internet is withheld from the majority of its citizens, and is only available to the elite. Iranian citizens are not able to view foreign media or any sites that express criticism of their government. Other countries, such as Oman and the Sudan, censor internet content to limit exposure to Western ideas, protecting traditional values. Cuba and Russia are among countries that impose censorship to maintain political stability and national security.

What are the issues associated with censorship?

There are several issues and concerns facing the practice of censorship. For those living in democratic countries, it is easy to believe that all information is freely accessible. However, censorship exists in one form or another in
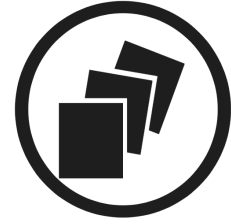
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almost all countries in the world. Studies show that only 25% of the world's population has free access to the internet. Another 35% has very little access at all. Citizens in the most heavily censored countries may not realize that they are being censored. If people are only exposed to one highly restricted "internet," they may not be aware that their internet experience is different from the larger, global one. Another concern is that the internet does not have physical borders between countries. A resident of a country that bans certain websites is technically able to access information on a website hosted in another country. This creates a challenge for countries that then need to figure out how to filter content and block sites from outside the country. Censorship also raises the issue of access to fair and balanced information. If a conservative organization filters content to protect its world-view, it can end up blocking material from liberal outlets. Even though it may not agree with liberal ideas, the suppression of those ideas (which may have merit) shuts down any chance for dialogue and the honest exchange of ideas. Censorship may also inadvertently block innocent content. For example, a harmless query for "chicken breast recipe," may flag the word breast and block the search, assuming the search is for pornographic content. Additionally, a tech-savvy individual will be able to circumvent censorship and gain access to prohibited materials. Censorship does not remove material from the internet; it only blocks access to it. Consequently, for those with the expertise, they are able to bypass internet filtering.

What is the censorship debate?

Those who advocate for censorship see the value in limiting access to harmful material online. Racist posts, hate speech, child pornography, and videos of real-life violence are examples of things that should not be readily accessible. Suppressing harmful material can protect children from viewing unhealthy content and can reduce the impact of hateful speech. In addition, censorship may help to further national security. Although hacking will undoubtedly continue to occur, strict fines and penalties for violations could reduce the instances of information breeches through hacking. Similarly, censorship can also protect personal information and help reduce occurrences of identity theft. When information is not easily shared and accessible, it is not easily stolen. Another reason that people support censorship is that it can help stop fake news from being distributed. Without guidelines and restrictions, anything could be posted online and passed as truth.

On the other side of the argument, opponents to censorship view the idea of controlling who gets what information a dangerous one. A government that decides what is accessible online removes all autonomy and decision-making from its citizens. Through censorship, a governing body can encourage one point of view or ideology, withholding information that challenges these. Lack of information can lead to ignorance and encourages compliance among a population. Likewise, although fake information can be limited through censorship, so can the truth. The blocking of information because it runs contrary to a political philosophy, even though the information is factual and newsworthy, is a form of oppression. Opponents would also argue that there is a negative economic impact when censorship occurs. If a company or business has their website content blocked because it does not meet someone's idea of what is decent or acceptable, it can have a devastating effect on their bottom line. Businesses whose products are considered offensive and are blocked, do not have the same advantage of being able to advertise on the internet. Censorship itself is an expensive practice. In 2011, the Egyptian government shut down the internet to the entire country for five days as a way of responding to protests. The cost to do this was around 90 million dollars. One of the biggest arguments against censorship is the argument for freedom of expression. Individuals have the right to express their own ideas and opinions without fear of repercussion. In addition, users of the internet also have a right to read truthful information and share opinions about it. As long as an opinion is not harming anyone else, people should have the ability to freely access and present their own ideas.

Should censorship remain in place so that society can stay safe and protect its children? Alternatively, should people be trusted to self-regulate without having moral boundaries imposed on them? One thing is certain. The internet is here to stay, and so is this debate!

Card Game: Internet Censorship

Play this card game in groups of three or four. Shuffle the cards and place the deck in the middle. Player 1 takes a card and reads the definition aloud. Players 2 and 3 try to guess the vocabulary word or phrase. Player 1 gives the card to the player who correctly guesses the word or phrase first.

If both players answer correctly, Player 1 returns the card to the bottom of the deck. If neither player answers correctly, Player 1 reads the answer and returns the card to the bottom of the deck. The player to the left takes the next turn. The player with the most cards at the end is the winner.

This serious game provides useful practice learning the precise definitions and vocabulary for this chapter. Since only correct answers can win the card, this game provides opportunities for implicit peer-feedback in a safe and structured way. This game also provides opportunities for careful listening, friendly competition, and reciprocal teaching.

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Not identified by name; of unknown name.

anonymous

Favouring or enforcing strict obedience to authority at the expense of personal freedom.

authoritarian

The enforcement or advocacy of strict obedience to authority at the expense of personal freedom.

authoritarianism

A system of government by one person with absolute power.

autocracy

Officially or legally prohibit.

ban

A line separating two political or geographical areas, especially countries.

border

Examine a book, film, etc. officially and suppress unacceptable parts of it.

censor

The suppression or prohibition of any parts of books, films, news, etc. that are considered obscene, politically unacceptable, or a threat to security.

censorship

Find a way around an obstacle.

circumvent

Intellectual property whose owner has the exclusive right to make copies of it.

copyrighted content

A system of government by the whole population or all the eligible members of a state, typically through elected representatives.

democracy

Relating to or supporting democracy or its principles.

democratic

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Spread information widely. **disseminate**	The holding or expression of opinions at variance with those commonly or officially held. **dissent**
The process of converting information or data into a code, especially to prevent unauthorized access. **encryption**	Not genuine; counterfeit. **fake**
A part of a computer system or network which is designed to block unauthorized access while permitting outward communication. **firewall**	A lengthy exchange of angry or abusive messages between users of an online forum or other discussion area. **flame war**
Of a country or language other than one's own. **foreign**	The power or right to express one's opinions without censorship, restraint, or legal penalty in a variety of forms, including speech. **freedom of expression**
The depiction of especially vivid, brutal and realistic acts of violence in visual media such as film, television, and video games. **graphic violence**	Unintentionally, accidentally. **inadvertently**
Occurring in an instant. **instantaneous**	Necessary to make a whole complete; essential or fundamental. **integral**

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A global computer network providing a variety of information and communication facilities, using standardized communication protocols.

internet

The territory within which authority may be exercised.

jurisdiction

Content which is obscene, indecent, pornographic, seditious, offensive, defamatory, threatening, liable to incite racial hatred, or deceptive.

objectionable content

A place from which items are sold or distributed.

outlet

The state of being subject to unjust treatment or control.

oppression

Printed or visual material containing the explicit description or display of sexual organs or activity, intended to stimulate sexual excitement.

pornography

Inhibiting or restraining the freedom of a person or group of people.

repressive

An unintended consequence occurring some time after an event or action, especially an unwelcome one.

repercussion

To be opposed to; to disagree with.

run counter to

Extend over a large or increasing area.

spread

Proficient in the use of modern technology, especially computers.

tech-savvy

Refuse to give something that is desired by another.

withhold