

# Networked Communications

## Lecture 3-2

**Computers & Society (CPSC 430)**

Kevin Leyton-Brown

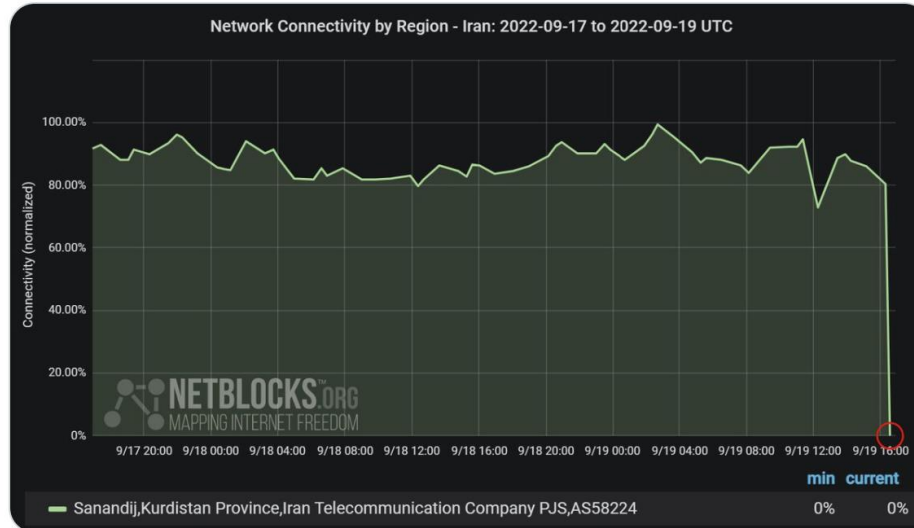
<https://www.cs.ubc.ca/~kevinlb/teaching/cs430>

# Government Control of the Internet

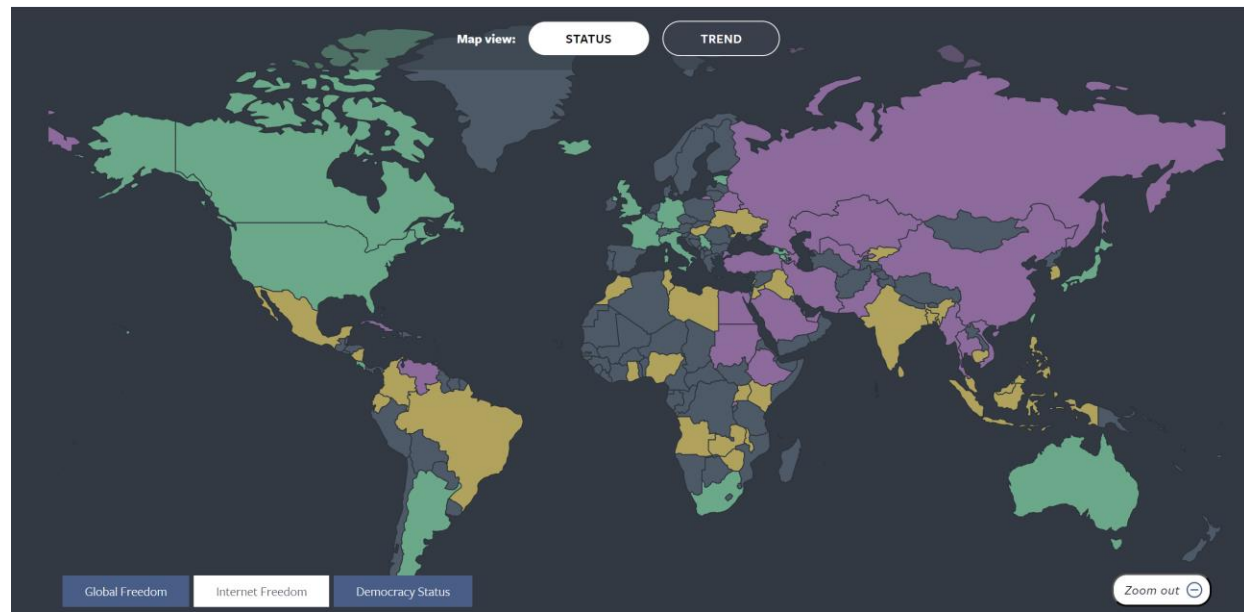
- North Korea: Internet mostly inaccessible; Myanmar: formerly inaccessible; Cuba: Notoriously slow & expensive.
- Saudi Arabia: centralized control
- People's Republic of China: highly sophisticated filtering ('great firewall') as well as censorship
- Germany: Forbids access to neo-Nazi sites
- United States: Limits access of minors to pornography

# Internet access in Iran

- Disruptions of internet services in the wake of the “Woman, Life, Freedom” protests against the death of Mahsa Amini
- Access to Instagram and Whatsapp was restricted (Facebook, Youtube and Twitter were already banned)



- “Global internet freedom declined for the 13th consecutive year
- Attacks on free expression grew more common around the world
- Generative artificial intelligence (AI) threatens to supercharge online disinformation campaigns
- AI has allowed governments to enhance and refine their online censorship”



# Forms of Direct Censorship

- **Government monopolization of a communication medium**
  - E.g., the government owns all television stations, or all printing presses, and so controls the message
  - Doesn't work so well with the Internet (though see Saudi Arabia; China)
- **Prepublication review**
  - Certain kinds of information must be reviewed before they can be published
  - E.g., nuclear/military secrets
- **Licensing and registration**
  - You can't operate a TV station without a license
  - Necessary because of limited bandwidth
  - Opens the door to regulation of content (as in Canada)

# Self-censorship

- Most common form of censorship
- Group decides for itself not to publish
- Reasons
  - Avoid subsequent prosecution
  - Maintain good relations with government officials (sources of information)
- A “soft” form of self-censorship: ratings systems
  - Movies, TVs, CDs, video games
  - Nothing similar has happened on the Web
    - At least, not consistently.

# Internet access in Ukraine

- Areas of Ukraine were left without internet access as a consequence of the conflict with Russia
- Starlink (a subsidiary of SpaceX) largely stepped into the gap
  - Reflects a shift of balance: a private, multinational corporation (with an outspoken CEO) backstopping a fundamental freedom in response to an act of war
  - no guarantee that this would happen the same way next time



# Challenges Posed by the Internet

- **Many-to-many communications**
  - Hard for the government to shut down (but not at all impossible)
- **Dynamic connections**
  - Computers coming and going all the time; hard to know who's who
- **Huge numbers of Web sites**
  - Hard to control access to online information
- **Extends beyond national borders, laws**
  - Governments may have limited authority to shut down sites
- **Hard to distinguish between minors and adults**
  - Important for initiatives that seek to restrict children's access



# Ethical Perspectives on Censorship

- Kant opposed censorship

- Product of the Enlightenment: reaction to institutional control
- “Have courage to use your own reason”

- Mill opposed censorship

1. No one is infallible: we may silence the truth.
2. Even if not, an opinion may contain a kernel of truth.
3. Even if not, the truth must be rationally tested and validated.
4. Ideas are most persuasive if they're tested rigorously.

Principle of harm: “The only ground on which intervention is justified is to prevent harm to others; the individual’s own good is not a sufficient condition.”

*When, if ever, do you think censorship is justified?*

# Freedom of Expression: History

- **De Scandalis Magnatum (England, 1275)**
  - You could be imprisoned for weakening loyalty to the King
  - Not so different from lèse-majesty laws today, esp. in Thailand, Morocco, Jordan (see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lese-majesty>)
- **18th century: freedom of the press in England**
  - Anyone could print what they liked
  - Punishment for libel: publication causing harm, even if truth
- **American states adopted bills of rights including freedom of expression**
  - Freedom of expression in 1st amendment to U.S. Constitution: “Congress shall make no law ... abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press”

# Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms

1. The *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* guarantees the rights and freedoms set out in it **subject only to such reasonable limits prescribed by law** as can be demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society.

2. Everyone has the following fundamental freedoms:

- (a) freedom of conscience and religion;
- (b) freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of communication;**
- (c) freedom of peaceful assembly; and
- (d) freedom of association.



# Freedom of Expression not an Absolute Right

- Right to freedom of expression must be balanced against the public good
- Various restrictions on freedom of expression exist
  - e.g., Section 1 of the Canadian Charter is used to justify laws against hate speech, even though these limit expression

## **In pairs:**

*Which restrictions on freedom of expression do you think are justified?*

# Networked Communications

“Social networks should be held legally liable for the content of any post promoted to the feeds of over 100,000 users.”

