Networked Communications

Lecture 3-2

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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

- Recent disruptions of internet services in the wake of protests for the death of Mahsa Amini
- Access to Instagram and Whatsapp was restricted (Facebook, Youtube and Twitter are already banned)
Key Findings

1. Global internet freedom declined for the 11th consecutive year. The greatest deteriorations were documented in Myanmar, Belarus, and Uganda, where state forces cracked down amid electoral and constitutional crises. Myanmar’s 14-point score decline is the largest registered since the Freedom on the Net project began.

2. Governments clashed with technology companies on users’ rights. Authorities in at least 48 countries pursued new rules for tech companies on content, data, or competition over the past year. With a few positive exceptions, the push to regulate the tech industry, which stems in some cases from genuine problems like online harassment and manipulative market practices, is being exploited to stifle free expression and gain greater access to private data.

3. Free expression online is under unprecedented strain. More governments arrested users for nonviolent political, social, or religious speech than ever before. Officials suspended internet access in at least 20 countries, and 21 states blocked access to social media platforms. Authorities in at least 45 countries are suspected of obtaining sophisticated spyware or data-extraction technology from private vendors.

4. China ranks as the worst environment for internet freedom for the seventh year in a row. Chinese authorities imposed draconian prison terms for online dissent, independent reporting, and mundane daily communications. The COVID-19 pandemic remains one of the most heavily censored topics. Officials also cracked down on the country’s tech giants, citing their abuses related to competition and data protection, though the campaign further concentrated power in the hands of the authoritarian state.

5. The United States’ score declined for the fifth consecutive year. False, misleading, and manipulated information continued to proliferate online, even affecting public acceptance of the 2020 presidential election results. The new administration took promising steps to enforce stronger protections for internet users.

6. State intervention must protect human rights online and preserve an open internet. The emancipatory power of the internet depends on its egalitarian nature. To counter digital authoritarianism, democracies should ensure that regulations enable users to express themselves freely, share information across borders, and hold the powerful to account.
Freedom on the Net measures the level of internet freedom in 70 countries. Each country receives a numerical score from 100 (the most free) to 0 (the least free), which serves as the basis for an internet freedom status designation of FREE (100-70 points), PARTLY FREE (69-40 points), or NOT FREE (39-0 points).

Ratings are determined through an examination of three broad categories:

A. OBSTACLES TO ACCESS: Assesses infrastructural, economic, and political barriers to access; government decisions to shut off connectivity or block specific applications or technologies; legal, regulatory, and ownership control over internet service providers; and independence of regulatory bodies.

B. LIMITS ON CONTENT: Examines legal regulations on content; technical filtering and blocking of websites; other forms of censorship and self-censorship; the vibrancy and diversity of the online environment; and the use of digital tools for civic mobilization.

C. VIOLATIONS OF USER RIGHTS: Details legal protections and restrictions on free expression; surveillance and privacy; and legal and extralegal repercussions for online activities, such as prosecution, extralegal harassment and physical attacks, or cyberattacks.
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 have been left without internet access as a consequence of the conflict with Russia
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 Magnum (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

• 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”
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

“Any social network that employs moderators should be required to make it impossible to share posts flagged as false.”

Section 101

A total of 108 voters in 636 hours

- 3 votes (3%)
- 16 votes (15%)
- 15 votes (14%)
- 60 votes (57%)
- 12 votes (11%)

Section 102

A total of 73 voters in 636 hours

- 2 votes (3%)
- 11 votes (15%)
- 8 votes (11%)
- 40 votes (33%)
- 6 votes (9%)
Internet Addiction/Excessive Use

- Some liken compulsive computer use to pathological gambling
- Traditional definition of addiction:
  - Compulsive use of harmful substance or drug
  - Knowledge of its long-term harm
- Some people spend 40-80 hours/week on the Internet, with individual sessions lasting up to 20 hours
Is Internet Addiction Real?

• Kimberly Young created test for Internet addiction
  – Sample question: “Have you repeatedly made unsuccessful efforts to control, cut back, or stop Internet use?”
  – Patients who answer “yes” to at least 5 of 8 questions may be addicted

• Arguments against it being an addiction
  – Computer use is generally considered a positive activity
  – Do not need more to function; we don’t develop a ‘tolerance’
  – Excessive use does not lead to criminal activity
  – More accurate to call excessive use a compulsion
Algorithms to promote engagement

• Large, popular social media platforms use algorithms to increase user engagement

• Proposed content is designed to keep the user on the website longer
  – It also often becomes more extreme as the user follows the suggestions

• Other stimuli increase use by offering small and frequent dopamine hits (likes, retweets)
Vote

Do you believe that internet addiction is real?
A: Yes
B: No

Does society bear an ethical responsibility for excessive internet use/internet addiction?
A: Yes
B: Somewhat
C: No

Should we hold tech companies accountable?