Internet Censorship Essay, Research Paper

Is Internet Censorship Needed?

Internet censorship seems to be the target of many debates nowadays in the U.S. due to the rising popularity of the internet and the large amounts of pornography, warez, illegal drugs, and general threats to society. It is a very hard subject to handle, after all no one really is in charge of the internet, and in fact no one really owns it except perhaps the ?millions of people throughout the world who contribute to it in various ways? (Burton). The argument for censorship has been going on for at least 5 years now and no one really sees an answer being had anytime soon. Sure getting rid of all the unwanted content on the internet would perhaps make it more productive but can you stifle someone?s rights like that? The government thought so at one point and tried to pass a law to help filter the internet only to have it found unconstitutional soon after. So many people are affected by the internet either in the business place or at home it is going to be very hard to find a solution that satisfies everyone so maybe we should not censor it and just leave it how it is. Internet censorship may prove to make the internet more productive but by censoring it you would be bringing unwanted solutions upon people and also cripple their rights.

Sexually exploited material on the internet is in fact not a threat to our children and need not be filtered. One of the biggest arguments for internet censorship is by parents that do not want their kids corrupted by pornography on the internet. If you think about it though, how much of the internet is actually sexually explicit material? The amount of business pages, school pages, personal homepages, and computer related web pages far outweigh the amount of sexually explicit material. Miller agrees saying ?Compared to the overall size of the Web, however, the proportion of sites that are devoted to sexually explicit material is small? (157). Although the actual amount of pornography sites on the web is small they are some of the most profitable e-businesses. ?Despite the small number of Web sites devoted to sexually explicit material, commercial pornography sites are among the most profitable sites on the Web. In 1998, commercial pornography sites garnered between $750 million and $1 billion? (Miller 158). So if you tried to censor these sites you would be preventing people from making a living and denying their right to entrepreneurship. Since entrepreneurship helped found this country no one can deny someone that. Also has anyone thought what would happen to all the people who do intentionally visit these sites every day who are adults? ?Nine million people visit sexually explicit Web sites each day according to The New York Times? (Miller 158). With the amount of legit people who look at these sites they would be missed. A lot of the activity on the internet has to do with the use of search engines and arguers for censoring the internet claim that pornographic sites are all over and you can?t tell the difference from other sites. What they fail to realize that anytime you use a search engine and bring up your results it has a description for each page. So if it is a pornographic site it will normally let you know that via the description. By banning, or filtering these sites the internet would be much more productive, but at the same time restricting the rights and wants of the people too. Since you can still find resources you need if you are a competent computer user and put your mind to it the people?s rights far outweigh the need to ban sexually explicit material.

The CDA (Communications Decency Act) and the COPA (Children Online Protection Act) are both bad examples of government regulation. In 1996 the CDA was passed stating that it was prohibited to ?knowingly transmit any communication which is obscene or indecent, knowing that the recipient of the communication is under [eighteen] years of age? (Miller 68). It also ?prohibited knowingly sending or displaying to a person under eighteen years of age any communication that, in context, depicts or describes, in terms patently offensive as measured by contemporary community standards, sexual or excretory activities or organs? (Miller 68). A year later a suit was filed against the CDA by 17 organizations and it was found to be unconstitutional under the 1st amendment. They said it was nothing more than a broad suppression of speech that was aimed at adults. Not only did it violate those adult?s rights but this law is awfully vague. It doesn?t define any terms in its definition. After the CDA the government drafted a new bill, the COPA. The government took the complaints from the CDA and tried to fix them by saying that the COPA applies to the web only, only commercial purposes, and only applies to harmful communications. They did not do anything about the 1st amendment though and once again it was found to violate the 1st amendment and the 5th amendment now in 1999. It was infringing on the 5th amendment by being so vague still. A lot of sites are starting to comply with the COPA even though it was found unconstitutional because the government still supports it. The CDA and COPA are both bad ideas and attempts by the government to filter the internet and show that government?s regulation won?t work because it brings unwanted solutions.

By placing the PICS rating system in place the internet would be limited in content and taking away people?s rights to expression. PICS stands for the Platform of Internet Content Selection, and originated from the people who actually designed the World Wide Web while the Communications Decency Act was being thought up by the government. They thought that instead of banning what people can put on the internet the user could just block it on his end. Then ?Everybody could then carve out his or her own zone of comfort on the Internet, with just the right mix of Puritanism and prurience? (Marshall). It?s very close to the CDA but it does not conflict with the freedom of speech amendment. PICS is basically a set of ratings that can be used for a different set of rating systems to filter the internet. Since it is only a format and not actually a rating system it will only work if the sites are rated by the publisher themselves or by a 3rd party. Rating bureaus are a good example of 3rd party raters, they rate sites then people subscribe to them if the bureau fits them. Like a Christian rating bureau would appeal to a Christian family. Some people believe that PICS is a lot like the V-chip. It?s true they are similar but their differences are very notable. The V-chip is a chip that is put in all TV?s larger than 13? by the FCC that blocks the display of television programming based upon its rating. There are many links in the information food chain separating your personal computer from the source of information. And what you see on the Internet can potentially be filtered at any of those points so you in fact are not in total control of what comes to your screen, unlike the V-chip. ?You can block material at your computer, but so can libraries, your employer, your internet service provider, your university, or even – depending on where you live – your nation-state. With the V-chip you control what comes on your television set. But with PICS the choice may not be yours? (Marshall). There is also one more problem with PICS, when internet is filtered you don?t know what you are not seeing. The companies that would provide the blocking services would have to hide their list of what they are blocking or else they would lose their edge. They wouldn?t have a service to provide. So lets say a public library is using a certain business to filter they have no idea what they are actually blocking. PICS seems to be good solution since it doesn?t compromise the freedom of expression and it filters out unwanted material, but overall PICS is an unwanted and unethical solution. It filters not only unwanted material but also a lot of material that is useful and you won?t even know you are missing it.

If the internet is censored then all American?s rights to freedom of expression would be in jeopardy. We either assume the government is going to be regulating the internet or some kind of public company will be doing the filtering. If the government would be the one regulating the internet via CDA, for example, then a lot of people who are in the pornography business would definitely lose their rights to express themselves. The CDA prohibited the sending of indecent or obscene telecommunications knowingly to anyone under the age of 18. It was found unconstitutional since it violated the first amendment. If filtering was left up to the public, in the form of businesses, such as the use of PICS it would also be at risk. Let?s take a look at this a little closer. With PICS they want to have a variety of rating systems but that is not how the computer industry operates. Everything in the internet industry is done by a few major companies such as: operating systems, software, printers, browsers, computer manufacturers, scanners, monitors, and speakers. ?The idea that there will be a great multiplicity of rating systems may also be deceptive. Despite the possibility of an infinite variety of rating systems for a multitude of different cultural perspectives, everything we know about the computer and internet industries tells us that pressures lead not toward multiplicity but toward concentration? (Marshall). So just by knowing the industry itself you know its going to be ruled by about four or five companies. The internet and site blocking fields would demand a larger variety of options in the field but economic pressures and the need to create economies of scale would be too high and overpower it. The economies of scale would definitely be required in this field though. Since only a few companies would be filtering and censoring every part of the internet would be so time consuming, making it impossible for a small company. You would also have to have a lot of customers or subscribers to make any money as a site blocking company. Now you see why the industry would be so concentrated, and being controlled by a few major companies really limits the consumer?s choices. Since their choices of who to subscribe to are limited they don?t have a lot of options and a lot of peoples sites would get filtered out by the few companies. With the public doing the regulating we should not focus so much on the government and reconsider our values of free speech and expression to better understand our goals and what we need to censor.

It is easy to see that any form of regulation or filtering of the internet will in fact bring unwanted solutions and conditions to the people and in most cases stomp on their rights as a citizen. The COPA and CDA prove that any government regulation is basically unacceptable because it can never satisfy everyone who contributes to the internet and they can?t just make a law and say deal with it since they don?t own or run the internet. So maybe we should stop focusing on the government and look towards the public on this issue, since they will be the ones that will end up doing the regulating if we go that route. Another question that comes to mind is: do we actually need censorship? If you think about it, all censorship really does is make the internet a little more productive and gets rid of a small amount of pornography. This is definitely not a good reason to give up your rights and that?s why internet censorship is a very unwanted and unethical solution.

84d

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