Internet Censorship Essay, Research Paper

Internet Censorship

Surfing the Internet is like strolling through a library. With just one click of the

mouse, a person can enter an amazing world of information. The Internet takes away the

inconvenience of having to drive to the public library, plus, the Internet is open

twenty-four hours a day. But, not only can a person research information on the Internet,

he can shop for products, read the latest news and stocks, meet new people, not only in

the United States, but in other countries as well, look for a job, and more. With the many

application of the Internet, so many more opportunities for individuals exist. Also, a new

meaning of ?It?s A Small World After All? comes to mind when surfing through the World

Wide Web. But not all is grand and spectacular in the Internet world. The Internet has

been a major concern of the American people and government for the last few years with

controversies over certain types of web sites displayed over the Internet including

pornography, hate group web sites, ?inappropriate? literature, and other various kinds of

web sites. Their main concern for these types of web sites is that this material is easily

accessible to a young, impressionable audience. Some believe that censorship of the

Internet is not the best solution. There are other alternatives to censorship that won?t

violate the free speech clause as stated in the First Amendment.

First of all, the reason why censorship is not the best solution is because the

censorship of expressions of speech is a violation of the First Amendment of the United

States Constitution. This argument is supported by the United States Supreme Court

ruling in the landmark case of American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) v. Janet Reno.

?On June 26, 1997, the Supreme Court held in ACLU v. Reno that the Communication

Decency Act, which would have made it a crime to communicate anything ?indecent? on

the Internet, violated the First Amendment? (ACLU) This ruling declared that the Internet

is entitled to the highest level of free speech protection. In other words, anything printed

on the Internet deserves the same amount of protection as any book or magazine that is

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sold at a store or available at the local library; this is why surfing the net is similar to going

to the public library.

Although the Communication Decency Act (CDA) was declared unconstitutional,

a supporter of the act, Senator J. James Exon, did have good intentions in trying to come

up with a solution for the Internet problem. The main goal of the CDA was to protect

children from the ?indecent? material accessible on the net. I think that protecting the

children is a very crucial element that must be considered in developing the best solution,

however, not at the expense of free speech. Abridging the First Amendment right of free

speech is the flaw associated with the CDA, which is the reason why it is wrong.

Another reason why Internet censorship should not go into effect is that the

methods of censorship including rating systems and filters are prejudice; rating systems do

not accurately judge. Rating systems are deficient because they will cause controversial

speech to be censored. According to the ACLU, ?Kiyoshi Kuromiya, founder and sole

operator of Critical Path AIDS Project, has a web site that includes safer sex information

written in street language with explicit diagrams, in order to reach the widest possible

audience? (ACLU). If his web site is rated, it will be in the same category as pornography

as a result of its references to sex and it will be blocked by a majority of the audience that

he wishes to view his web site. In all actuality, his Critical Path Aids Project web site is

just an informative speech about the prevention of AIDS, not pornography. This type of

rating system is not fair because even though his web site mentions sex or deals with sex,

it shouldn?t be considered pornography or placed in the same category as pornography.

Rating systems are simply unequipped to properly rate or judge the diversity of content

that is available on the Internet. To put it briefly, rating systems are based on taste and

opinion, which does not accurately fit the disposition of the general population.

One question that poses a problem with the rating system is how will foreign

material be rated? Since ?half of all Internet speech originates from outside the United

States,? how would American rating make sense to a Turk whose standards and beliefs are

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totally different from American culture (ACLU)?Despite all good intentions, the

application of rating systems is unsuitable for the Internet. The Internet isn?t like the

television where the Playboy channel can be clocked and the Discovery channel is kept

unblocked as well. There?s just too much information in cyberspace to keep tabs on.

Even if all controversial speech is blocked, it will still exist because hackers will always

have the ability and technology to escape through filters and establish their prohibited,

?x-rated? web sites.

Instead of using censorship, I recommend that the choice be left up to the Internet

user. The primary responsibility for determining what speech is appropriate or

inappropriate should remain with the individual Internet user. Let the individual censor

what he doesn?t want to see or read. When an individual logs onto the Internet, he has the

choice to double-click on the link that leads to pornography or to the commentary on the

Klu Klux Klan. Even though ?pornography had been the most controversial topic arising

from the use of the Internet in recent years, its availability on the Internet has caused fear

and a moral panic among almost everyone? (Elmer-Dewitt 35). I can understand this

outrage from the public against pornography on the Internet. It?s a scary thought to know

that a child can accidentally stumble onto a web site that is filled with pornography, but a

child can also accidentally come upon dad?s hidden stash of porno magazines the same

way. From my own experience, every time I log onto my e-mail server, my mailbox is full

of porno mail. I don?t even look at the junk mail; only delete the unwanted mail and block

the sender from ever sending me mail again. I wasn?t forced to look at the pornography

because I still had a choice to not look at the undesired material. And I chose not to look

at the material because my parents instilled in me values and morals.

As far as protecting children from the ?indecent? or ?controversial? material,

parents should take the responsibility for determining what their children should access on

the Internet. Parents already take on the responsibility of determining what their children

watch on television, listen to on the radio, and read; they should supervise where they surf

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on the Internet as well. Parents may act as if it is a big hassle to watch over their

children?s shoulder, but a small price to pay to protect them from the ?indecent? material

on the Internet. Perhaps parents need to educate their children more thoroughly about the

Internet and its dangers. Web sites that teach kids valuable tips on the net are available on

the Internet. The Federal Trade Commission, who provides one of these types of web

sites, has been a big supporter in protecting children on the Internet. Recently ?the

Children?s Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) was passed by the U.S. Congress in

November of 1998? (FTC). This act requires that operators of online services or web

sites must ?obtain parental consent prior to the collection, use, disclosure, or display of the

personal information of children? (FTC). This act just went into effect April 21, 2000.

From now on, privacy policies are required to be available through a link on every web

sites? homepage where general information about the web site is provided. COPPA is just

one of the few ways that children can be protected on the Internet. But, more

importantly, it is up to the parents of these children to supervise their activity on the net.

Since parents can control what children watch on television with a v-chip (violence

chip) that blocks certain channels, maybe parents can control what their children see on

the Internet with user-based programs that allow the parents to make their own list of

blocked sites, parents should be able to determine what sites they want blocked. It is very

important that the user-based software provide maximum user control. If the online

software companies have most of the control, the companies? rating system would

discriminate against or censor much of the content, as mentioned previously. ?There are

many programs available with parental control features, but sometimes this kind of

software goes too far and limits access to or censors inconvenient web sites, or filters

potentially educational materials regarding AIDS and drug abuse prevention? (Akdeniz).

This ties into the reason why censorship and rating systems are wrong.

Whether playing, shopping, studying, or just surfing, today?s children are taking

advantage of all that the Internet has to offer. At the same time, children are susceptible

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to the dangers of the Internet as well, including pornography and other inappropriate

material. Some propose that censorship is the best solution. I disagree with that proposal

because censorship of free speech is a violation of the First Amendment and the rating

systems and filters used to regulate content on the net creates discrimination and

censorship as well. The number one priority in creating a solution is the protection of

children, and this protection begins with the parents. Parents know best what material is

appropriate or inappropriate for their children. Parents have the responsibility to

determine what their children watch on television. Also, parents need to educate their

children about the dangers on the Internet and they need to explain to them why they

don?t want them to visit such web sites. Censorship of the Internet is just a ?quick-fix?

and inefficient solution to solving the Internet problem.

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