Internet Censorship Essay, Research Paper

Internet Censorship

There is a growing debate about censoring the internet. Some people think that the

internet is protected under the first ammendment and cannot be censored. Others think

that some of the material that is on the net needs to be filtered and regulated. The word

censorship is defined as examining any material and prohibiting what is objectionable,

according to Webster’s II dictionary. Censoring the internet is a violation of the first

ammendment rights of every citizen in the United States. There are two general truths

that some people feel are attitudes towards censoring the internet. The first is that very

few people admit to favoring it. The second is that no matter who you are, in a matter of

minutes spent surfing the net almost anyone can find something that they find to be

offensive. In fact, some web surfers feel that the truly inappropriate things are inspired

by one’s own religion. For example, the Nurenberg Files website showed pictures of

mangled fetuses with the photograph, name, and address of some abortion clinic doctors.

If someone were to kill one of the doctors then an ‘X’ was put over their picture. This

site may not harm a child, but it seems that the focus today is on what is inappropriate for

the child to see. What about the adults? A site like this “clearly acts to corrupt and

deprave the adults who take it seriously” (Brown 48).

Another reason for not censoring the internet is the psychological effects that it can

have on a child. The filtering of the internet can tell a child that adults do not trust them

to surf the net on their own. This can lead them to believe that they can not make their

own decisions, and that a computer determines what right and wrong is. These filters

also give off the impressions that the communities are unsafe and the school officials

have not got the know how to do their job. Many teachers try to teach their students

responsibility. This can be done in many ways, one of which is through the internet

policy in our schools. By not censoring the internet and trusting children to make the

right decisions they can get a boost of self-esteem that so many children need these days

(Nellen 53). The filtering devices can obstruct a teacher in their quest to teach their

students. For example, Ted Nellen wanted to use to obtain some information on the

AIDS virus to help him teach his class. He tried to get information of the internet at the

school he teaches at and found that to be impossible because the filtering devices that

were installed worked (Nellen 53).

Another question that needs to be asked is who are the people that are determining

whether a site should be filtered or not? Just because they find something offensive does

not mean that there is not some one out there who would find the site unoffensive. These

people can filter what is put on the internet, so what is stopping them from doing this sort

of thing in other areas of American culture. Filtering the internet is not the answer to the

problem. Children and adults should be educated on what is right and wrong on the

internet and not treated like they are criminals (Nellen 53).

The software that is available for the purpose of internet filtering and blocking has

been able to block out certain web sites, but the web is always changing and the software

is outdated so fast that censoring that way is not worth it. Another way to censor is to

leave it up to the internet server. Even they cannot keep up with the growing number of

sites and monitor each and every one. These undesirable sites are not easily found unless

a specific word is typed in as a search engine or if the web site is known. However, those

who are for censoring the internet all have the same argument, which is that the obscene

sites will cause some kind of unacceptable behavior that will lead to violence. They feel

the software is a good thing even though it becomes obselete within a short period of

time.

When a person subscribes to an internet provider they are receive with a few

services. The first one is the use web itself. The user can see postings made by the

internet provider or by other people. A user can access any website he or she wants as

long as they know the website’s address. Another option that internet users have is the

ability to send messages across the web to another person by sending them an e-mail.

E-mail is included in most internet servers’ packages. The last major service that the

internet provides is Usenet News. Usenet News is where all the issues of today are

discussed by internet users. These kinds of things are what some critics want to censor.

E-mail is just like using the telephone and phone calls are not censored, so the internet

should not be either. If the whole story cannot be presented on the internet then the

Usenet News is useless because no one can get all the facts. The web itself is where

advertisements and offers take place and the only way to find these offensive sites is to

type in a key word that a child must already know. On the internet a user can put up

signs, banners, ads, displays, etc. of anything they want. The press always uses the first

ammendment as their justification for what they do and the internet users should also

receive the same benefits from the first ammendment as the reporters do.

There are three main ways that the attempt to block obscene sites from children. The

first is software that goes through a list of offensive sites and if the one using the

computer feels the site is inappropriate then the software will block the site. The second

is software that looks for words that could be connected to pornography or violence and

chooses when to deny access to the site. The last one is provided by the internet server

and blocks out portions of the site that are inappropriate (The Economist 84). However,

there are new sites popping up all the time and the software cannot keep up with the

growing number of sites. Children can just type in any word and get a whole list of sites

related to that topic. In some cases the blocking of anything to do with that topic can

prove to be anything but helpful. For example, America Online’s word-screening

software caused a forum on cancer to be shut down because the word “breast” was

mentioned. The White House web site was shut off because the word couple was

mentioned (The Economist 84). In addition, net minders like Surf Watch have no

official watcher to tell the users what sites are being blocked. Surf Watch seems to be

the leader in the struggle to keep inappropriate sites away from the eyes of children. The

installation is easy for anyone, even the computer illiterate. Surf Watch will block up to

sixteen categories in four main categories which are violence and hate speech, gambling,

sexually intended items, and illegal drugs and alcohol. Search Watch will not allow any

search engines that are considered sexually explicit. At the present time some of these

net watchers are not free and some people do not want to pay the money to own one. A

simple solution to the idea of censoring the internet for everyone with a computer to be

given one of these net watchers free with the purchase of a computer. The government

has a good reason to be involved with the controlling access operation because:

As networked digital communications become more prevalent, consumers will be

faced with justifying the purchase of a PC and modem or computer-powered

television. If that purchase comes with the added cost of access-control software,

there’s an inherent disincentive to embrace interactive technologies (Ratcliffe 16).

As long as the system allows the computer owner to change his or her list of

inappropriate sites, then it does not violate the first ammendment right.

In order to make this access control system available threre are a few simple things

that must be done. First, the access control API would need to be available for all the

web browsers and microsoft and apple computers. An ambitious company could

promote the API as freeware and allow for the option of add ons to this free piece of

software. However there is a problem, getting support for such a plan. Using the

International Telecommunications Union the United Nations could get a global license to

this kind of technology and distribute it through the International Telecommunications

Union for an annual cost. After this was all squared away the individual countries could

decide what needs to be installed and how to download additions to the program

(Ratcliffe 16).

A solution to this problem was presented in Paris in May of 1996. The meeting was

attended by a plethora of internet and computer firms. They decided that self-rating was

the way to go when it came to preventing the children from seeing inappropriate sites.

The Platform for Internet Content Selection was the name given to this idea and it allows

internet providers to put a rating on their contents using software that runs on either the

users on computer or doing it through the internet provider, which is more difficult to get

around. This allows for people to write what they want on the internet, but what they

write may not be seen as appropriate and will be blocked (The Economist 84).

Another argument for censoring the internet is the pornographic sites that are

easily accessible can cause children to view things that are inappropriate. In 1996

President Clinton signed the Telecommunications Act which included the

Communications Decency Act. The Communications Decency Act was intended to

protect young children from those sites which are not in their best interests to see (Lewis

114). However, there are problems with this law. The Telecommunications Act of 1996

does not successfully get the job done. Any child can still find material that is not meant

for them to see. The act says that adults can communicate using any words they want to

as long they are careful not to be accused of harassment. These words and phrases can

seem sexual to one person, but just casual conversation to another. The laws that were

made to protect minors from offensive material are very unclear. The term “indecent”

that was used in items aimed at protecting adults as well as children is unconstitutionally

vague (Sjoerdsma 301).Lewis says:

It is also stupid, because it assumes that Congress can regulate an international

computer network that is 99 percent private and that is composed of users who are

more than 50 percent non-American. It assumes it can outsmart my two teenagers

technologically, and it is offensive because it assumes that the Government can

provide a better moral compass for my kids than my wife and I are already

providing (84).

Lewis feels that the best way to prevent inappropriate material from being viewed on the

internet is to make all the users identifiable (Lewis 84). This idea may work for a while,

but false identifications can be entered and if that is said to be impossible all anyone has

to do is look at all the under twenty-one people who have id’s saying they are twenty-one.

It would only be a matter of time before fake id’s would be available for internet use.

Edwin Diamond said “It doesn’t take a magnifying glass to find hard-core

pornography on the Internet…and since many youngsters can navigate circles around their

elders on the Net, some adults are in near panic” (Diamond 30). Pornography is defined

as material, films, printed matter, or devices dealing with sexual poses or acts considered

indecent by the public. Pornography is censored in almost every form of communication.

Movies, books, and even stores that specialize in sexual toys, movies, and magazines are

being censored in this day and age in stores that make a profit from selling sexual

material. Pornography is not something that a user justs happens to discover. The

pornographic sites need to be triggered by a key word typed into the search engine.

Children who find these sites have to have some knowledge of the topic of sex in order to

type in a word that would lead to a sexual site. Of course there are accidental discoveries

of these sites, but any further exploration is done by the user. Many people want to

regulate these sites, but they do not realize the amount of money it costs or the time it

involves in order to effectively censor the net. Moreover, studies have been conducted

that show that pornography is represents only a small portion of the entire internet traffic.

Steve Lloyd feels regulation of the net is not very practical because “It’s virtually

impossible to regulate the net because of the global nature of this communications

device. It would mean monitoring every phone call into the Internet which is impossible

to do” (39).

The internet was designed to be able to operate under any condition. The internet

service providers have found it very costly to censor portions of newsgroups without

blocking the whole site. Pornography is a very miniscule amount of the internet user’s

interest (Gidari). Gidari feels that internet regulation is a futile thought because :

Anything as massive as the global system of interconnected networks that is the

internet can not be “regulated” in any meaningful manner. The very nature of the

internet precludes its effective regulation. It was designed to be a self-healing

network of diverse platforms capable of opreating under the most adverse of

conditions – nuclear holocaust” (Gidari).

If what Albert Gidari says is true then the internet can not be censored because that

would defeat the whole purpose of its creation. The following editorial appeared in the

Knight Ridder Tribune News Service. These articles are right on the money as to why

the internet should not be censored. Here is the first article in part:

Knowledge at the fingertips. That’s the charm of the Internet, the global network of

computers that allows anyone with the capability, even a grade-schooler, to tap into

vast pools of information at any time.The Internet, indeed, may be the closest

society has come yet to free and equal access to information for all. The relative

ease of access is also the Internet’s bane. There is no telling the range of

information one could be exposed to or the nature of activities one could be drawn

into, knowingly or unknowingly. With children, controlling what they see once

they are on-line becomes a problem as well. Pornography on computer networks

and unsavory characters on chat lines have garnered much attention, but consider

the three eighth-graders arrested recently for allegedly plotting to bomb their junior

high school in the Syracuse area of New York. They gained information on

materials and how to build the bombs from the Internet, and police say they were

serious about following through. They had set off a test bomb in a field behind

an elementary school. As has been pointed out many times, an interested person

could gather the same information from a public library. True enough, but space

and money preclude public libraries from stocking every piece of available

information. The process of selection, based on the principle of community

standards and needs, imposes some limitation. Global computer networks bypass

even such minimal limitation. Being plugged into the global network is a release

from traditional barriers to knowledge, and with the vast pools of information

come multitudes of opportunities for misuse. Computer-inspired pranks and

outright crime, from murder to fraud, are as likely as the potential for beneficial

use. As the network industry matures, incidents such as the youngsters’ bomb plot

will continue to invite serious efforts to reduce abuses.

Provisions in the new telecommunications bill such as the ban against

pornography and indecent material directed at minors are one form of response. In

a free system such as the Internet, however, monitoring data from computers

worldwide may be next to impossible, and strict content regulation would destroy

the freedom that gives the Internet its value. Personal computers have brought

global links down to individual levels. In time, from their very usage, new

technologies generate new levels of public awareness and their own standards of

use consistent with the constitutional rights of all users. In that vein, the market’s

response in developing software allowing parents or operators to block access to

certain services is most reasonable and practical. The only guarantee against

egregious abuse of the global computer networks, in the end, is a well-developed

ethic of personal responsibility, in which users and those who provide the services

are mindful of the potential for mischief (Knight Ridder 212).

This article was provided as a way of showing the reader why the internet should not be

censored. The solution is not in censoring the internet, but in teaching children what the

difference between right and wrong is. Like the article says “In a free system such as the

Internet, however, monitoring data from computers worldwide may be next to

impossible, and strict content regulation would destroy the freedom that gives the

Internet its value” (Knight Ridder 212). The second article is also pro internet freedom

as well. Here is the article to clarify any misconceptions about this paper’s purpose:

Like the Maytag repairman in the TV commercials, Congress is itching to fix

something that isn’t broken: the Internet and online services. As part of the vast

new telecommunications bill, both House and Senate are on the brink of making it

a federal crime to expose minors to naughty words or pictures in cyberspace.

Double-clicking the “send” icon could become a dangerous act. Jail terms and

huge fines would be slapped on anyone caught “knowingly” transmitting indecent

material to minors, or to any freely accessible area of a computer network. Reports

from the online front indicate that dirty talk and sexually graphic images are far

less prevalent, or available, than the recent congressional lather on the topic would

lead you to believe. In fact, the glossy mags behind the counter at any convenience

store are probably more accessible to the young. So far, though, nothing has served

to turn back this movement. Never mind that the Justice Department insists

existing laws are adequate to combat illegal pornography, in whatever form. Never

mind that, given the global nature of the Internet, any attempt to enforce a national

standard of decency is doomed. Never mind that the whole push to set federal

government up as cyber-censor runs contrary to the prevailing philosophy: Get

intrusive federal bureaucrats off the backs of citizens and trust in the magic of the

free market to solve problems. The maddening thing is this is one case where the

profit motive “is” riding to the rescue. Ever since the alarms first went up, the

software industry’s wizards have been churning out programs that enable adults to

monitor and block objectionable material. Not even a flaming \_ e-mail parlance

for a tongue-lashing \_ from House Speaker Newt Gingrich has made much

difference. Like many folks, Speaker Gingrich regards the congressional

crackdown on the online world as an assault on every citizen’s basic right to free

discourse. Over the summer and in recent weeks, it appeared the House would

recommend far less intrusive measures than the Senate. But the push for more

reasonable steps such as online warning signs has faltered. What hope is there of

keeping cyberspace as free as possible? A presidential veto would be the quick

way; court cases and the inevitable discovery that the harsh restrictions just aren’t

enforceable would be the long, costly way. It would be better if a public outcry

convinced Congress now that its attempts to curb Net-surfing are about as foolish as

ordering the waves not to come rolling in (Knight Ridder 214).

The two of these articles were intended to be a supplement to the main idea of this paper.

They are two examples that further show why the internet can not be censored.

The obscene material found on the internet has caused some decisions to be made

about what violates community standards. A private bulletin board operator in California

was prosecuted in Tennessee for making some material available to a member of the

Memphis community. The operator in California was found guilty by the Memphis

judicial system. The jury ruled that local community were comprimised when the

offensive material was made available to the postal worker from their community. Even

though this sort of thing may be legal in California or on the web, the Memphis

community felt that this sort of thing was inappropriate. According to Harvard Law

School Professor Laurence Tribe, even with the ruling in this case “The question of

community standards hasn’t been adequately solved solved in any medium” (Quittner

56).

The internet should not be censored. There are many other ways to solve the problem

of inappropriate web sites on the internet and censorship is not the best one. Educating

people on the uses and misuses of the internet is one of the best ways to filter the world

wide web as well as others already mentioned. A small group of people can not be

allowed to dictate to the rest of the world what they can and can not view or express on

the internet.

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