ITC331 Cyber Ethics

Nationwide Internet censorship in the United Kingdom

A Brief History of Nationwide Censorship

Many countries have tried to censor the internet since it's inception, some mandatory, and some voluntary, both in the form of opt-in and opt-out schemes. These schemes have had varying degrees of success, albeit all or most of these censors are easily avoided by the populace. Among western countries, such as Australia, America and the UK, there have been numerous recent attempts to censor the internet, often through the use of laws regarding the content that can be hosted online, and filters.

Obviously, there are numerous benefits and issues that come as a result of censorship, only some of which are ethical. This paper will focus on Nationwide Censorship of the Internet as a whole, specifically the recent legislation introduced by the UK government led by David Cameron that, since the end of 2013, which required all UK ISP's to censor traffic going to websites that have been categorised as belonging to certain groups, including child pornography websites, piracy websites, and LGBT lifestyle websites, and an optional extended list of sites that isn't mandatory to censor.

As a result, the UK filter affects, on a larger scale, every single person capable of using the internet within the UK, whether this is a UK citizen or a visiting foreigner. That being said, The four major ISP's in the UK have stated that if users wish to not participate in the filter they can "Opt-out" by indicating to their ISP that they don't want to have their content filtered. However, this doesn't stop their traffic from being routed through the filtering software, which may potentially be abused.

Ethical issues and implications

As with any issue regarding censorship, there are numerous controversial pros and cons of internet filtering, especially mandatory, nationwide censorship.

One of the most common defences is that filtering will help protect children from issues that could potentially harm them, such as pornography. The arguments for stopping children from viewing pornography range from protecting youths from developing adverse sexual habits to protecting youths from deep psychological issues. There have been numerous studies done on the subject of youths and pornography with varying results. For example, Luder et al noted that among youths 16-20, exposure to pornography only led to the youths being more likely to neglect using condoms during sex (2011, p. 1034), and a similar study proposed that there isn't a significant link between pornography exposure and high levels of sexual aggression among the majority of American men (Malamuth, Addison, & Koss, 2000, p. 85). However, another study discovered that youths 12-17 with internet access had sexual intercourse at a much lower age than participants without (Kraus & Russell, 2008, p. 166).

That being said, it doesn't necessarily mean that filtering their access to the internet will aid in stopping youths from engaging in sexual intercourse. Collins et al discovered that merely watching sex on TV through mainstream media can increase the rate at which youths behave sexually to youths up to 17 months older (2004, p. 287).

Similarly, one of the proposed aims of the filter is to lower the rates of child abuse online. Child abuse via the internet is a growing and troubling problem. In 1998 the FBI had roughly 700 cases open dealing with online child abuse, but that number had over quadrupled to roughly 2850 cases by 2000 (Nordland, 2001), and the writers of a child sexual abuse report noted that in a personal correspondence with Freda Briggs on the 5th of January 2006, that almost 4 in 5 offenders charged with downloading or possessing child abuse images had abused children near to the time of downloading or possessing (Ronken & Johnston, 2012, p. 39), and with over 100 000 requests per day for child abuse images or videos and at least 100 000 websites offering child abuse images or videos (TopTenReviews.com, n.d.).

However the argument could be made that the filter isn't an effective way of fighting these sites, and cases, as the filter isn't actually taking down these sites, most of which aren't within the UK (Powell, 2013), but rather blocking, or attempting to block access to these websites. However it has been noted that the filter is relatively simple to bypass by using publicly available services, such as TOR, public DNS's and VPN providers not within the UK or Great Britain (Egan, 2013).

The filtering system also provides the ability to block "gay and lesbian lifestyle" (Jivanda, 2013), whilst this is because it is claimed under the category of "sexual education", however numerous studies, such as Hatzenbuehler (2009), and Mustanski, & Liu, (2013), agree that LGBT vicitimisation increases the susceptibility to suicidal behaviour. Whilst this is only an optional feature, not part of the most basic package but rather an additional option, given that if a youths guardian believes is necessary to block these sites, it is likely that the household won't be open to their sexuality, and their access to online LGBT sites may be a contributing factor to lowering their likelihood of developing mental disorders or suicidal thoughts, and it is arguable that preventing the death of it's citizens (Through suicide or not, LGBT or straight), is a core responsibility of a government.

The filter will also attempt to censor extremist websites, via a URL list curated by the Counter Terrorism Internet Referral Unit (Jowitt, 2011). As noted above, protecting it's citizens is a core responsibility of the government.

Many extremist and terrorist organisations gain their primary source of membership through the use of recruitment, with one study finding that the majority of white supremacists were recruited in as opposed to electing to join without prompting (McCurrie, 1998). It could therefore be argued that in eliminating one of the most popular tools for recruiting the prevalence of extremism will drop within the UK, with a 2001 study discovering that Nazi Skinheads focused their recruitment efforts on youths (Blazak, R), With Gerstenfeld, Grant, & Chiang (2003) noting the internet is highly suited to recruitment efforts on youths online.

Yet another ethical issue is that of the possibility that citizens right to free speech may be impacted, or that the ruling government may use the filtering system to subvert or attack sites that would not otherwise fall under the filtering system guidelines, such as an opposing political party. Such a possibility will remain a possibility until the filter is completely removed, due to the nature of the filter, primarily being a collected list of URLs and websites that are deemed to have fallen under certain categories, such as pornography, extremism and child abuse.

Options and Solutions

One of the most obvious possible solutions to the ethical issues raised in implementing a nationwide filter is to simply not implement a nationwide internet filter. This instantly removes any and all ethical issues that arise as a result of filtering the nation. However, this also comes with the caveat that none of the positive effects of implementing a filter. Therefore the ethical benefits of a national filtering scheme must be weighed against the negatives in order to properly evaluate whether or not using no national filtering scheme is a good solution, or indeed the best.

Using the above scheme would also allow the UK government to still control certain numbers of online sites via physical/legal takedowns on servers hosting particularly illegal content, such as child abuse content or extremist content, especially considering the vast majority of UK based sites hosting such content are taken down within two hours (Powell, 2013)

As has been noted above, a core responsibility of the government is to protect it's citizens. Many extremist attacks throughout history have been targeted at large numbers of people (9/11 Attacks and Boston marathon bombings in America, 7/7 London bombings in the UK), and blocking access to extremist websites will result in a lowered number of available extremists, especially given that youths are predominantly committing hate crime (Steinberg, Brooks, & Remtulla, 2003). This would logically lead to a lower overall rate of extremist attacks and hate crimes.

A second obvious option to the UK Government is to keep the current implementation. As has been discussed above, this implementation has numerous flaws and ethical issues, however it also has a number of benefits, as has been discussed above.

 The final proposed solution is to reverse the current implementation of participation in the national filtering scheme. By using an opt-in model as opposed to an opt-out model many of the benefits of the scheme could be kept whilst avoiding some of the negatives. This implementation would allow families or religious people the ability to filter pornography (Or at least the majority of it online), from their connection, and suicidal or other at-risk people to remove topics from their connection that may cause harm to them, whilst at the same time allowing the majority of people in the UK to not have their content sent through the filtering software (And therefore put themselves at risk to the possible security risks, such as Man-In-The-Middle attacks or physical cable eavesdropping attacks).

Proposed Solution

Given the discussed ethical issues that the filter brings up, as well as the possible options available to the UK government, this paper recommends it implement an Opt-in Filter, with a separate, mandatory filter used for particularly illegal content, such as child abuse content sites and extremist sites, with the Opt-In filter having user controls to decide what exactly is blocked. This way, if a household wishes to block pornography, but not LGBT lifestyle websites, then they are more then able to, and likewise, a suicidal or otherwise at-risk person could block such websites, whilst still being able to view pornography or LGBT lifestyle websites, especially if the person was sucidal as a result of a social stigma from being LGBT, and as has been noted, both Mustanski, & Liu, (2013), and Hatzenbuehler (2009) agree that online websites lower the LGBT suicide rate.

At the same time, this option provides on at least some level, a blockage to those wishing to access content such as child abuse images or videos or extremist sites, therefore providing a significant number of the benefits of the current scheme, whilst ensuring that few of it's faults and ethical issues are kept.

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