Ethics of Encore

Much like most such research projects which are looked at under the lens of ethics, the authors of the Encore study only had good intentions in mind - to be able to better study and understand censorship, which is a very real problem effecting human beings. But that being said, the methods used to study this might not be ethical. Narayan and Zevenbergen discuss these methods and some of the consequences of the Encore study in their 2015 paper.

In particular, let us use a consequentialist approach to study it - when users unwittingly have Encore code injected into their browsers and they start sending requests for potentially sensitive websites, they are doing so *with* their IP addresses. This means that there is a high possibility that there are other external agencies taking note of the fact that certain individuals are visiting blocked sites, landing people on lists; all of this without the knowledge of the individual! As pointed out by Narayan and Zevenbergen, while there might be *some* precautions taken to mitigate harm, it is simply not enough in this context.

Keeping the principle of beneficence in mind, the pros should always outweigh the cons of any research with a possibility of risk to any individuals. In the case of Encore, the pros would be a better understanding of censorship and what kind of techniques different regimes may use to enforce censorship. Even though this is potentially useful information, it is information we get while possibly exposing many individuals to risk. It is also very difficult to identify very strong causal relationships with this data being mined - so we cannot even be sure of how "useful" the data might be, at least with any real levels of certainty.

Narayan and Zevenbergen raise up multiple points in their analysis of the ethical concerns of Encore, all of which help us reconsider what is considered ethical and what isn't in the rather nascent era of social data analysis.