Ethics of Encore - 2

The Encore research project by Burnett and Feamster (2015), like most other studies involving analysing or collecting human data off the internet, usually begin with good intentions. But more often than not the consequences of these studies can be complicated to assess and we end up over stepping the line of caution.

In particular, one of the biggest problems with the Encore study is consent. Individuals who end up having the code snippet on their browser or not always aware of the fact that they do have the code. This is a HUGE problem because it means humans are part of an experiment which they do not know about. But in the case of Encore, this becomes even more complicated; being part of this experiment can have very serious implications, because many regimes may not take so lightly to individuals repeatedly visiting blocked sites. In regimes without due process, this means that certain individuals could be prosecuted for a crime they did not know they committed! However good the intentions were, individuals are pretty much on their own at this point.

While the fact that consent was not asked for itself puts the research on very shaky grounds, using the beneficence principle we can further question it, where we do not really know the "usefulness" of the data being collected. While it is no doubt that censorship is a very real human problem, we do not know how much this study will go in either understanding it or circumventing it.

All in all while Encore is an impressive technical feat, to actually employ it over a network without consent means that it quickly starts to become unethical.