

A Case of Cyber Censorship

Omar Usman Khan

April 11, 2014

1 Background

One of the most popular definitions assigned to the internet is that it is simply “a network of networks”. While this definition can shed light on the architecture of the internet, it does not give any hint of how it is used. The internet can be used for a variety of purposes, where communication and easy access to information would be top of the list. Communication can be made through a variety of services like email applications, instant messaging, and the phenomena of social networking websites. Access to information can be made through various websites, search engines, scholarly journals and databases, etc. There is no doubt in the fact that the popularity of the internet has been attributed with the emergence of the world-wide-web. Through this, what we are seeing is the emergence of different entities that are offering information and services to the end-user. As an example, we can take the case of popular social networking websites, web-services like maps, ticket bookings, and even open source operating systems which can be built together and configured using tools and services that are only available on the world-wide-web.

But while the web has grown remarkably, so has it brought problems along with itself that have its origins in the “offline” world. Just like we are experiencing a phenomena of social-networking websites today, in the early 2000s, the internet world was introduced to the concept of blogs; a term derived from the words “web log”. The blog is a simple website that is maintained by an individual or groups who comment on events, media, and personal narrations.[1] The theme can vary from technology, politics, arts & sciences, or a mixture of all of them. The blog was suddenly a tool through which people could express their voices and be heard. Popular blogs would be inter-connected to one another, and at one time the popularity of blogs was even found to threaten the very existence of newspapers. At least in the United States, local newspapers were found to be dying a slow death that was attributed to blogs.[10]

The whole concept of the blog was simple; as publishing on the internet is free, and free is synonymous to freedom,

therefore why not use the internet to make voices heard which would otherwise not be possible in any form of media local to a specific country. Besides, the internet also allows a degree of anonymity which implies that an opinion can be spread into the wider world without putting at stake the lives of the opinion makers. This level of freedom was not welcomed by many countries. The BBC has reported numerous cases of arrests of bloggers in Iran in the same era who would write against the state machinery on topics of corruption or simply for expressing their political opinions. The first case was the arrest of Iranian journalist Sina Motalebi on 20 April 2003 for his writings against the then government. The most recent case is that of Hossein Derakhshan who was arrested in November 2008. Derakhshan’s case was covered by Amnesty International as well.[7] Another blogger Omid Raza Mir Sayafi died in prison in March 2009.[12] But despite state suppression, blogging in Iran has thrived.[5] Researchers in the University of Washington have confirmed 36 cases of bloggers who were arrested in 2007 alone around the world. The number of bloggers arrested the year before that was 12.[4] But even then, there may be many unreported cases.

This report will look briefly at how certain entities who are in legitimate and responsible positions may try to impose their will and ideology on everybody else. Their decision does not only hurt the people local to their origin, but may also have global impact.

2 Scenario

On the 24th of February, 2008, the BBC reported that Pakistan has blocked the popular video sharing youtube website.[6] It reported that the blockade was enforced because of content that was deemed offensive to Islam, a religion practiced by 98% of its population.

Practices by some governments to block websites are quite common in countries like china, the middle-east, and even in Pakistan, this had happened before,

when sites like google, yahoo, cnn, download.com, microsoft.com, bbc, and even espn remained block by the country's leading ISP, the PTCL on 3rd March 2007.[11] But despite being a common practice, the reason this news was of importance was the technique used by the government's Pakistan Telecommunication Authority which handled the blockade. The result was a global shutdown of the youtube website not only for users in Pakistan, but for everybody in the world for well around 3 hours. The loss may not have any monetary value to the consumers flocking the website, but it will be of significant impact to the owners of the website.

The way the blockade was made was by the Telecommunication Authority instructing internet service provider's throughout the country to re-direct the website's traffic to a cul-de-sac, a dead end. The re-direction leaked across its borders to a company sending internet traffic across Asia, and from there it spread to internet providers around the world. As the ban was through a responsible government authority, nobody gave it much attention.

The incident raised eyebrows both within Pakistan and around the world. For the outside world, it was surprising to see that a government with its own personal motives could so easily bring down services of a website which has a global reach. Within the country, people objected to the ban because the ban was placed for the wrong reasons; that the government was playing on the country's religious sentiments and trying to divert people's attentions from videos that had surfaced on the website showing mass rigging in the country's election held just six days earlier. In fact the latter seems more an appropriate theory because nearly a year later on July 21, 2009, the Daily Telegraph reported that the government announced a 14-year prison sentence to anybody who is caught sending jokes about the country's president via SMS, email, or blog.[13] This showed the intent of the government.

3 Stakeholders

The stake-holders involved in this scenario are the following:

- The **government of Pakistan** is a parliamentary form of government with the president as head of state and the prime minister as head of government. There are three elementary bodies of the government; the Executive (president & prime minister),

the legislative (parliament & ministries), and the judiciary.

- The **Ministry of IT & Telecoms** forms legislation for all sectors related to IT & telecommunications. These laws are then enforced by regulatory authorities like the electronic media authority or the telecommunication authority. In the case of decision to block youtube on 24th February, 2008, the decision came from this ministry. Usually the minister for IT belongs to the same political party that is running the government. The credentials of the head of ministry may not specifically relate to IT & telecoms.
- The **Pakistan Telecommunication Authority** is a government department which is responsible for enforcing laws for establishment, operation and maintenance of telecommunication companies in Pakistan and regulating the radio-frequency spectrum. In terms of the internet, it regulates domestic & international bandwidth through the PIE (Pakistan Internet Exchange) and/or alternative third-party services. Broadband and Internet service providers fall under this authority as well.[8]
- **Internet service providers** are an entity that offers customers access to the internet. The mode of connection can be through dial-up modem, broadband/DSL, wireless, or dedicated high-speed connections. ISP's are usually regulated and controlled by respective country's relevant departments.
- By the **common public**, we are referring specifically to website visitors or those who have been affected as a result of a block.
- Youtube as a service is used not only by free-lance video publishers, but also used by many universities, organisations, and media-outlets to put their content online. Any ban on youtube indirectly affects these **content publishers** as well. Youtube does not place any charge on content-publishers. However, it may earn revenue in the form of advertisements.
- **Website Service Providers**, in this case is youtube. This is the direct target. Many countries are known to have blocked access to certain websites. Google and China are a well known example of this. It is possible that a website service provider may become an unsuspected victim of a block because some of its members are found to have published sensitive/illegal material. An example of this is the blockage by the Pakistani government of the entire blogspot.com website just because a certain blog on

it was found to have sensitive material in it.[2] Another case is that of blockage by the Turkish government of wordpress.com for the same reason.[9]

4 Ethical Issues

With the scenario, a number of ethical issues are met with. For instance, should any quarter be allowed to control what we see, speak or hear? If yes, what should be the degree of control? Can any check be in place to question a decision made by any authority? Should penalties be enforced? We would look at some arguments that study the different aspects of it.

The proponents of censorship claim that it is necessary to suppress certain elements of speech that may be immoral or that are simply sensitive to ethnic or religious values. It is true that the web is abound with many material and media that may be of indecent nature. Such material is censored, and those found accessing or using it may be strictly penalized even in countries that are known for their freedom of expression and speech. Examples of such material may be child pornography, vulgar references to certain ethnicities, or even excessive violence that is showed in media. The same idea holds for online material. Material in the online world can be censored with the help of techniques such as blocking of IP addresses by an ISP or traffic redirection. Commercial filtering software are also available.

The difference both online and offline censorship is that since there are no borders on the world wide web, certain material that may be banned in a particular country can easily be found in a server in another country which has no such ban in place. In addition, there are well-known tools and methods that can circumvent restricted access to information such as proxy websites, anonymous proxies, or p2p software. Using these, one can definitely question the futility of censorship if it can be accessed through alternate ways.

Nevertheless, the ability to censor material has been exploited by various quarters, especially regimes which suppress free speech and who divert attention from their own failures for their own vested interests.

5 Conclusion

The issue of censorship on the internet is still a major issue for many third world countries, where regimes suppress sources of information for vested interests in the

name of national security or religious grounds. The reporters sans frontiers (reporters without borders) publishes an “enemies of the internet” which lists countries known as the worst examples of web censorship [3] and organises a world-day against cyber censorship every year on 12th of March. There are also other private efforts with significant followings which use public forums for raising their voice against web-censorship; for example the don’t block the blog [2].

References

- [1] Blog. Website: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog>.
- [2] Don’t block the blog. Website: <http://dbtb.org>.
- [3] Web 2.0 versus control 2.0; enemies of the internet. Website: <http://www.rsf.org/ennemis.html>.
- [4] Censorship: Record number of bloggers arrested. Website: <http://guardian.co.uk>, June 2008.
- [5] Iran’s bloggers thrive despite blocks. Website: <http://news.bbc.co.uk>, Dec 2008.
- [6] Pakistan blocks youtube website. Website: <http://news.bbc.co.uk>, February 2008.
- [7] Prisoner of conscience. Website: <http://www.amnesty.org>, December 2008.
- [8] Pakistan Telecommunication Authority. Broadband policy. Website: <http://www.pta.gov.pk>, 2004.
- [9] Allon Bar. Turkey explores the internet, along with restrictions. Website: <http://columbia.edu>.
- [10] Mark Harris. The american local newspaper is dead. long live the local blog. Website: <http://technology.timesonline.co.uk>.
- [11] Adil Najam. Google, yahoo, bbc, cnn and others websites blocked in pakistan as ptcl fumbles a censorship extravaganza. Website: <http://pakistaniat.com>, March 2007.
- [12] Hamid Tehrani. Omid reza mir sayafi, iranian blogger dies in prison. Website: <http://globalvoicesonline.org>, March 2009.
- [13] Isambard Wilkinson. Pakistan president asif zardari bans jokes ridiculing him. Website: <http://telegraph.co.uk>, July 2009.