**Should we consider VPN as a solution of removing communication barriers caused by censorship?**

The importance of the integrity of communication could not be reflected more in the clarity of disseminating information, and the cherry-picking of information to convey to the public, also known as censorship. Censorship is the restraint of expressing a speech or a message that is potentially harmful, sensitive, or inappropriate. As parties exercising censorships are free to define the term “inappropriate”, censorship actually limits the conveying of informative message when it is deemed “harmful” to the parties themselves, such as news of the Hong Kong protest which were banned in mainland China (Zhou, 2019). To bypass censorship, one main solution currently is the utilization of the Virtual Private Network (VPN), and I am going to argue that given its complexities, VPN could be a potential solution of facilitating communication despite technological barriers in between.

According to Symanovich (2019) who is an employee of the American software company Symantec, a VPN is a private network extended across a public Internet connection. When users connect to the internet without a VPN, the Internet Service Provider (ISP) provides a specific IP address to the user (Cook, 2017). ISPs are able to observe users’ online activity, and data transmitted on the network could be easily breached if necessary security measures are not properly implemented. However, when users connect to the internet via VPN, they direct the connection to a server somewhere else, and access the internet from there. Since the VPN service provider may have routers around the world, users’ activities are untraceable since users may access from any one of them. Also, VPN encrypts online traffic, which renders data unreadable. Therefore, VPN not only guarantees users’ privacy, but also security when surfing the Internet.

However, concerns still exist despite the benefits and conveniences the VPNs offer. VPN users noticed a flaw of communicating over the Internet via VPN: similar to ISP does, VPN service providers may track users’ online activity. Summers(2019) presented the statistics that 95% of VPN providers claimed that they do not log data, but do otherwise. Marks (2019) agreed with the fact that certain VPN service providers are able to store users’ activity based on their design architecture, and may even sell users’ data to third parties, or when forced to. As an example, he raised the case which a VPN named “HideMyAss” surrendered users’ data to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) when pressured. However, he added that these actions are normally exercised by free VPN providers. Top VPN providers, although come at a cost, practices a “no log policy” which does not store users’ data, such as ExpressVPN and NodeVPN (Cook, 2017). Users have their own right to choose the VPN they prefer, whether to compromise money for privacy, or vice versa.

Moreover, the legality of the usage of VPN is also debatable. While there is no definite answer to this issue, it can be viewed from multiple perspectives. Firstly, the legality of using VPN varies from country to country. For example, VPNS are permitted in the US (Parkyn, 2019), but are illegal in China, Turkey, Russia, Iran, and UAE (Summers, 2019). Moreover, Summers (2019) suggested that although bans are enacted in these countries, it is unlikely that it will result in the complete removal of VPNs as these bans are newly enforced, they are not strict enough to entirely remove VPN from the network. Furthermore, Summers (2019) argued that these VPNs are businesses themselves, and shutting them down will impose severe impacts on the countries’ economy itself. Barbashow (2018) showed that 100 million users surf the Internet with VPN daily in China, and the details about the ban still remain unannounced. Next, although it is not illegal to access the Internet via VPN, it is still considered unlawful to perform illegal actions through VPN. According to Barbashow (2018), VPNs are used in China by scholars, students, and scientists to access the vast information they needed which are unaccessible inside the “Great Firewall of China”. Since VPN providers are not always guaranteed to adhere to the “no log policy”, certain activities such as distributing viruses, torrenting, and hacking will still cause breachers to face prosecution (Parkyn, 2019). In short, VPN are aimed at providing a secure and encrypted path for users to transmit information, and users should be discreet and aware of their doings while enjoying the benefits that VPN offers.

In conclusion, the privacy, security, and convenience offered by the VPN comes at a cost with its various complexities. Potential counterarguments of using VPN included the safety of the VPN itself when the providers conduct similar exercise to that of ISPs, and the legality issue of using VPN. However, users hold a crucial role in deciding which trustable VPN providers they can subscribe to, and what activities will they be doing over the VPN. VPN can be a viable solution in improving communication worldwide, provided that it is accessed with the correct way, and with the right motive.

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