Access Denied: The Practice and Policy of Global Internet Filtering

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Access Denied: The Practice and Policy of Global Internet Filtering

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As we have frequently observed, the impact of the Internet is highlighted for those of us who use it a great deal, when we are denied access to it. [1] But as it has become more pervasive and the world more dependent upon it so has control of the information and services it carries become more critical to the governments of nation states. The result, the work Access Denied argues, is that the trend is markedly toward more filtering of the Internet at the state level, and the denial of access to content to increasingly more people. Moreover, it seems that the major obstacle to even more marked increases in filtering practices may be the current inability of many governments to afford to do so. [2]

While almost all states presume the Internet to be a key element in encouraging local productivity and economic growth, it can also be a destabilizing factor. Adverse social and political impacts are obvious in all countries. Currently, Access Denied is clearly the most useful text for understanding the many ways in which states have tried to shape those impacts. The specific focus is upon filtering, which many might reduce to the simple term “censorship.”

Access Denied discusses the technology of filtering as well as the many legal issues involved, both in general terms in summative initial chapters, and country by country in voluminous regional overviews which fill well over half of the book. These include specific studies of forty countries ranging from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe.

An important part of the work’s value lies in the adoption of a standard methodology, which permits comparative evaluations well beyond the usual impressionistic travelers’ or journalists’ tales. The OpenNet Initiative (ONI) initially organized by scholars at the universities of Toronto, Harvard, and Cambridge conducted large-scale systematic sampling of Internet traffic from within specific countries.

The ONI was soon cooperating with many other local and international bodies, enabling the editors to produce what is truly an of encyclopedia of Internet filtering practices, as of the period 2003-2006. Some references are as late as 2007, but, of course, this is a subject which is...
ultimately tied to the speed of the development of the Internet and its supporting technology. The book will quickly be dated, though one hopes that the group’s work will be continued and regularly reported upon. [3]

The approach is somewhat simplistic in that the contributors, while observing that Internet content such as pornography, sexual exploitation and violence are universally condemned as a problem, chose to adopt a sort of libertarian all-or-nothing philosophy. The pervasive attitude of the authors is that the Internet should be fully open, period.

Within this context, all censorship comes to seem itself an attack on human rights, a position taken explicitly in Mary Rundle and Malcom Birdling’s excellent chapter, “Filtering and the International System: A Question of Commitment.” This chapter presents the best summary I have seen of the evolution and current state of international and local laws bearing upon filtering issues.

The editors can, of course, be excused for not delving repeatedly into such issues as cultural differences in Internet filtering/censorship, though their failure to do so produces very generalized observations. Specific cultural issues in individual countries or groups of societies related by largely common value systems such as Islam or Confucianism are generally ignored. We learn, for example, that Iran is the most thoroughly censored society of those they studied, yet only at the last do we also come to understand that the primary issue driving censorship is the question of fundamentalist Islamic morality and that the sorts of content filtered would probably be objectionable to a good portion of the world’s citizenry. Iranians, however, live in a state willing to dedicate itself to attempting to enforce a strict moral standard. [4]

It follows as well that the focus on nation states, however natural it may seem, also obscures important cultural issues. The regional surveys do little to fill this void, as Islamic states, for example, are widely scattered around the world. It would have been more useful perhaps, to substitute for the regional surveys cultural ones: Confucian states, Islamic states, and free-market democracies, among other possible divisions.

The shortcoming of the national state focus becomes particularly apparent when we examine the lengthy Chinese example. In general, China is the quite obvious exception to the notion that economic progress lends itself to the development of human rights. But the model against which Chinese attitudes are measured is implicitly, as is the case in general here, classical Western notions.

The work also misses another important element of the Chinese political system—the widespread cultural agreement in favor of stability and security in the face of potential “luan,” disorder. This primary Confucian value is also shared in “Greater China,” which might have made a better focus as argued above than the work’s “China with Hong Kong.” Taiwan, another useful Confucian example, receives no coverage at all, a surprising lacuna given its importance to the production and distribution of computer technology itself.
One of the truly important attributes of the work is the great detail that it offers as to how filtering is accomplished. Murdoch and Anderson’s chapter on “Tools and Technology of Internet Filtering” is particularly useful in this regard. The on-site methodology of measuring filtering in a large number of nation states also permitted very useful statements about the wide variety of approaches taken internationally.

Zittrain and Palfrey’s chapter, “Reluctant Gatekeepers: Corporate Ethics on a Filtered Internet” deals with the ethical problem that arises “when the corporation is asked to do something at odds with the ethical framework of the corporation’s home state.” [5] Most of the examples here are from the well-known cases involving Google and Yahoo’s accommodation to Chinese filtering practices. Again, however, this analysis neglects an important political dimension, the degree to which such highly publicized events often are as much related to China-bashing as to concerns for individual freedoms.

The hero of the anti-China publicity campaign, for example, is Congressman Chris Smith of New Jersey who conducts annual sponsorship of legislation such as the Global Online Freedom Act intended to preclude U.S. corporations from selling equipment or services “for the purpose, in whole or in part, of facilitating Internet censorship.” For the authors, “The legislation’s intent is laudable, to limit the extent to which United States-based corporations participate in censorship and surveillance in other states.” [6]

Smith, however, is ultimately a dogged anti-communist who attempts to embarrass such regimes at every opportunity. [7] Underlying his highly ideological approach is his personal opposition to abortion. [8] What the Smith example shows is the difficulty of treating filtering as simply a case of human rights; it is inextricably intertwined with cultural values.

With these caveats, however, Access Denied remains the single best source with which to understand the nature and extent of state-sponsored filtering practices.


[4] It might be well for us to state here that the Berglund Center has itself been a victim of Iranian filtering practices in that they hijacked one of our major journals, The Journal of History and Computing. After scraping our site, they then created a pirated site supported, it appears, by systematic manipulation of Google rankings, to the point where the pirate site often outranks our own original, causing many problems for us. See “CYBERJACKED! Again… and Again…” at: http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2006/02/edit.php


[7] See the list of legislation which he has sponsored at: http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/bdquery/R?d110:FLD003:@1(Rep+Smith+Christopher):


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13 THOUGHTS ON "ACCESS DENIED: THE PRACTICE AND POLICY OF GLOBAL INTERNET FILTERING"

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Thanks a bunch for sharing this with all of us you really recognise what you are talking approximately! Bookmarked. Please additionally seek advice from my web site =). We will have a link trade arrangement between us!

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You have done an impressive job and our entire community will be thankful too you.

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Hi therre friends, its great article concerning educationand fully explained, keep it up all the
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pastor clarence mcclendon
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Very good article. I absolutely appreciate this website.
Keep it up!

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And of course, thank you to your effort!

poor children
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I've been surfing online more than three hours today, yet
I never found any interesting article like yours.
It is pretty worth enough for me. In my opinion, if all website owners and bloggers made
good content as you did, the net will be a lot more useful than ever before.

http://toplist.stonetawne.net/
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some nice methods and we are looking to trade methods with others, please shot me
an e-mail if interested.

Rufus
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ans also sharing in delicious. And certainly, thank you to your sweat!

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