Filtering vs. Globalization

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Filtering vs. Globalization

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Editor, Interface

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.01 Introduction (return to index)

As we have repeatedly emphasized in this space, a major impact of the Internet has been to create conflicts between the resulting globalization of communication and the security concerns of nation states, at least insofar as their governments are concerned. [1] For many analysts, this conflict comes down to a sort of metaphorical race between the development of an international civic culture as the result of the globalization of communications, and the security interests of individual states whose governments may well oppose the creation of such a culture. Simply put, governments, like many other parties, often wish to “filter” the Internet, letting through useful and advantageous communications while keeping out communications they oppose. Our purpose in this editorial is to clarify issues related to the filtering of the Internet on national security grounds by examining recent cases of such filtering in the Peoples’ Republic of China.

.02 Filtering and National Security (return to index)

Even in the United State the Internet has long been contested territory. While its origins lie in national security-related research projects its strongest voices have favored little or no restraint on its content. One of the most frequently quoted slogans on the Internet is “Information Wants
To Be Free.” [2] For most Americans the filtering (a more value-laden term would be “censorship”) of the Internet seems appropriate only as a primarily local affair. Very few would argue that certain kinds of content should not be permitted at all on the Internet, but rather than they should be kept from certain audiences, usually children. The least intrusive and hence most acceptable way of doing this has been to filter content at the users’ machines.

But while most of us would probably object to a general censorship of the Internet, national security concerns are bound to erode this widespread social agreement. We have had no clear case, to my knowledge, of generalized censorship of Internet content on national security grounds in the United States. [3] But there have been some related issues that could well become precedents.

Immediately after the events of September 11, 2001, hitherto public materials were removed from the Internet at many government sites. Another interesting example was the event of October 2001, when the Bush administration initially attempted to prevent the airing of a “Bin Laden video” because of fears that a hidden message might be steganographically encoded in it. [4]

So far as we are aware, even very violently pro-Al Quaeda sites have not been screened from the Internet in any manner, though there have been several cases of local pressures being directed at countries hosting such sites. Hackers have also disrupted them. [5]

But if Americans are not yet prepared to defend a general censoring of the Web, many of us might agree to limited filtering. As Jonathan Zittrain, co-Director of Harvard Law School’s Berkman Center on Internet & Society, has written:

Internet service providers and their customers have long since tired of handling overwhelming volumes of Spam. Parents want to shield their children from pornography and hate speech. Governments want to exclude certain content from their respective territories. [6]

.03 China and Filtering (return to index)

As Zittrain points out above, the blocking of Spam, child porn, or objectionable political content by governments are all examples of filtering. Perhaps a way to clarify our own attitudes toward filtering is to examine our reactions to examples of filtering by foreign governments. China has been a sort of bellwether on this issue.

It has long been known that China has attempted to control internal national access to the Internet. [7] It has been taken for granted by most analysts that the increase in communications caused by the spread of the Internet is inherently democratizing. The argument in favor of extending trade to China, notably to supporting Chinese membership in the World Trade Organization, has been similar. [8] Underpinning this judgment, however, was an important
assumption: That China would not be able to pick and choose the influences that it permitted in from abroad. This was particularly true with regard to the Internet, which was held to be inherently uncontrollable.

Until quite recently, these judgments seemed to be safe ones. China was not able to control the Internet save by such Draconian measures as shutting down Internet cafes (the point of access for many Chinese people, particularly for poorer ones) or otherwise denying access in toto. James C, Mulvenon, Deputy Director of the federally funded Rand Center for Asian-Pacific Policy, refers to these methods as “Low-tech Leninist”. [9]

If the Chinese government was highly motivated to control the Internet, it was also faced with a huge number of very creative Internet users who developed an astonishing panoply of weapons with which to frustrate the government, including the widespread use of proxy servers, labor-intensive e-mail Spam campaigns, clever use of caching protocols, utilizing foreign access points, etc. At one point dissidents apparently representing the outlawed chiliastic Buddhist sect Fa Lun Gong even hijacked state television programming by hacking into satellite transmissions, possibly from locations in Taiwan.

But a study by Zittrain and Edelman recently revealed a far more sophisticated and successful filtering operation than had been supposed possible. [10] The New York Times reported this as “China Has World’s Tightest Internet Censorship, Study Finds.” [11] The Zittrain and Edelman study is still in its preliminary stages, but shows that the Chinese, by using a variety of methods, at this point can only control some of the objectionable sites some of the time. But the government does have enough control, and an increasingly sophisticated ability to identify specific users attempting to access such information, as to create an extremely chilling effect.

This should not be surprising. The Internet developed relatively late in China (it is generally said to have begun in 1995 when the Ministry of Posts and Communications established the first commercially available network). [12] It accordingly developed under direct governmental control. It is far different than the current American Internet with its myriad of digital channels. Rather, it is very like the Internet that is apparently desired by some of those wishing for a more secure American Internet, an Internet with a relatively few number of “choke points” which can be easily protected and monitored. [13]

In China there are only nine Internet Access providers who control all external physical lines. They in turn license some 600+ Internet Service Providers who then control content providers and end users. This hierarchical structure, while immense because of the vast number of end users (an estimated 40 to 50 million, placing the number of Chinese users third after Japan, possibly second after the United States), [14] is easily controlled given adequate technology. The Chinese government has benefited not only from its ability to marshal thousands of security agents to monitor Internet activity [15] but also from the ability to buy the most highly developed Western technology, [16] and to engage in joint research programs.
Earlier Chinese attempts at filtering were, as discussed above, “Low-tech Leninist.” Recent approaches, however, are far more sophisticated, involving a number of simultaneous approaches capable of filtering pages not only for web server IP addresses or domain name server IP addresses, or by screening content in URL addresses, but also for internal content on specific pages, or, for that matter, in e-mail as well. [17] The Chinese have also learned to locate proxy servers much more quickly in real time and shut them down, as well as to disable many of the caching protocols that earlier permitted users to access forbidden sites.

.04 Is China Wrong to Censor? (return to index)

This question, “Is China Wrong to Censor?” may seem like one of those questions that suggests its own answer: Of course Chinese censorship is deplorable and should be resisted. But let’s reword the question: “Is China Wrong to Filter?” In other words, how does Chinese filtering differ from that of other governments, potentially even our own?

Does the Chinese government have the right to protect itself from terrorists operating abroad? Should it be able to filter out the sites of known violent organizations responsible for earlier terrorist attacks in China, on the grounds that instructions to terrorist cells may be steganographically embedded a la the case of the Bin Laden video mentioned above?

Should the Chinese be able to filter out child pornography? [18] What about Spam?

What if the Chinese succeed, through a use of extensive broadband development in Shanghai (completed), and the deployment of facial recognition video technology (in process) and the requirement that each resident carry an ID card with an embedded “proximity chip” that can be read from several meters away (contemplated, possibly planned, and currently feasible) in monitoring security in all of Shanghai? Then in Beijing, Canton, etc., etc. Is this a terrible thing or a possible model for American security measures vis-à-vis terrorists? [19] Should we deplore it or emulate it?

The Chinese government may seem to Americans to be so alien, so “bad” that we might succeed in distancing ourselves sufficiently to see these implied comparisons as lunatic ones. But China is changing very rapidly and it is increasingly more difficult to apply the shibboleths of the Cold War era to it.

For example, the Chinese recently added a number of younger leaders to their governing bodies in the Sixteenth National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, which met from November 8-15. This is the group of men who will rule China for the foreseeable future, the successor generation to Mao Zidong, Deng Xiaoping, and more recently, Jiang Zemin. [20]

In playing a favorite game of Sinologists like myself, analyzing leadership changes and career patterns, it becomes evident that the make-up of this group is very striking. Of the ten who constitute the Politburo’s Standing Committee, which rules the Chinese Communist Party from
day-to-day, all are engineers by training. Four of them were educated at Tsinghua University, China’s top technical university where the Chinese Internet arguably was developed. All of them are from first-rate Chinese universities (most of them are from the top five among Chinese universities) and several have graduate degrees. Most also have a work background in electrical engineering, the most common entry point for computer scientists in the Chinese educational system. Certainly if they wish to filter the Internet, they have the talent and experience to successfully manage such a project.

Among my other concerns at present is the development of an educational program at my home institution, Pacific University, intended to attract Chinese students from both the P.R.C. and Taiwan. We have been seeing, from China in particular, incredibly talented and well-trained students. Nicholas Kristof of The New York Times recently visited a Chinese high school affiliated with one of our sister institutions, East China Normal University in Shanghai, and wrote an article “China’s Super Kids” detailing the literally amazing abilities of many of these students. [21]

However, perhaps because we now carry pages referring to the Taiwan portion of our program on our University server, our servers were blocked in China during August, according to the records kept by the Berkman Center at Harvard Law School. [22] This meant that the very Chinese students to whom we were trying to appeal were no longer able to see the details of our program. As it turned out, this was probably irrelevant in any event, because of the six hand-picked candidates who were recruited, each and every one was denied the appropriate visa to study with us by the U.S Immigration and Naturalization Service at the consular offices in China, because, we learned, of security concerns in the United States.

For us, this brings home the terrible consequences, unintended perhaps, of security concerns on the part of both the Chinese and the American governments. These two countries taken together account for an appreciable portion of the world’s Internet users.

.05 Conclusion: The Importance of Global Civic Culture (return to index)

How are we then, to decide what is an appropriate concern for security expressed as Internet filtering, and what is a totalitarian censorship? It is not enough to simply presume comfortably that we are good and they are bad. A recent very important Pew study, for example, “What the World Thinks in 2002”, confirms that our own view of ourselves is not uncritically accepted abroad. The study points out that while a majority around the world (with the exception of the Mid-East) approves of the war against terrorism and supports American efforts, a majority in most areas (Latin America is an exception) believe that United States’ foreign policy fails to consider the interests of others. Even the majority of citizens in our Western European allies, with the exception of the Germans, agree. [23]

This scepticism suggest that American approaches to filtering the Internet are not necessarily going to be accepted uncritically, and that the United States will find it as difficult to condemn China for doing so as has to condemn Iraq, probably far more so in that China represents a
considerably larger market.

It seems to me that the only way in which questions such as those above can possibly be answered is by international discussions, the development of appropriate treaties and protocols, and the creation of international bodies that can bring something at least resembling sanctions to bear. This is not merely a theoretical issue. If each country develops its own protocols and means of filtering the Internet, the Internet itself will be damaged as an international resource. We might find it as segmented as are national boundaries, and as complicated to cross.

In short, the ability to develop a means of permitting appropriate filtering of the Internet so as to preserve it as a common global resource itself depends upon the continuing development of a global civic culture. This is, of course, increasingly utopian in our present political climate. It seems more reasonable merely to hope that the inevitable proximity chip will one day be embedded in a card and not in my person.

.06 Notes (return to index)


[2] A search on this phrase on Google (“Information wants to be Free” turned up more than fifteen thousand occurrences of the phrase, but no indication of its original author. It has become a phrase authored by “somebody.”<http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&ie=ISO-8859-1&q=%22information+wants+to+be+free%22&btnG=Google+Search>

[3] For Americans, such disputes have generally revolved around “child porn” and even these have been extremely controversial issues. See Julia Scheeres, “House Refines Virtual Porn Ban” at: http://www.wired.com/news/business/0,1367,53510,00.html for some notion of the complexity of related issues.


[5] An interesting recent example is the Al Neda Website, which was used to mount supposedly Al Quaeda statements in relation to the Bali bombings of November 2002. See CCN.con story at: http://www.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/asiapcf/southeast/11/07/bali.bombings.qaeda/
Upon accessing the site, www.alneda.com, one now encounters the phrase “Hacked, Tracked, and NOW Owned by the U.S. A.” before being diverted to a second site.


<http://law.vanderbilt.edu/journal/Vol345/Liang.htm>
or Amnesty International, “People’s Republic of China. State control of the Internet in China”


[9] Statement by James C. Mulvenon, Roundtable before the Congressional-Executive Commission on China, One hundred seventh Congress, Second session, April 15, 2002

Berkman Center for Internet & Society Harvard Law School
<http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/filtering/china/>


<http://law.vanderbilt.edu/journal/Vol345/Liang.htm>

http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2002/04/editorial.php

November 2002.
http://www.web.amnesty.org/aidoc/aidoc_pdf.nsf/
index/ASA170072002ENGLISH/$File/ASA1700702.pdf

http://www.web.amnesty.org/aidoc/aidoc_pdf.nsf/
index/ASA170072002ENGLISH/$File/ASA1700702.pdf p. 2.

[16] For a truly terrifying survey of currently available technology and the uses to which it will probably be put in China, if not in other countries, see: Greg Walton, “China’s Golden Shield: Corporations and the Development of Surveillance Technology in the People’s Republic of China” 2001.


[18] Zittrain and Edelman, above, objectively demonstrate that the Chinese are far more assiduous in filtering politically objectionable materials than culturally objectionable ones. This may be, however, I would suggest, because porn sites are often very difficult to spot because they have become extremely adept at avoiding filtering software in American schools, libraries, and private homes.

[19] Greg Walton, who names the Western companies currently working with the Chinese government to develop these capabilities, discusses these in technical detail.

[20] See Beijing Review:
These are the new central ruling elite of the Peoples’ Republic:

**Jiang Zemin** — Chairman of CPC Central Military Commission. He graduated from the Electrical Machinery Department of Shanghai Jiaotong University in 1947.

**Hu Jintao** — General Secretary of 16th CPC Central Committee. He graduated from the Water Conservancy Engineering Department of Tsinghua University where he had majored in the study of hub hydropower stations. With a university education, he holds the title as an engineer.

**Wu Bangguo** — Politburo Standing Committee Member of CPC Central Committee. An electric engineer from Tsinghua University.

**Wen Jiabao** — Politburo Standing Committee Member of CPC Central Committee. He
graduated from the Specialty of Geological Structure of Beijing Institute of Geology. He is a postgraduate and engineer.

**Jia Qinglin** — Politburo Standing Committee Member of CPC Central Committee. He graduated from the Specialty of Electric Motor and Appliance Design and Manufacture of the Department of Electric Power of Hebei Engineering College. With a university education, he holds the title as an engineer.

**Zeng Qinghong** — Politburo Standing Committee Member of CPC Central Committee. He graduated from the Automatic Control Department, Beijing Institute of Technology. He is a university graduate and engineer.

**Huang Ju** — Politburo Standing Committee Member of CPC Central Committee. He graduated from the Department of Electrical Machinery Engineering, Tsinghua University, where he had majored in Electrical Machinery Manufacturing. He is a university graduate and engineer.

**Wu Guanzheng** — Politburo Standing Committee Member of CPC Central Committee. He graduated from the Specialty of Thermal Measurement and Automatic Control of the Power Department of Tsinghua University. He is a postgraduate and Engineer.

**Li Changchun** — Politburo Standing Committee Member of CPC Central Committee. He graduated from the Specialty of the Industrial Enterprise Automation of the Department of Electric Machinery of Harbin Institute of Technology. With a university education, he holds the title as an engineer.

**Luo Gan** — Politburo Standing Committee Member of CPC Central Committee. He graduated from the Machine Casting Specialty of Freiburg Institute of Mining and Metallurgy in the Democratic Republic of Germany. With a university education, he holds the title as a senior engineer.


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14 THOUGHTS ON "FILTERING VS. GLOBALIZATION"

Zulema Schrimsher  
on January 30, 2014 at 6:12 PM said:

Hello, Neat post. There’s a problem with your web site in internet explorer, may test this

rice cooker reviews  
on January 31, 2014 at 1:43 AM said:

I love what you guys are usually up too. This kind of clever work and exposure!  
Keep up the very good works guys I’ve incorporated you guys to my blogroll.

best random orbital sander  
on February 1, 2014 at 3:31 AM said:

You should be a part of a contest for one of  
the finest sites on the net. I will recommend this site!

infrared grill reviews  
on February 3, 2014 at 8:12 PM said:

I could not resist commenting. Exceptionally well written!

exercise bike reviews  
on February 3, 2014 at 9:32 PM said:

Having read this I thought it was really informative. I appreciate you taking the  
time and energy to put this short article together.  
I once again find myself spending way too much time
both reading and commenting. But so what, it was still worthwhile!

**best electric kettle**  
on **February 3, 2014 at 9:39 PM** said:

Hi there, just became alert to your blog through Google, and found that it is truly informative. I am gonna watch out for brussels. I'll be grateful if you continue this in future. Many people will be benefited from your writing. Cheers!

**jig saw reviews**  
on **February 3, 2014 at 9:51 PM** said:

This article is really a nice one it helps new web viewers, who are wishing for blogging.

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on **February 4, 2014 at 12:07 AM** said:

hello there and thank you for your information – I’ve definitely picked up anything new from right here.  
I did however expertise some technical points using this website, since I experienced to reload the website many times previous to I could get it to load correctly. I had been wondering if your web host is OK? Not that I’m complaining, but slow loading instances times will sometimes affect your placement in google and can damage your high-quality score if ads and marketing with Adwords.

Anyway I’m adding this RSS to my e-mail and can look out for a lot more of your respective exciting content. Ensure that you update this again very soon.
best shoes for crossfit
on February 4, 2014 at 12:55 AM said:

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best pressure washer
on February 4, 2014 at 1:04 AM said:

Excellent items from you, man. I have take note your stuff prior to and you are just extremely excellent. I really like what you’ve bought right here, really like what you’re stating and the way by which you assert it. You’re making it enjoyable and you still take care of to stay it smart. I can not wait to learn far more from you. This is actually a great website.

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best home gym
on February 4, 2014 at 1:33 AM said:

We stumbled over here by a different website and thought I might check things out. I like what I see so now i’m following you. Look forward to looking into your web page again.

---

best table saw
on February 4, 2014 at 2:00 AM said:

Hey! This is kind of off topic but I need some guidance from an established blog.
Is it difficult to set up your own blog? I’m not very techincal but I can figure things out pretty quick. I’m thinking about making my own but I’m not sure where to begin.
Do you have any points or suggestions? Appreciate it
scroll saw reviews

on February 4, 2014 at 2:05 AM said:

Howdy very cool web site!! Man .. Excellent .. Superb ..
I will bookmark your blog and take the feeds additionally?
I am glad to find so many useful information here within the publish, we want develop extra strategies in this regard, thanks for sharing. . . . .

robotic pool cleaner reviews

on February 5, 2014 at 1:00 AM said:

Hey There. I found your blog using msn. This is an extremely well written article. I’ll be sure to bookmark it and come back to read more of your useful info. Thanks for the post. I’ll certainly comeback.