

**Committee: Special Political and Decolonization Committee**

**Issue: The issue of internet censorship by national governments**

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**Position: Co-Chair**

## Introduction

In the era of rapid globalization with the costs of telecommunications being lower than ever before and therefore affordable by almost every individual on planet earth, the internet is now considered a sacred commodity. Exchange of information is what it all comes down to and an internet connection provides just that, meaning that billions of people now have the opportunity to be made aware of what is happening on the opposite side of the world, miles away from all the things that they come in contact with in their everyday life. Naturally, along with every new invention of the human race come rules and regulations that need to be constructed and limits need to be drawn. Somewhere along these lines of new inventions and the need of having a set of rules that need to be respected, internet censorship became an issue not only for the international community but for every individual state as well. Here we must refer to the fact that censorship in its original form has been a point of controversy for quite some time now. The new element that is now being added to the debate is the fact that this phenomenon has been expanded to the web.

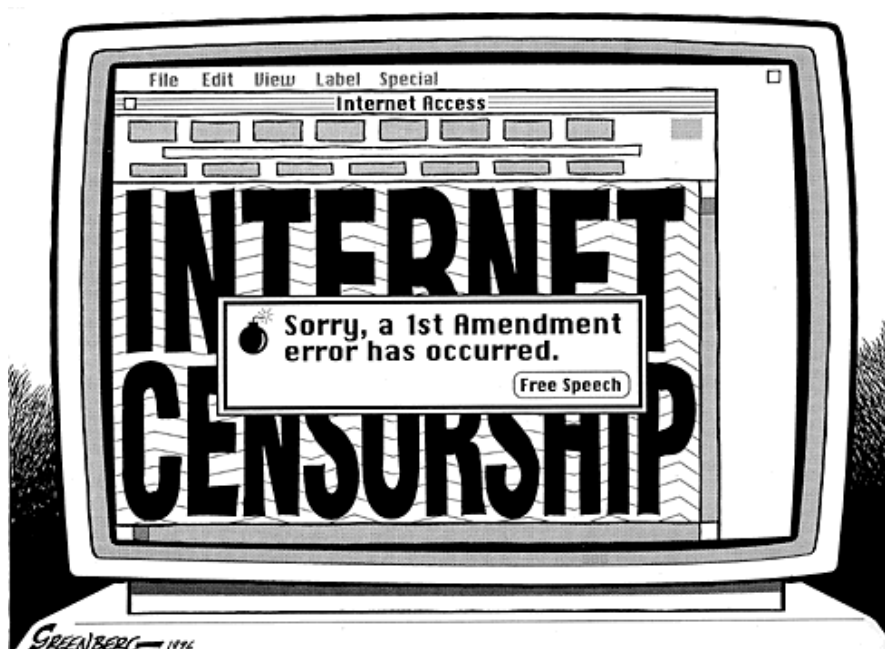


Image 1. A cartoon by Steve Greenberg about internet censorship

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## Definition of Key-Terms

### Censorship

Censorship is "the suppression or prohibition of any parts of books, films, news, etc. that are considered obscene, politically unacceptable, or a threat to security" <sup>2</sup>

### Internet censorship

"Internet censorship is the control or suppression of what can be accessed, published, or viewed on the Internet enacted by regulators, or on their own initiative. Individuals and organizations may engage in self-censorship for moral, religious, or business reasons, to conform to societal norms, due to intimidation, or out of fear of legal or other consequences."<sup>3</sup>

### National Government

A national government is a government or political authority that controls a nation. At a minimum, a national government requires a national army, enough power over its states or provinces to set and maintain a firm policy and the ability to collect taxes.

## Background Information

### Historical Background

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<sup>1</sup> "Internet Censorship Bills Up For Vote Dec 5th – “Stop Online Piracy Act” & “Protect IP” Garner Enthusiastic Bi-Partisan Support In Congress." *The Oldspeak Journal*. N.p., 30 Nov. 2011.

<sup>2</sup> "What Is Censorship?" *American Civil Liberties Union*

<sup>3</sup> "Internet censorship." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, 02 July 2017

The history of censorship dates back in the ancient times and could also be described as a phenomenon that accompanies humanity for a rather long time. One of the most famous cases of censorship is the one of Socrates. The ancient Athenian philosopher was sentenced to death in year 399 BC by the members of the court with the accusation of corrupting the youth and acknowledging unorthodox divinities. The Athenian state came to this decision in order to ensure the political, ethical and religious stability of itself and the seemingly, according to its principles, well-being of its people. In other words, disallowing a member of the society to openly express their opinion, also defined as censorship, is something rooted deeply in the start of civilization of humanity with incidents such as this one. Then again censorship cannot be described as a tactic only used by the ancient Greeks. At around the same time on the other end of the world, namely in China and specifically in year 213 BCE, not granting people the right to freedom of expression was widely used as well as a measure to control the public opinion. Another great example would be the one of the Catholic Church. It was under similar circumstances that the Index Librorum Prohibitorum was first introduced by a Pope, and thus marking the start for 20 more reinforcements of new editions of the aforementioned document by multiple Popes. It has to do with a list of books that the general public wasn't allowed to have access to, since they were viewed as "heretical" by the Church. The most famous author that the Church of Rome banned is probably Galileo in 1633. It wasn't much later that the individual authorities, mainly the monarchs, followed suit in the steps of the Catholic Church. The new system of censorship that was born could be described as dual. Both the church and the state exercised the tactic of censorship. The ones who had the power controlled everything that could influence the way of thinking of the public. The colonial era of Europe did not bring any more freedom of expression that there already had been. Around the same time, the Spaniards also destroyed a great number of Mayan Codices, which is still considered one of the cruelest crimes against a whole nation and its heritage. This situation continued for many years and even expanded in new fields and evolved into what we acknowledge as censorship today. The states started to not respect the people's rights. Investigation of the post and the newspapers was now the norm, especially in times of national crisis and war when the political leaders were allowed to act as they thought was best for the time being. Characteristic examples of this were, for instance, the Licensing Act in Britain and the state censorship in Germany during the Thirty Years War. The first bright page in the history of censorship was the period of Enlightenment. These two centuries, the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>, were a time where reason and logical thinking reigned and people started fighting for the right of freedom of expression, by opposing censorship tactics. A turn in politics was visible so that these rights as well as other liberties became a topic of political discussion and debate. Censorship was abolished and the courts became

now the protectors of the aforementioned rights. However, that didn't last too long. Both the Nazi government of Germany as well as the Soviet Union were game changers for the issue of censorship. The first exercised propaganda and censorship, they namely set up huge fires and burned all books that didn't align with their supreme goal of cleansing the mind of society. Another important source of censorship was the central administration of the Soviet Union. With a tradition dating back in the time the Russian empire, with little reform tries by the tsar Alexander II, and the imposition of it again around 1866, the long period of the strict censorship was synonym to the rules of the USSR and lasted until the end of the 1980's. Religious books were banned as well as anything similar that may have misled the public.

### Internet censorship

With technology slowly but steadily taking over in almost all aspects of the lives of the people of today it is only logical that the long history of censorship doesn't end in the 20<sup>th</sup> century but continues until today. Some even argue that the censorship of today, in other words, the censorship of the internet, puts even more barriers on the free expression of the public in specific countries across the globe compared to the situation in the last two centuries. The extent to which internet censorship takes place varies from country to country and it mostly has to do with the governments and the strictness of their views. Under this criterion, internet censorship can be separated into two categories: the one being the moderate censorship and the other one being the actual limitation of access to several sources of information and therefore also the suppression of discussion and dialogue among the members of society. Given the fact that around 3.5 billion of people have an internet connection, one could simply say that the web now is the biggest, widest, most up to date source of information for the population. Therefore, internet censorship can be observed at times of social upheaval. Such periods could always be elections, referendums or coups. Therefore, it is used either in response or in anticipation of these incidents. Here it should be mentioned that the absolute, total censorship of the internet is, if not impossible, in any case very difficult. So, to sum all the aforementioned up, internet censorship can occur either on an ongoing basis or in key periods of time, both of which in accordance with the administration of the state. The tools and the ways that the governments use in order to censor the material published on the web are either site blocking or content filter. Both terms are self-explanatory. The governments either disallow citizens to visit websites with content that can be described as obscene or inappropriate or they filter all websites in order to censor material that could vary from words to phrases to whole topics.

This happens with the help of blacklists, which contain all terms or topics that the public can't have access to.

Another way, which however is not as widely used as blacklists, is the examination of the content in real time. The motives, or better said the rationales that drive the governments of the states to exercise internet censorship could be summed up in three points. First of all, in the world of politics, censorship can be used by the powerful in order for them to obtain more power over the public. Then, again censorship is once again being used in order to keep the social norms and morals in the way they are so that the citizens keep respecting traditional values. Last but not least, the matter of possible security concerns is always something that has led leaders of nations to take measures closely connected with internet censorship. Either way, the support or opposition to internet censorship varies, a point that will be analyzed as followed.

### The types of censorship

The tactic of censorship is, as mentioned above, used by multiple governments for multiple reasons. Therefore, through the different ultimate goal that every administration has in mind when censoring material on the internet we can now speak of different types of internet censorship. The criteria, thus, for this categorization are the objectives based on which every government acts.

#### 1. Political:

The political motivation to restrain criticism against the government, the views of the opposition and the critical thinking of the citizens poses the strictest form of internet censorship. Any content regarding policy issues that are not in sync with the government is being filtered or blocked. The same faith also awaits sites that include material about ethnic or armed conflicts. Critical sites for the information of the public that are based overseas are blocked and sensitive issues that could cause an upheaval of the society are not accessible. In China, for example, one has no access to information about Taiwan or the Tiananmen Square. Along the same lines, information about North Korea is blocked from internet users in South Korea. At the same time, other countries such as the Russian Federation have given their law enforcement agencies full allowance to monitor all internet activities within the borders. In Germany and France, there are laws that dictate that any material about denial of the holocaust or the Nazi regime is viewed as a criminal act with a penalty of prosecution, even if based abroad.

#### 2. Moral:

The second motivation for censorship is possibly the most widely used one and it happens because of moral reasons, rooted in what every society views as immoral or disturbing. In most cases that would be pornographic material, gambling or criminal activities. This is also mainly for the protection of the minors, namely in order for them to be able to navigate the web without the danger of coming upon disturbing material. These measures of censorship imposed by national governments are of very frequent occurrence particularly in countries where the main and official religion is Islam. There, blocking of foreign sites is the norm and public online discussion of matters such as faith and also adult content, substance abuse and gambling are illegal. Censorship of illegally downloaded copyrighted material as well as of material of child pornography, which is blocked by most countries of the global community, also fall under this category.

### 3. Commercial:

A third motive, though not so widespread, is the one of commercial profit. The situation in such for-profit censorship is the following: the state blocks any advertisements or internet based carriers in order for the state-owned businesses to flourish. Characteristic examples of that would be Telmex in Mexico and Deutsche Telekom in Germany. Commercial censorship can also occur by a non-state factor. There have been cases where companies with profit orientated interests pay popular searching engines in order for them to censor the products of their rivals or in order to conceal any possible scandals.

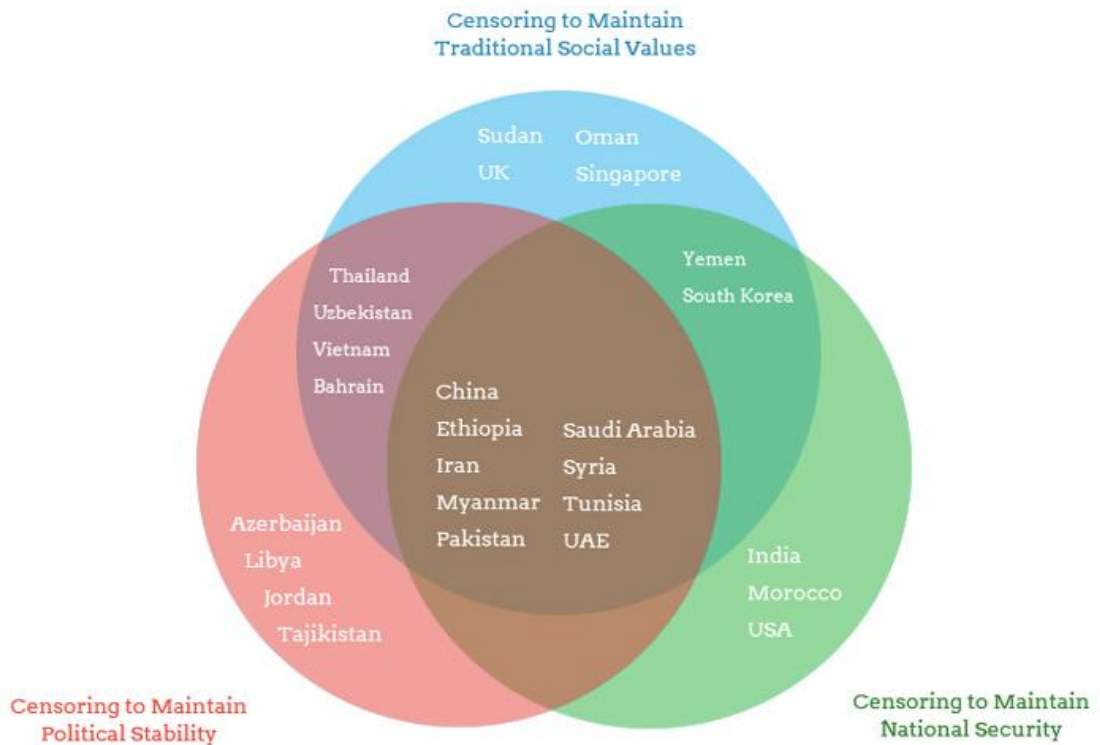


Image 2. The graph is explaining the policies and purposes of certain countries when it comes to internet censorship tactics

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### The case of social media

As mentioned above the world of today is more connected than ever and a simple internet connection can give the user access to unlimited information. In this cyber world, the role of social media is becoming more and more significant. It is through them that the majority of the people get informed about the current situation around the globe and it is also through them that the same majority share their ideas as well as their opinions, when the local media are either owned by the state or have close ties with its officials. As it is easily understood when a government has the power over social media, it also has the power over the people. Therefore, the tactic of censorship of social media by national governments has not been of rare occurrence in the last approximately 20 years. With social media such as Twitter and Facebook eventually becoming the source of information for billions of people, central administrations have started to censor what people can view on

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<sup>4</sup> "OpenNet Initiative." *OpenNet Initiative*.

these platforms. In other words, this would be a way of directing the masses without making it as public as it would be on the other media but rather a tailored, delivered message to every single user of any social media platform. In the past, Facebook and Twitter used to be feared by governments because of the fact that people would organize demonstrations with the help of the aforementioned social platforms. Nowadays, that is no longer the case. Censorship of social media gives the government the power to control such things without much fuss. Of course, there are some cases which show us that there is still much room for improvement when it comes to freedom of speech on social media. The example of China should be mentioned here. China has blocked both Facebook and Twitter for its population and has created its own social media instead. Weibo is a platform for blogging that is also hundred percent controlled by the government. In that way, the Chinese citizens can stay up to date with the internet by using a social media platform that also allows the ongoing regulation of the content. So, to conclude the issue of social media censorship is an existing situation with cases varying from a slight surveillance of the platforms to absolutely disallowing access to them.



Image 3. Demonstration in Istanbul against internet censorship on May 15, 2011. Photo taken by Murad Sezer for Reuters.

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<sup>5</sup> "Why is Turkey censoring lingerie, antique books?" *Al-Monitor*. N.p., 30 Jan. 2015.



## The debate

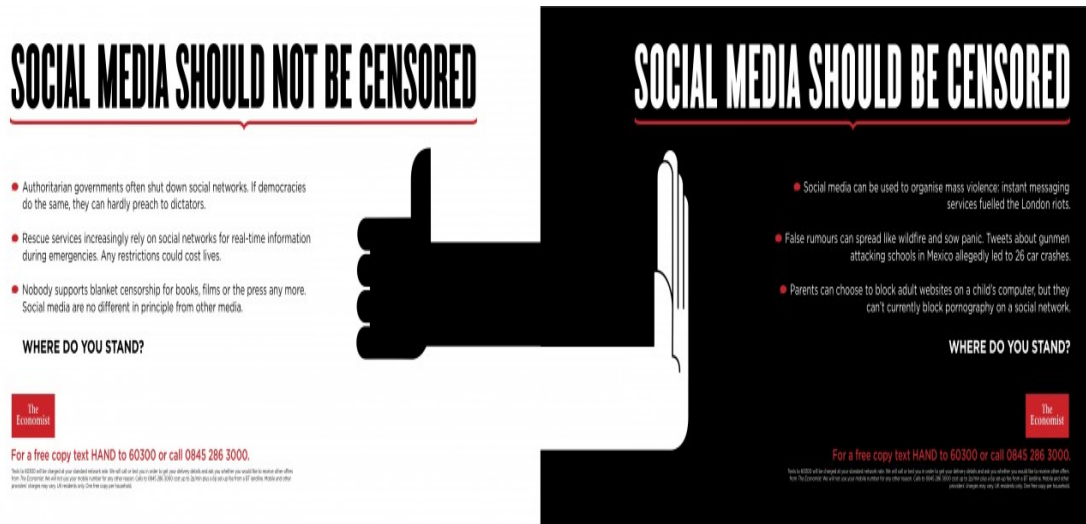
The issue of internet censorship is surrounded by much controversy and the debate around it is heated with both sides arguing about whether this phenomenon should exist or not. The question it usually all comes down to has to do with the degree in which the aforementioned type of censorship takes place.

For those in favor of censorship, this tactic ensures national security as well as harmony among the members of society. By censoring pornographic material for instance the state protects the society's most vulnerable members by being able to provide them with a danger-free zone online, which they can use for their benefit. The same procedure is being followed with issues that could be described as disrespectful or offensive for specific groups or individuals because of a religion-, sexuality- or ethnicity-based discrimination. Therefore, sensitive topics that would cause a possible wave of discomfort for some citizens are being censored by national governments, a tactic that many people are in favor of. Then, again, the matter of national security is being brought up by many proponents of internet censorship by limiting access to only some of the information and not to what is ranked as classified the military, air force and navy can act for the best of interest for the state. In this way, it is ensured that possible threats by other nations will not be posed, since the documents of the state will be secured. All of the above project the arguments of the part of society that is in favor of national governments censoring the internet for the well-being of their people.

On the other hand, the opposition of this debate is mainly referring to the dangers posed by state censorship. According to this side of the debate, censorship in general and therefore also internet censorship is synonym to the infringement of the right of freedom of speech and expression. By limiting these rights and preventing access to information, a state creates an environment that is fostering ignorance in its citizens. With society not being able to understand the world and its functions, those who have the power are more likely to be able to control the masses with tremendous consequences. The historical background of censorship is another argument that makes many critical of internet censorship. In the past, this tactic was mainly and successfully used by dictators or national leaders that managed to control and manipulate the mindset of the society in order to meet their goals. The fact that the limitation of information led to such terrible things in the past, for instance the situation during the IIWW and namely the fact that the german public was never made aware of the "Final Solution", has resulted into many people feeling very strongly about the issue and trying to advocate against it.

Either way, the question still remains: Is internet censorship in order or not? One can clearly see that it serves purposes that protect important members of

society as well as the state as a whole. But, then again, nobody can really control where this censorship ends and what freedoms could be violated in a possible attempt by the powerful to gain even more power.



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Image 4. The poster of the campaign launched by The Economist in order to inspire a heated debate around internet censorship.

## Major Countries and Organizations Involved

### Democratic People's Republic of Korea

North Korea is currently ranked in the last place of the Press Freedom Index, that is being published every year by the Reporters Without Borders. The situation in the aforementioned country doesn't resemble this of any other nation worldwide. The central administration has proceeded into restricting the global internet and creating their own intranet, by the name of Kwangmyong. However even the existence of this network doesn't mean that the whole of the North Korean society has access to it. This intranet is fully controlled by the Korea Computer Center and therefore is used for the exercising of political propaganda and the promotion of the personalities of Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un.

<sup>6</sup> Sawers, Paul. "The Economist Launches Social Media Censorship Debate." *The Next Web*. N.p., 06 Feb. 2012.

## The United States of America

The current situation in the United States regarding internet censorship is a matter of great controversy and provides the ground for a very heated debate within the country itself. The First Amendment of the United States Constitution protects the freedom of speech and expression, even when the case is about criticizing censorship itself. Therefore, one could say that the USA is a safe harbor for all those that want to be able to express themselves freely. On the other hand, a darker side of the matter in America is starting to show. In year 2014, the United States were added to a list by the name of "Enemies of the Internet" established by the "Reporters Without Borders" along with the statement that the U.S. " [...] has undermined confidence in the Internet and its own standards of security" and that "U.S. surveillance practices and decryption activities are a direct threat to investigative journalists, especially those who work with sensitive sources for whom confidentiality is paramount and who are already under pressure." Another point that one should refer to while discussing the issue of internet censorship when it comes to the USA is the fact that the internet itself as well as most global servers and very big and important companies (e.g. Google, Facebook, Twitter) are based in the USA. This alone had as a result that the aforementioned state had very big control over all activities taking place on the web. In other words a country was in charge of a network used by the whole of the international community. This situation changed in October 1st 2016. From this day the US Department of Commerce decided to give away the share of power it had over the DNS to a non-profit organization by the name of ICANN (Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers). ICANN has been present since almost day one of the internet, namely since 1998. For this whole time the USA had a say in all actions of this organization, a clear hit in the basic right of freedom of speech. However the decision made by the Obama administration seems to be turning a new page in the history of censorship exercised by the US even though it wasn't widely accepted by many players of the political arena, including President Trump.

## China

The Chinese government is famous for its censoring activities regarding information on the internet, which usually take place in order to ensure that authority is not threatened. Although censorship in all its forms wasn't of rare occurrence in China, in the year 1997 the government decided to launch a campaign

known as “The Great Firewall of China”. This is an entire new internet surveillance and censorship system that combines legislation and technology in order to establish a ground on which state officials can have full control over what can be viewed online by the citizens of China. Censorship in China has reached a point where sites like Google, the world’s most famous search engine, or social media like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube are totally banned while access is also denied to international news sites that project the facts in a way that is not in favor of the Chinese government, with the most characteristic ones being BBC and CNN. Essentially, the Chinese administration has full control over what crosses the country’s cyber borders. Therefore, it is a fact that the public is not well informed or most of the time victims of state produced propaganda. In a survey called “Freedom of the Internet” in year 2016, China was ranked as “the world’s worst abuser of internet freedom”.

## Censorship on China’s social media

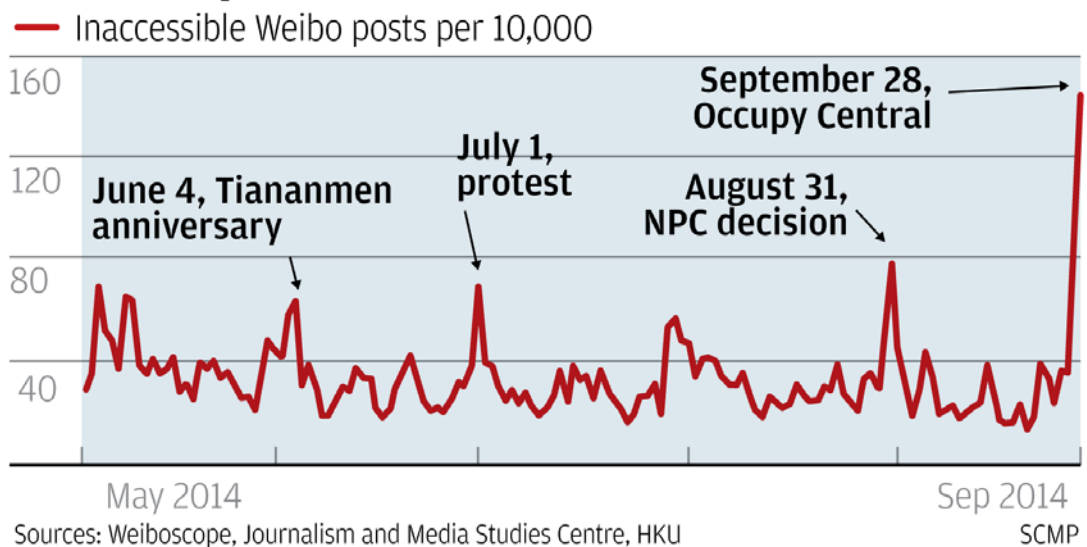


Image 5. This graph is showing the levels of censorship exercised by the Chinese government on the chinese social media Weibo on specific key dates

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### Turkey

In Turkey, the start of internet censorship was made back in the year 2007, when the government at the time passed the Internet Regulation Law 5651, which aimed at filtering the web and in that way cleansing it from any undesirable content.

<sup>7</sup> "Where street meets tweet." *The Economist*. The Economist Newspaper, 30 Sept. 2014.

The enforcement of this law practically meant the establishment of a unit within BTK (Information and Communication Technologies Authority) that then had the responsibility of blocking any site based on specific already existing laws. By May of 2015, around 80.000 websites were banned from public access. The same Law Nr.5651 has been used multiple times in order for the government to temporarily block platforms of public dialogue such as WordPress and YouTube. It should also be mentioned that although there have been court decisions stating that social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter should be banned, the law enforcement agencies did not act upon them. The European Court of Human Rights has declared that Law 5651 goes against the European Convention of Human Rights.

### Amnesty international

Amnesty International is an organization that promotes and advocates for the human rights as stated in the Declaration of the Human Rights. It is along these lines that they also fight for the rights of freedom of speech and expression. Since 2002, they have cooperated with giants of the internet age such as Yahoo!, Google and Microsoft in an attempt to limit internet censorship as much as possible through different actions including legislative advocacy and activism.

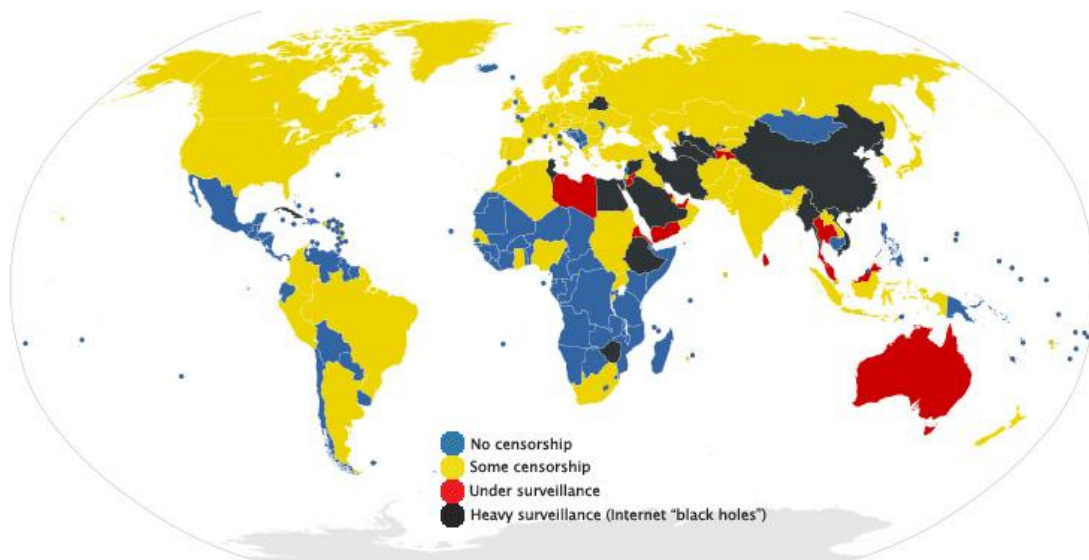


Image 6. The rates of censorship in countries around the world.

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<sup>8</sup> Pavlus, John. "Infographics: Internet Censorship Is Rampant Around the World." *Fast Company*. Fast Company, 07 Sept. 2012.

### Timeline of Events

Date	Description of event
399 BC	Socrates is one of the first victims of censorship in ancient Athens
1933	The Nazi burn thousands of books that were deemed as offensive
1991	The Windhoek Declaration is introduced in Africa by UNESCO
1997	„The Great Firewall of China“ is launched
2016	China is ranked as the worst abuser of internet freedom

### Relevant UN Treaties, Resolutions and Events

#### Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a set of fundamental rights that have to be universally protected and respected by every single individual for every single individual. The article 19 of this declaration states as followed: “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”

#### UN Humans Rights Council Resolution 20/8

The resolution A/HRC/RES/20/8 adopts “the promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet”. Among other things, this resolution restates that the rights of the people should be respected online just like they should be taken into serious consideration while offline. Amendments were however proposed to this resolution mainly by the Russian Federation as well as China, in order to weaken the “human rights based approach” that this resolution promotes. Lastly, the aforementioned resolution recognizes the importance of both the regulation of online censorship and the fundamental human right of freedom of

speech and it also emphasizes that overcoming these obstacles will play a significant role in achieving the Agenda 2030 Sustainable Goals.

### The Windhoek Declaration

In 1991 UNESCO conference took place in order to promote democracy and pluralism in the African Press. In other words, this document is in a way completing the 19th Article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The significance of this document lies in the fact that it was highly influential and it inspired many other similar declarations around the globe. Its points of focus are media freedom, pluralism and independence of the press. Since at the time of the conference the printed press was the norm on the 10th anniversary of the declaration, it expanded so that it covered other ways of broadcasting. May 3, the day the document was adopted, is commemorated as World Press Freedom Day, as declared by the United Nations.

### **Previous Attempts to solve the Issue**

Internet censorship by national governments has been a relatively recent phenomenon that the international community has to deal with today. It took the public some time to fully understand firstly the fact that it was taking part in it, secondly the degree to which it was happening and lastly the intentions behind it. Therefore, the attempts of the past in order to combat this issue haven't been many.

The United Nations themselves have tried to take action against it. The only binding resolution is the 19<sup>th</sup> Article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which then leaves a huge void in dealing with the issue, since it is not specific to the matter at hand but sets the outline for the general topic. Unfortunately, all other documents are not binding and they are only addressing the issue without actually proposing a solution.

A serious resistance when it comes to internet censorship has been posed by the frontier of activism, either by individuals or by organizations that wish to do something about the existing situation. Such an organization would be Amnesty International with a wide field of focus that covers advocating for the right to free speech and expression as well. AI has managed to address the issue, to inform and also motivate the public about the issue of internet censorship. A similar action undertakes the "Great Firewall" in China, a blog that lets the user know which sites are being censored within the Chinese cyber space. Nowadays everybody that is

interested in the internet restrictions of the Chinese government usually seeks information on this blog.

## Possible Solutions

Internet censorship is a very controversial issue with the debate taking place when it comes to finding a solution as well. The approaches vary depending on the general view on the matter of every administration. The most frequent question that is being asked when forming the policy of a country in its initial form is the following: Is internet censorship bad because of the fact that it doesn't respect the right of the people to have access to information or because of the fact that it gives the governments too much power over the public?

As a result, the proponents of internet censorship argue that this tactic is much needed for the protection of the citizens. Therefore, their proposed solution is forming the much-needed legislation. That would regulate the means and also the depth in which material online is being censored. A set of laws on the matter would define what exactly should be censored and what not. In that way, it would be made much more difficult for any government to not abide by it and at the same the implementation would be more effective with the public being perfectly aware of what is, and is not being censored. However, a possible drawback is that no 192 nations could agree upon a universal legislation about what is considered morally unacceptable and disturbing or what is harming the state's social harmony.

On the other hand, the people that strongly disagree with state-based censorship regularly support the idea that the total eradication of censorship is the only way of dealing with the issue. The main argument is that nobody should be excluded from information and culture with the main source of which being the internet. At the same time, nobody has the right to remove access to this material. Again, they talk about legislation but in a totally different way, meaning that the laws should make it clear that censoring activities online are a crime punishable by the legal system of the nation.

The middle ground is a solution that people rarely refer to. Most of the citizens taking part in the debate have very strong opinions either against or in favor of internet censorship used by the state itself. A possible solution would however be a compromise between the two. It is an undeniable fact that this tactic as long as it happens in a way controlled by the authorities can be of great benefit for the public. Then again, if a certain point is crossed a serious situation of the government having



full control over the citizens could occur. Legislation is again proposed as the best solution so far but this time not as absolute. In other words, by creating a legal framework that will protect the society from viewing offensive and disturbing material, which every nation defines itself, and at the same time respecting the people's rights and allowing them their deserved access to the majority of the information online.

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