Censorship

Censorship is when an authority (such as a government or religion) cuts out or suppresses communication. ...

There are many reasons to censor something, like protecting military secrets, stopping immoral or anti-religious works, or keeping political power.

Pros of Censorship

1. Censorship can reduce the impact of hate speech in society.
2. Censorship can protect children from unhealthy content.
3. Censorship can reduce the amount of conflict that is in society.
4. Censorship can provide another level of security to a country’s profile.
5. Censorship protects the rights of artists, innovators, and inventors.
6. Censorship provides us with a vehicle to stop false content.
7. Censorship can work to improve a person’s knowledge.
8. Censorship can limit the impact of identity theft.
9. Censorship helped to create our ratings system.

Cons of Censorship

1. It represses one group of people in favor of what the majority wants.
2. It allows people to create a specific narrative in society to call it truth.
3. It stops people from pursuing career opportunities.
4. It reduces the overall intelligence of the general public.
5. It prevents an individual from expressing themselves freely.
6. It shifts where the responsibility of consumption is in society.
7. It creates an adverse impact on the economy at all levels.
8. It allows a false narrative to become the truth.
9. It is expensive to be engaged in the practice of censorship.
10. It creates repression so that it encourages compliance.
Verdict on the Pros and Cons of Censorship

Some people look at the idea of censorship as a way to add common-sense restrictions to our daily routines so that we can stay safe and protect our children.

The other side of that equation is that families can set their own limits, establish rules, and create circumstances that fit their needs without imposing their morality or beliefs on others.

That's not to say that all forms of content should be allowed in society. Murder videos, child pornography, and similar items that encourage violence against others or promote actual harm in the images is a safety factor that we cannot ignore.

That's why the crux of the pros and cons of censorship work to distinguish fictional content from factual items.

We don't outlaw murder mystery novels because someone in the story dies.

We would outlaw content that showed a murder because a real person was harmed in the process of its creation.

First Amendment

From the First Amendment:

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

Freedom of Speech: Censorship

"Censorship, the suppression of words, images, or ideas that are "offensive," happens whenever some people succeed in imposing their personal political or moral values on others. Censorship can be carried out by the government as well as private pressure groups. Censorship by the government is unconstitutional."

ACLU

Freedom of Speech: Section 230

"Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act of 1996 states that, with some exceptions, internet companies are not legally responsible for the content they host if it was published there by someone else."

Technology Review

Internet Censorship

• The internet can be a vile place, and the instinct to enforce some standards there is not misplaced.

• The questions are:
  • who should set these limits?
  • who then should police them?

• Both governments and private companies have a part to play, even if government action often takes the form of demanding that private companies execute government policies.
The justification for government censorship is that some hate speech is an incitement to violence or a dangerous ratcheting of community tensions, whereas some — no matter how offensive — should be permitted by law, even if we are happy for private companies to act against it. Internet censorship is very different around the world, ranging from little to no oversight to very pervasive control and surveillance. Let's take a look at two countries on opposite sides of the spectrum.

Internet censorship in America

Internet censorship in the U.S is among the least controlled in the world. This is mainly due to the fact that most online activity is protected by First Amendment rights. There is still some surveillance and control when it comes to publishing certain content that may contain libel, child pornography, and intellectual property. While the Internet in the U.S. isn’t highly censored, it is highly regulated which leads to a lot of self-censorship in America.

Although the United States is pretty broad in what it allows, it does have a few restrictions:

- Incitement: incite imminent lawless action
- False statements of fact: libel or slander
  - Libel is a written or published defamatory statement, while slander is defamation that is spoken by the defendant.
- Obscenity: violates contemporary community standards
- Fighting words: incite an immediate breach of the peace

Case Study: Twitter

"In the first half of the year, Twitter said it suspended nearly 300,000 accounts globally linked to terrorism. Of those, roughly 95 percent were identified by the company’s spam-fighting automation tools. Meanwhile, the social network said government data requests continued to increase, and that it provided authorities with data on roughly 3,900 accounts from January to June."

Is it ethical for companies to remove information broadcasted by terrorism organizations, or about terrorism organizations?
**Case Study: Reddit**

- In 2015, Reddit's then-CEO, Yishan Wong, wrote: "We will not ban questionable subreddits. You choose what to post. You choose what to read. You choose what kind of subreddit to create."
- A few months later, Reddit began banning "hateful" subreddits as part of a new "anti-harassment" policy
- Last year, Reddit began removing "violent" subreddits such as r/Nazi, r/NationalSocialism, and r/far_right
- Last semester, Reddit began banning subreddits that facilitate the transactions of firearms, drugs, and alcohol
- Is it ethical for companies to remove discriminatory, provocative, hateful content generated by its users?

**Case Study: Cloudflare**

- "Our team has been thorough and have had thoughtful discussions for years about what the right policy was on censoring.
- Like a lot of people, we've felt angry at these hateful people for a long time but we have followed the law and remained content neutral as a network.
- We could not remain neutral after these claims of secret support by Cloudflare."
- Is it ethical for companies to remove information or deny service to people that do not promote or share their interests or political beliefs?

**Case Study: Google**

- According to Wikileaks, Eric Schmidt, Google's Chairman, drafted Clinton's campaign plan in 2014 and was an active advisor to the candidate.
- In the recent past, Google has been accused of suppressing unfavorable search results or preventing negative autocomplete suggestions
- Moreover, it has been accused of excluding conservative news sources on its news aggregator
- Additionally, it has recently banned apps popular with the Alt-Right
- Is online censorship a concern to you?

**Internet censorship in China**

- Internet control and surveillance in China is one of the strictest in the world.
- The Chinese government blocks a range of websites that contain content related to various historical independences, protests, freedom of speech, and pornography from its estimated 500 million Internet users.
- There are also international media and news sites that are flagged, including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.

**China’s Great Cannon**

The Great Cannon of China is an Internet attack tool that is used to launch distributed denial-of-service attacks on websites by performing a man-in-the-middle attack on large amounts of web traffic and injecting code which causes the end-user's web browsers to flood traffic to targeted websites.

The Great Cannon hijacks foreign web traffic intended for Chinese websites and re-purposes them to flood targeted web servers with enormous amounts of traffic in an attempt to disrupt their operations.

Besides launching denial-of-service attacks, the tool is also capable of monitoring web traffic and distributing malware in targeted attacks in ways that are similar to the Quantum Insert system used by the U.S. National Security Agency.

As of December 2019, the Great Cannon was being used to attempt to take down the Hong Kong-based LIHKG online forum.
Case Study: Search in China

Yahoo

Yahoo provided the Chinese government account-holder in formation that lead to the arrest of a Shi Tao, a poet and journalist.

Google

Upon investigating an attack on their systems, Google discovered that Gmail accounts of Chinese human-rights activists had been hacked and decided to pull out of the country.

In 2016, the company decided to head back...

Case Study: Facebook in China

"The social network has quietly developed software to suppress posts from appearing in people's news feeds in specific geographic areas, according to three current and former Facebook employees, who asked for anonymity because the tool is confidential.

The feature was created to help Facebook get into China, a market where the social network has been blocked, these people said. Mr. Zuckerberg has supported and defended the effort, the people added."

Facebook Said to Create Censorship Tool to Get Back Into China (Video)

Case Study: Apple in China

"Apple, complying with what it said was a request from Chinese authorities, removed news apps created by The New York Times from its app store in China late last month (December 2016).

"Skype's disappearance from the App Store came to light on Tuesday as Apple told two US senators that it had removed 674 VPN apps this year, at the request of the Chinese government. The company said it had "questioned the legal basis of the request" but was told that the affected VPN operators were in violation of Chinese cyber security law (November 2016)."

Apple officially handed over its iCloud operation in China to a local state-run company, along with all encryption keys to unlock local user data. The switch will give the Chinese government unfettered access to the photos, emails and contacts of over 240 million iPhone users in China (March 2018).

Earlier this month, Apple removed HKmap.live—an app that pro-democracy protestors in Hong Kong used to track police activity—from its iOS App Store, after an op-ed criticizing the tool was published in People's Daily, the Chinese Communist Party's flagship newspaper.

Apple also removed the Quartz news app from its China App Store, after the outlet extensively covered the protest movement in Hong Kong. Around the same time, Apple began hiding the Taiwan flag from users in Hong Kong and Macau; the Chinese Communist Party asserts that Taiwan is formally part of the country under its One-China policy. (October 2019)

Case Study: Google's Chinese Dragonfly

"Dr. Poulson said the Chinese project, called Dragonfly, had several "disturbing components." A prototype, he said, would allow a partner company in China to view a person's search history based on his or her phone number. He said the project also censored an extensive list of subjects that included information about air quality and China's president, Xi Jinping."

-- New York Times

While onstage at the event, Pichai did not back away from Google's controversial decision to build a censored search engine in China. In fact, he doubled down on the search engine, codenamed Project Dragonfly, saying the potential to expose the world to more information is guiding Google's push into China.

"We are compelled by our mission [to] provide information to everyone, and [China is] 20 percent of the world's population." -- Wired

Case Study: Facebook in China

Question

Is it ethical for companies to comply with government requests for censorship?
Cons of Internet censorship

- There are some big disadvantages to Internet censorship that affect the way people access information.
- It restricts too much information. It’s entirely possible that real information is blocked along with fake information, which opens a large debate about what you should and shouldn’t restrict/access.
- Who’s in charge? How are rules defined? Are there checks and balances? Internet censorship could quickly turn into a matter of opinion over what is acceptable and what isn’t.
- Censors free speech. Internet censorship not only limits the content you can access but potentially the content you post as well.
- Cost. This kind of goes without saying but the workforce required, and associated cost, to control and survey Internet users would be astronomical - most likely coming at the expense of taxpayers.

We Don't Need No Thought Control

In 2007, AT&T came under fire when music fans discovered that the company had edited out political comments in a Webcast performance by the band Pearl Jam. The band covered Pink Floyd's song "Another Brick in the Wall" and added lyrics criticizing United States President George W. Bush.

AT&T cut the new lyrics out of the song before Webcasting it.

Web Filter Controversy

Censorship opponents have some big problems with Web filtering software. Many Web filtering programs encrypt their blacklists, claiming that it helps minimize abuse.

Opponents point out that the encrypted blacklist could also include Web pages that aren't inappropriate at all, including pages that criticize the creators of the Web filter.

Even if the programs’ creators aren’t blocking these sites on purpose, it’s easy for a Web filter to restrict access to the wrong sites. That's because programs that search for keywords can't detect context.

For example, early Web filters would often block access to chicken breast recipes.

The programs couldn't tell the difference between an innocent site about cooking and a pornographic site, so they blocked all of them indiscriminately.

Search Engine Censorship

Most search engines self-censor their search engine results pages (SERPs) in an effort to provide users with relevant search terms.

This is necessary because some webmasters try to trick search engines into giving their Web pages high SERP ranks. If the search engines didn’t weed out and censor these pages, every SERP would be filled with irrelevant results.

Recently, censorship opponents have criticized search engine companies like Yahoo and Google for helping restrictive countries maintain control of the Internet.

The companies are in a delicate position – although headquartered in the United States, they still need to obey local laws when operating in other countries.

The good, the bad, and the ugly

- Internet censorship is a touchy subject, but it's important to underline the facts and lay out both sides of the argument.
- It's typically handled at the government level, and there are a lot of factors in play with different laws and societal norms at the center.

Good, Bad, and Ugly

A pro-censorship member of Congress once attacked the following shows for being too violent:

The Miracle Worker, Civil War Journal, Star Trek 9, The Untouchables, and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.

What would be left if all these kinds of programs were purged from the airwaves?

Is there good violence and bad violence?

If so, who decides?
Consider

Sports and the news are at least as violent as fiction, from the fights that erupt during every televised hockey game, to the videotaped beating of Rodney King by the LA Police Department.

Should sports and the news be subject to censorship?

Closer to home

Video game censorship has been a long and tireless battle for censors, changing in response to controversial titles.

Video games in the past were simple and targeted at children with an ensemble of a bright, pixelated color palette.

Contemporary games with excessive violence and nudity purchased by unsuspecting adults brought about years of debate and concern for youth who might be exposed.

Video Games

Pokemon - Saudi Arabia's religious authority banned the entire Pokemon franchise back in 2001 because the games feature six-pointed stars, "a symbol of international Zionism and the state of Israel."

EA Sports MMA launched in many countries throughout the world in 2010 but not in Denmark. The energy drink logos on the rings and fighter's shorts violated the country's restrictions against advertising those kinds of products.

SNES role-playing game Earthbound had its own share of "family-friendly" changes from Nintendo. What's more interesting, though, is the collection of edits Nintendo made to avoid being sued.

Final Fight - Nintendo had a tendency in the eighties and nineties to over-edit their games before releasing them overseas to maintain their family-friendly image. For the game's SNES release here in the West, black enemies were given lighter skin. Trans criminals Roxy and Poison were changed into male thugs "Billy" and "Sid." Instead of grabbing whiskey to regain health, players could grab "vitamine."

Mass Effect - The only country to ban Mass Effect was Singapore, due to an alleged lesbian sex scene.

Video Game Censorship

On December 9, 1993, a United States Senate committee held a hearing on the subject of video game violence.

The hearing was led by senators Joe Lieberman and Herb Kohl.

Throughout the hearing, the committee scrutinized Night Trap along with Midway's Mortal Kombat.

As a result of the publicity generated by the hearings, retailers sold 50,000 copies of Night Trap the following week.

Video Games

Controversial themes are abundant and often glorified: bullying, violence, gang activity, theft, sexism, and many more.

The consistency of these themes prompted a question:

Do games make teenagers more violent and if so, should they be censored?