

Chapter 38

Censorship in the Digital Age the World Over

Kari D. Weaver

University of South Carolina – Aiken, USA

ABSTRACT

Censorship is found in all human societies but is of increasing concern and complexity in the modern, digital age. This chapter explores the history of censorship, current concerns surrounding censorship, organizations and agencies working against censorship, potential solutions, and future research in this area of study. Though censorship is unlikely to ever disappear completely, all individuals can and should be aware of it and contribute to the overall social dialogue on issues of censorship.

INTRODUCTION

Censorship is an issue that has impacted information access for as long as humans have shared information. As communication technologies have grown and changed, from oral traditions, to the printing press, to the rapid rise of the Internet, many have sought to limit the ability of others to create, find, use, and share information with their fellow citizens. This has had important implications for the power and freedom of individuals within these societies, and has helped to shape the face of the modern world.

Censorship is also of critical importance to managers and entrepreneurs worldwide. Although international business has become increasingly “flattened” by globalization, information policy varies widely from nation to nation and has a significant impact upon both business climate and personnel safety. Employees in some countries may not be able to receive or share certain information, and government censorship may require additional functionality to be included in products or services. Cultural norms, practices, and ethical guidelines for capturing and sharing information are governed by the laws of the host nation. All of these factors must be taken into account when considering expanding operation into new locations around the globe.

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BACKGROUND

Although censorship is a familiar concept, a precise definition is challenging. In this article, “censorship” is defined as “the action or the use of authority to limit access to information that would otherwise be available in the public sphere.” Common justifications for censorship include morality, obscenity, blasphemy, or national security. It can be and is performed by individuals, groups, corporations, or governments and their agents.

Censorship has existed throughout civilized history. The word “censor” is derived from Latin, when censors within the Roman Empire conducted the census and other state functions while regulating morality under Roman rule (Pina Polo, 2012). Censorship has been practiced worldwide, primarily through religious institutions or by governments acting as agents of the church. Book banning and burning has played an important role in European history, such as in France during the Enlightenment, in the USSR during the Bolshevik revolution, and in Germany during the Weimar Republic (Lyons, 2011). There were few laws regulating censorship of information until 1789, when the Constitution of the United States of America was adopted, and individual freedoms, including the right to free speech, became protected. Since then, similar laws have been adopted by other countries around the world (Passavant, 2002).

Today, information has become a digital commodity, and individuals are now affected both by the laws of their home countries and by international standards. This is further complicated as individual jurisdictions seek to apply laws from the offline world to the online context (Worstell, 2012). However, no overarching international laws directly address censorship, and it was only in 2011 that the United Nations Human Rights Council identified unfettered Internet access as a human right (La Rue, 2011). International law regarding information theft lags behind even the UN report, as prosecutions are based on the laws of the countries in which the crimes were perpetrated. Depending upon the country, these laws can be extremely restrictive, very broad, or potentially even in violation of internationally-recognized human rights agreements (La Rue, 2011). This inconsistent treatment of information across countries, in concert with increasing technological complexity, has led to challenges with the implementation of new internet standards (DeNardis, 2009).

Educational institutions have historically had a special role within society, with libraries and universities acting as both repositories of knowledge and points of information access for their communities. Libraries are common targets for censorship since removing a book from a personal collection blocks access for one person, whereas removing it from the library blocks access for the whole community. As Byrne (2003) notes, librarians cultivate a “professional narrative of non-judgmental, disinterested provision of access to information” which “confers a legitimacy on their professional choices to make [information] available or not make available” (Byrne, 2003, p. 7). Libraries have historically taken all sides on censorship debates - sometimes removing materials, keeping them in place, or relocating them to special sections. Broadly, though, libraries tend to focus on preserving, protecting, and providing access to information, as can be seen in their central role in preserving culture in locations as varied as Afghanistan and Colombia (Knuth, 2003, 2006).

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