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Opinion & Analysis

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Surfing the edges of personal freedom

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IT WAS only a matter of time before the internet became a political issue. Recent developments suggest that the use, availability and control of cyberspace are likely to become new arenas for global relations and conflict. This represents a new era that will demand innovative guidelines, lest the internet becomes an impediment, rather than an asset, to democratic governance. Web censorship is on the rise worldwide.

Ironically, just as the web now covers the earth, so does the ability of countries to block content at will. A recent study by the Open-Net initiative shows that net censorship is now prevalent in 25 of 41 countries surveyed. Chief culprits are largely found in Asia and the Middle East, in particular in China, Vietnam, Thailand and Saudi Arabia.

In many cases, selected web pages are being blocked or filtered. YouTube has already been blocked in Turkey and Morocco as governments find that the open society promised by the internet becomes a threat to their own existence. Google and Yahoo! have already agreed to censor their websites in China. Clearly the might of the business that country generates has been enough to make the search giants scared to their core.

At the heart of the problem is political interference in the commercial side of the internet experience. Such has been the prolific influence of Google and Yahoo! that for many these search engines are the new gatekeepers of world information. Searching for relevant data is now largely confined to these giant providers – thus affording them a new powerful role in the world.

The power of the search engine is therefore meeting state power head on. The western values of an open society are now meeting resistance at the coal face – by US-based information providers grappling with state intervention and censorship abroad. The battle (already begun) will test the mettle of the internet's biggest names. It is therefore critical that these players make a concerted, and co-ordinated, effort to be free of state interference and not bow to authoritarian dictates.

So great is the new concern that Google has already requested that US trade officials treat internet interference as international trade barriers – similar to hurdles such as tariffs. Doing business across the world has become more problematic as the search giants start to pressure for an interference-free environment. For the US, it will be critical to uphold these values. They should be values that are agreed and endorsed as conditions for doing business via US negotiators and internet operators alike.

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Already, one search engine has come under fire for acquiescing to the whims of the Chinese authorities. At the recent World Association of Newspapers Conference held in Cape Town, the Golden Pen award for press freedom went to jailed Chinese journalist Shi Tao, who had disseminated – via his personal Yahoo! e-mail account – the regulations laid down by the Chinese government for coverage of the commemoration of the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown.

Following pressure from Beijing, Yahoo! handed over Shi Tao’s personal information, and he was detained shortly thereafter. Yahoo! blinked under pressure – and the thought of losing its foothold in a market of 1,4-billion people hungry for the web.

Clearly, this is one of the first – and certainly one of the highest- profile – examples of new media yielding to the political whims of a country with distinctive and differing attitudes toward s press freedom. The implications are serious.

The power and strength of information filters such as Yahoo! and Google pose a threat to us all. As Google catalogues the planet into an astonishingly efficient database, access to information might well be easier, but it is not necessarily more democratic. Although we accept the financial and commercial imperative of product placements and preferential search listings, what we are starting to witness is political interference in the transparency of the web.

While bloggers abound and alternative views are everywhere, popular websites that should enhance democracy (such as YouTube) are slowly falling prey to the larger new media giants. Now that YouTube is in the clutches of Google, will that medium continue to broadcast politically oriented material that flouts censorship laws in major developing nations, or will it meekly fold when new lucrative markets become paranoid?

The political implications of the cross-border power of the web are new and underexplored. For operators based in countries that value free speech and open access, any supplication to the whims of control halfway across the world will not only negate freedoms but will affect the web back home.

Gatekeeping is already a worry for US users of Google and Yahoo! How much more so if it becomes the norm for these giants to tolerate degrees of interference unheard of in western media? Once western practitioners accept state intervention in their foreign operations, it can only be a matter of time before their own countries’ governments find reason to snoop, spy and suspend democratic values in media relations.

It is therefore critical that at this relatively early juncture, the operations of the web be enhanced through broad-based international agreements that protect users and enshrine accessibility. While Yahoo! and Google can do nothing about the technology used to block their sites (and that of others) by nervous foreign governments, they can (and should) refuse to divulge the personal information of their customers – no matter how much the pressure.

The increased fear of blocking techniques and the resultant loss of revenue income for these new giants of the new media world, now offers substantial reason to renege on user security and confidentiality.

The web might well usher in a new era of transparency but, if not monitored, could become yet another instrument of control in the arsenal of states, both democratic and authoritarian, around the world.



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