

Barriers to Broadcasting on the Internet

The Internet was built as a global commons, a platform on which geographical boundaries did not apply. And yet, today more than 40 countries impose some form of content control over the Internet, and that number is rising. Freedom House, a US-based non-governmental organisation specialising in democratic rights, releases annual reports entitled “Freedom on the Net”. In this year’s edition¹, they noted that 20 of the 47 countries that they monitor had seen a “negative trajectory in Internet Freedom”.

The OpenNet Initiative² has documented the passing of Internet access and regulation through four key phases. They began with the Open Commons era, where the Internet was defined as a non-physical “cyberspace” that could not be regulated or controlled. From the year 2000 onwards, this position has moved into periods where access was first Denied, through rudimentary blocking of content; then Controlled, through overlapping layers of content filtering, regulatory pressure, and other technical means beyond information denial; and most recently Contested as governments, the private sector and civil society openly push for influence over the domain.

While restrictions on the flow of content continue to increase, so do the efforts of individuals to reach news and information online. Software exists to access the Internet freely, whether it’s Psiphon services propagated by the BBC and BBG, software like Tor that is discovered via word of mouth or Internet searches, or even private individual VPNs available off-the-shelf in local Internet cafes. And this software is not just being used in censored countries by activists, but by the general public, to access software and services that we in the West take for granted. In China, figures released earlier this year claimed that there were over 60 million Facebook users, and over 35 million Twitter accounts, despite both services being routinely blocked.

Over the past year, there have been some particularly high-profile cases of content being blocked on the Internet. In the wake of an anti-Muslim YouTube video that led to violent protests in the Middle East, Google saw blocks and shutdowns of its services in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Syria, Afghanistan and Iran. It blocked access to the video itself in Libya and Egypt following violent physical protests. In Ethiopia, Sweden’s state TV broadcaster’s site was blocked in September because of their reporting of falsified evidence related to the conviction of two journalists. And when the New York Times published a story on October 26 that highlighted the wealth of Premier Wen Jiabao, not only was their own site blocked, but also other sites reporting on the story, including BBC News.

New laws are also being introduced internationally to restrict Internet content. Pakistan is renowned for blocking content based on its anti-blasphemy laws, with Twitter also blocked there in May 2012 over a competition to draw the prophet Muhammad. Theories of a “Halal Internet” being formed in Iran are regularly discussed, while Russia has recently introduced a law aimed at blacklisting sites used for criminal activity, but with vague wording that would allow censorship of a much wider range of content.

The Guardian recently ran a series of articles called The Battle for the Internet³. Within that series they featured an article by Sergey Brin, co-founder of Google, in which he discussed the threats to Internet freedom. In clarifying his position from the original article, he wrote “Today, the primary threat by far to internet freedom is government filtering of political dissent. This has been far more effective than I ever imagined possible across a number of nations.”

The swift manner in which countries are blocking content on the Internet means that news broadcasters have to learn to adapt quickly, and try to reach their audiences through whatever means they have at their disposal. VOA and BBC services both make use of Psiphon’s software technologies to give their audience access to content when it is blocked. Over time, the services have built up an understanding of how their news can reach people in countries where content is routinely blocked and filtered.

¹ <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/freedom-net-2012>

² <http://www.opennet.net>

³ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/series/battle-for-the-internet>

The Canada Centre for Global Security Studies and the Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto issued a report called “Casting a Wider Net: Lessons Learned in Delivering BBC Content on the Censored Internet⁴”. This paper studied the BBC’s use of Psiphon technologies, looking at how news events and changes in censorship influenced the use of circumvention software in Iran and China. It also made recommendations to broadcasters and news organisations to help them deal with censorship of their content.

One of the key recommendations from the report is that broadcasters work together and collaborate with experts from both academia and the private sector. As more news content is delivered online, with some services exclusively operating in this field, news providers need to be able to detect when their content is being blocked, have the tools available to reach their audiences, and adapt their delivery methods accordingly. While the cost of delivery to unrestricted Internet users continues to decline, broadcasters and content providers need to be aware that much of their international content will be aimed at locations where the effort and cost to deliver services is much greater.

The future of the open Internet is the focus of much current debate. But who is it that will end up taking control? Should there be an international body responsible for ensuring the free flow of information across this relatively new medium? When the Internet was being developed and during the Open Commons phase, rules were devised by the engineers who created the networks, and were based on creating and promoting standards through largely informal mechanisms.

Now, nation states have a much greater perceived need to be in control of this medium. In the coming weeks, the ITU will be discussing governance of the Internet at its World Conference on International Telecommunications⁵, having issued a paper for public consultation proposing new authorities within the scope of the International Telecommunication Regulations.

Opponents of this move argue that existing norms for freedom of expression, such as those in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are sufficient, and transferable to the Internet. The stakeholders of the Internet are not just governments, but individuals, civil society, and both the public and private sector. The Internet as it is now has grown based on the needs and efforts of users of the Internet. Any attempts at governance should reflect the truly international, decentralised nature of the Internet, taking into account cross-disciplinary, multinational and multi-lingual requirements.

Content providers and broadcasters today need to be aware of the issues surrounding Internet freedoms, and need to be proactive in providing services that can ensure their news content reaches their audience. As more countries are controlling access to content, it is becoming increasingly difficult to be sure that the content is being seen everywhere. There is a need for broadcasters to build up and maintain trust amongst individuals in countries where censorship is prevalent, and to take seriously their role in providing not just news content, but software platforms and services for the consumption of that content.

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About the author: Karl Kathuria is an independent media technology consultant, specialising in Internet distribution and streaming media. Prior to this, he spent over 10 years at the BBC, managing the distribution of World Service Internet content. He was the lead author for the Citizen Lab’s “Casting a Wider Net” publication, and his current projects include working with Psiphon Inc., the Canadian provider of network software aimed at preserving security, privacy, and access to content that may otherwise be blocked. Karl can be contacted via email at karl.kathuria@gmail.com

⁴ <http://uoft.me/casting>

⁵ <http://www.itu.int/en/wcit-12>