



Freedom of Expression?

Social Pressures of the Internet

Introduction

The Internet is a form of mass media which spans many different countries. It can be accessed from anywhere in the world, and by anyone. You can express your personal opinions, safe in the knowledge that your personal life will not be affected. You can receive information about almost anything, anytime, and without anyone else knowing. Many people feel that this freedom of information poses a threat to our society today.

The new growth

There was little interest in the Internet until the creation of the WWW, and the graphical interface for the browser that allowed access to it. From that point onwards, the interest in Internet has grown exponentially, and has become a part of popular culture today. The Internet was once exclusively the domain of technical people, and the outside world carried on oblivious to the transient mass of information transferred daily. The introduction of the general public has caused a change in the content of the Internet, which is becoming more commercial, and catering more and more to the masses. Many of the problems with such a wide broadcast media are becoming obvious as the global community struggles to become a reality.

Society

In every social group or culture there are differences between individuals. Each of these individuals has the freedom of choice, and the right to exercise that freedom. Problems arise however, when the desires of two individuals (or social groups) are in direct conflict (eg: one person in a house wants to watch TV1, and the other wants to watch TV2). Usually such conflicts are resolved by cooperation or compromise in a friendly manner. When conflicts cannot be resolved by the participants, the government or law enforcement agencies become involved, and they make a decision which will be best for the groups involved and for the entire society (at least that is the idea).

Global Culture

The Internet has no governing body, nor does it have a law enforcement agency. Nobody has the power to make decisions which are enforceable throughout the Internet. Information which is available on the Internet is available internationally. Anyone can access the information from any country without restriction (as long as they have access to the Internet). The problem is of course that there is no global culture to match the global communication. Every country has its own unique culture which sets its own standards of acceptability. Inevitably, problems arise where some cultures are forced to accept the material produced by other cultures.

Cultural Disintegration

The Internet was founded in the USA, and continues to obtain much of its support from the US. Some countries are concerned about the possible degradation of their national identity as they become overwhelmed by US culture. The most common language used on the WWW is English, with the likely result that English will become the dominant world-wide language, and cultural diversity will suffer.

The English-speaking (mostly US) culture is likely to always be the major influence on the WWW, but we should all try to respect (and encourage) the other cultures visible on the WWW. Political ideologies are rarely compatible, so, as with most issues, tolerance is the important consideration here. Consider the "extreme" views of White Supremacist ideology: Should they be allowed to have a WWW presence (if you are unsure, check out <http://www.stormfront.org/>)? If not, then who has the right to stop them? What about the dangers of political ideologies such as Capitalism, or Communism?

There is no viable solution to the inevitable clash of cultures which is occurring. Perhaps a more uniform "global community" will emerge, perhaps it will merely incite bigotry and hatred as people are forced to deal with foreign cultures. Every person has the chance to contribute to the world which we are becoming, so make sure it is a world that we all want. It is highly likely that many of you will contribute to the content of the WWW, so make sure you are aware of the implications of what you produce.

Censorship

Most cultures censor material which is deemed unsuitable for the general population. It is obvious that different cultures have vastly different opinions about what is acceptable (eg: compare US, NZ, and European TV). The structure of the Internet prevents any country from censoring information stored in a different country (how could you enforce such a policy?), and it is impossible to edit or censor the information as it crosses the country border (as would normally be done with physical material). Laws can be enforced regarding information stored on computers within a country (and have been in NZ), but what can possibly be done about material from other parts of the world?

Information which is deemed acceptable and would usually be allowed within NZ still causes problems. Material available to the public can be restricted to certain portions of the population by using a rating system. For example; once a government body decides that some material deserves an R18 rating, it can be enforced by the distributors of that material (ie: book shops, video stores etc.). This option is not available on the Internet, since the distribution method is automated, and comes directly from overseas to the home. Even if material was rated, there would be no way of enforcing a restriction upon younger users.

Dangerous Information

Some of the information accessible on the Internet is considered dangerous by many. Examples include such things as guides on picking locks, burglary advice, how to make chemical weapons, how a nuclear weapon is constructed (with detailed schematics and advice), how to make bombs out of household cleaners, advice for the urban guerrilla, detailed advice for potential rapists and killers (i.e. how to get away with it) and so on. Most of this information is accessible from your local library, but on the WWW it is easily found, and can often be discussed with the authors (and other like minded people), making it easier to understand (and perhaps more acceptable within its own subculture). Defenders of free speech insist that if the information is already available (ie: in public libraries), then how can people complain if it is made more understandable (via the Internet)? Concerned parents criticise the availability of the information, saying that the information can be stumbled across, rather than requiring dedicated research, and high-level academic understanding. These parents often feel concerned that the context and presentation (eg: in advanced textbooks) of such information in ordinary society prevents it from being dangerous. The information on the Internet has been compared to keeping industrial cleaners in the kitchen pantry – an unsafe practice which invites disaster.

Protecting the Innocent

Children may misinterpret the information on the WWW, thinking that it is normal, or acceptable behaviour in society. Usually parents are able to steer children away from behaviour they deem inappropriate (such as offensive language, subversive or anti-social propaganda, extreme violence, racism, sexism, or overt sexual behaviour). Without guidance, children may be misled or otherwise exposed to such undesirable information. Many parents and schools are under pressure to provide WWW access, but lack the time to supervise every use of the WWW personally.

Solutions?

Both the US, and NZ have tried to pass laws which will restrict the information available electronically, and both failed. The Communications Decency Act initiated in 1994 in the US (and passed in 1996) would have made an individual liable for any material stored on their computers which was found to be "indecent" or "patently offensive". Since this included sex-education, and abortion information, civil rights groups were damning of the Act. The US Communications Decency Act was overturned by a Supreme Court ruling as unconstitutional in 1997.

A solution to the problem in NZ was proposed by Trevor Rogers (MP) in the form of the Technology and Crimes Reform Bill. This bill would make the owner of a computer responsible for all the material which was stored upon it. Of course, this would have resulted in ISP's being responsible for any information which any of their clients viewed. Since the only international link at the time was from Waikato University, the bill would have meant that Waikato University would be liable for all the information that anyone in NZ looked at. After a large petition by the computing industry, the bill was rejected.

Technical Problems

The information on the Internet is distributed among many countries. A client requests information from a distant location, and it is sent by the server. The information moves across international boundaries in *binary form*, totally divorced from the true nature of the information. It is impossible to decide what the content of electronic information is before it is viewed at the destination. The information is often encoded, making it impossible for an ISP to check what data is stored on their own system (eg: if a client has stored information on their account on the ISP server).

Commercial Solutions

There are three different options commercially available which attempt to solve the problem of restricting access to material. All of them have merits, but none solve the problem completely.

The first type of software maintains a large list of sites which are deemed unsuitable, and simply restricts access to these sites. Updated lists are available from the software publishers through the WWW. The primary fault with this solution is that new pages which have not yet been reviewed may be accessed without restriction. The other major fault is that your personal opinion about what is unsuitable may not match the publishers (eg; one publisher restricts entry to an educational site about being gay on the grounds that some of the links lead to unsuitable material).

The second type of software uses a list of keywords, and before each page is displayed, it is checked against the list of keywords and if a match is found, the page is not displayed. The problem is that it is difficult to restrict access to undesirable material (such as pornography) and still allow access to educational pages (such as "sex education") purely through the use of keywords. The distinction between "good" and "bad" pages is often the way the words are used, rather than the appearance of the words themselves.

The third type of software does not restrict pages at all, but provides a log of all the pages visited so that parents can check the logs and discuss the results with their children. This type of software performs a monitoring role rather than restricting access. The faults with such a system are self-evident.

Hope for the Future

The Internet community has realized that a problem exists and is attempting to meet the challenge. The current proposal is to introduce a rating system by which all pages are rated. This system would use international standards and would rate pages on a variety of criteria (such as violence, nudity and offensive language). These ratings are likely to be provided by a third-party reviewer, would be stored in a database system and accessed through a search-engine. The rating system would allow pages to be rated according to other aspects, such as educational value, and accuracy. Each person would have the control to select the level of viewing for themselves and their family.

Search Engines

The most common method of finding information is through the use of a search engine, which is thought of as a giant index. However, indexes are impartial whereas search engines results are displayed by rating the pages, and every search engine uses a different method of rating. If you know the system that the search engine uses then you can trick it into thinking your page has a higher rating (eg; engines which rate pages based on the number of times keywords appear can be fooled by using the same word repeatedly).

The Veronica search engine (a gopher search engine popular before the WWW) displayed a link to a page about homosexuals when a search was done with the keyword "camping". A powerful Christian group lobbied against the search engine, so the programmers rewrote the search engine to filter the results for homosexual references. The filtering of results to remove undesirable pages is done without the public knowing. Search engines are the only feasible way to find information, so the public is at the mercy of the programmers.

Search engines such as Alta Vista are funded by advertising and sponsors. If you search for keywords, the search engine will display an advertisement which matches your keyword if at all possible. It would be possible to alter the ratings of pages belonging to the sponsors, or indeed to sell ratings to advertisers. If this occurs then the WWW could become very misleading with information presented according to funding rather than relevance.

Conclusion

Newspapers gain a certain authority because they are printed information, and thought of as impartial (in fact, most reporting is highly subjective, interpreted, and presented as fact). The WWW will, over time, assume this kind of authority because we constantly refer to it as a source of information, and it is difficult to distinguish reliable and unreliable sources on the WWW. The material on the WWW is a mish-mash of personal views from individuals who are enthusiastic about pet subjects, and commercial groups with a vested interest. This material can be filtered (usually unannounced) by a third-party organisation (such as a search engine or company supplying ratings) whose personal views and policies are unknown. The real danger of the WWW is assuming that the information is somehow impartial, or representative of our culture.

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