# Censorship in the Digital Age the World Over

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## 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.

## 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 (Worstall, 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).

## CENSORSHIP IN THE MODERN WORLD

Throughout the modern world, agents of censorship fit broadly into three categories: individuals, governments, and corporations. In countries with laws protecting freedoms of speech, religion, and the press, acts of censorship are typically initiated by individuals or corporations, while, in others, authoritarian governments are the primary agents of censorship. Although China is most commonly associated with censorship, there is widespread agreement that governments in Eritrea, North Korea, Syria, and Iran are even more restrictive (Reporters Without Borders, 2013). Other countries, such as Ethiopia, Cuba, Saudi Arabia, and Belarus, are also often listed as "most censored" countries, but rankings depend on the perspective of the organization reviewing censorship activities in each nation.

Regardless of the censoring agent, there are three main strategies for censoring materials. The first is removal or blocking of offensive material, which prevents individuals from viewing or experiencing the material at all. As the most common form of censorship, this strategy is typically employed where information is contained within physical artifacts, such as books or recordings. Second, instead of removing the material directly, organizations may instead remove any references to the material, such as a catalog entry or its visibility to a search engine (Zittrain & Palfrey, 2008; Chen & Wang, 2010). This strategy may extend to keyword filtering at an internet service provider (ISP) or router level, depending on the level of control of the government organization (Xu, Mao, & Halderman, 2011). With the growth of the Internet and users' dependence on search engines for finding information, this is often as effective as removing the information entirely. Another variant of this method is blocking certain search terms that may lead to the offensive material, such as is used with the Chinese microblogging platform Weibo (Ng, 2013). The final method is intimidation. Authoritarian regimes make it known through a variety of means that exploration of certain materials or ideas is forbidden and will carry consequences for the user. While the ultimate decision remains with the user, the potential for punishment may prevent the search from ever taking place.

Due to its rapid growth and power for sharing information, the Internet has proven an important battleground for censorship activity. While most

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