

Book Review

Deibert, Ronald, John Palfrey, Rafal Rohozinski, and Jonathan Zittrain, eds. 2008. *Access Denied: The Practice and Policy of Global Internet Filtering*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.

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Since its founding in 1985, the NGO *Reporters Sans Frontières* (Reporters Without Borders) has monitored and publicised threats to press freedom in states worldwide. This book, as the editor's note, takes up a similarly daunting task with respect to state-sanctioned limitations on free speech via the Internet. This volume summarizes a major global survey conducted by the OpenNet Initiative (a collaboration between scholars at the Universities of Harvard, Toronto, Cambridge and Oxford). The results of their collective research efforts reveal an Internet that is incrementally diverging from that space of open and free communication envisioned and advocated by utopian activists in the early years following its emergence as a mass medium. In place of a democratic medium allowing unrestricted speech and a free exchange of information and ideas, we see instead concerted efforts by states worldwide to control the flow of fact and opinion, silencing their own citizens and denying them the right to access politically inconvenient truths.

However, in contrast to the monitoring efforts of RSF (and of other organisations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International), the survey conducted by the OpenNet Initiative has a more restricted and specific remit. Its primary concern is not with the manifold means through which states censor speech (such as legislative prohibition, intimidation, and penal sanctions); rather, it focuses upon a more specific mechanism used by states to control online flows of information, namely technological blockades that serve to monitor content and deny access to material deemed 'dangerous.' Such content spans political, religious, cultural and sexual representations and communications. In addition to blocking access, automated monitoring of this kind can be used to identify and gather intelligence about those *producing* 'undesirable' content, and subsequently subject them to a range of (often brutal) sanctions.

Broadly speaking, the book is divided into two sections: the first part comprises 6 chapters that outline and examine various dimensions of Internet filtering, ranging from methodological questions, through the technical means used to deny users access, to the ethical implications of filtering for the future of the Internet. The second part, making up the bulk of the book, provides empirical regional overview together with country-based studies of 40 nations (all of them 'non-Western,' spanning South and Central Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America). Of those 40 countries where empirical testing for state-sanctioned filtering activity was carried out, the researchers claim to have found concrete evidence for such actions in 26, with a further 2 'suspected' of filtering. While filtering practices vary widely in terms of scope, depth and effectiveness the overall picture painted by these country studies (alongside the regional overviews that include Western liberal democratic states) is a worrying one. The authors rightly point out (p. 2) that these developments give credence to Larry Lessig's prescient insights into the way in which computer 'code' can provide a much more effective mechanism for controlling the Internet than

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'old' codes of law and regulation. As states become more attuned to the possibilities of technologically led censorship, we might expect such restrictions to become ever more apparent.

The book is, by any judgement, a prodigious effort, one that has required the concerted efforts not only of academics but also of human rights activists, journalists and lawyers in the countries studied; it is the latter who have furnished much of the detailed material and background information on censorship efforts worldwide. However, this dependence on such a diversity of sources does raise some problems about the empirical evidence presented. To take one example, the study of Venezuela found no evidence for Internet filtering, but the authors nevertheless express concerns for the future, extrapolated from the 'restrictive media policies' (p.426) instituted by the Chavez government. The administration has indeed nationalized the country's major telecommunications company, and introduced a Social Responsibility Law that controls broader media content. However, this picture may be viewed as somewhat one-sided, insofar as what is omitted is an appreciation of the problematic role of right-wing mass media (such as newspapers) in Venezuelan politics in recent years. Specifically, these elements of the press are suspected of active complicity in the attempted coup against the democratically elected Chavez administration in 2002. The point here is not to oppose one account of Venezuelan state media policy with another, but to point out that particular political and ideological orientations and interests can and will shape the supposedly 'neutral' empirical data supplied, and therefore the assessments about threats to freedom provided by the analysts. A second limitation of the study lies in its (largely implicit) normative commitments to a classical liberal ethos viz. that maximizing the good of society is simply coincidental with maximizing the freedoms (including those of expression) of its individual members. What such an assumption overlooks are the very many legitimate reasons states may have for placing limitations on such freedoms, as for example when speech threatens the well being of minority groups (as in the case of hate speech) or the communicative freedom of one individual is bought at the expense of another (as in instances of defamation). The book as a whole appears to adhere to a rather straightforward 'free speech is good' doctrine, evading the broader dilemmas that face states in balancing freedoms against their sometime deleterious social impacts.

However, it would be churlish to end this review on a negative note. Those involved in this undertaking have provided an invaluable service, not only to scholars interested in online surveillance and censorship, but to politicians, activists and campaigners concerned with promoting citizens' basic freedoms in the global 'infosphere.' The book furnishes both sobering reading and a call to arms in defence of the Internet as a space of civic engagement and open dialogue. The promise to update the study annually promises to deliver the kinds of detailed insight into the control of the Internet that has been for so long conspicuously lacking.