

Computers and Society

CPSC 430

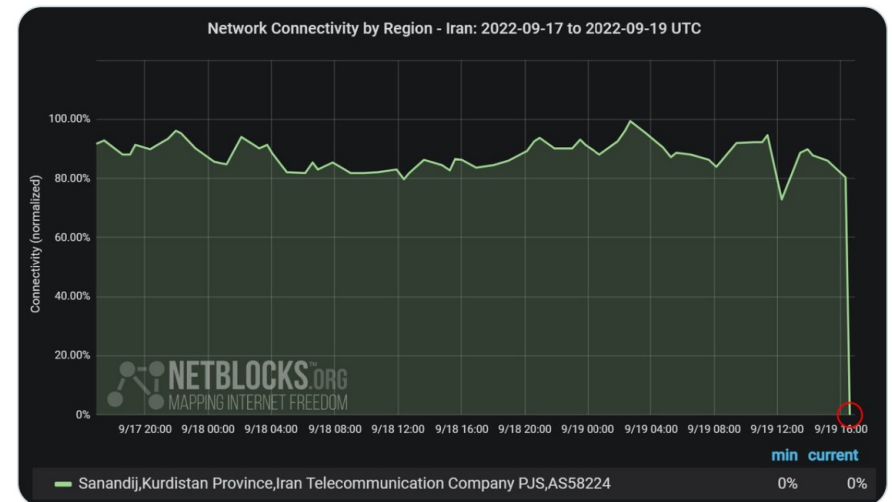
Lecture 4-2 – Networked Communications

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<https://www.students.cs.ubc.ca/~cs-430/>

Government Control of the Internet

- North Korea: Internet mostly inaccessible; Myanmar: formerly inaccessible; Cuba: Notoriously slow & expensive.
- Iran: Access to Instagram and Whatsapp, Facebook, Youtube and Twitter,... are banned.
- Saudi Arabia: centralized control
- People's Republic of China: highly sophisticated filtering ('great firewall') as well as censorship
- Germany: Forbids access to neo-Nazi sites
- United States: Limits access of minors to pornography



Key Findings

1

Global internet freedom declined for the 13th consecutive year. Digital repression intensified in Iran, home to this year's worst decline, as authorities shut down internet service, blocked WhatsApp and Instagram, and increased surveillance in a bid to quell antigovernment protests. Myanmar came close to dislodging China as the world's worst environment for internet freedom, a title the latter country retained for the ninth consecutive year. Conditions worsened in the Philippines as outgoing president Rodrigo Duterte used an antiterrorism law to block news sites that had been critical of his administration. Costa Rica's status as a champion of internet freedom has been imperiled after the election of a president whose campaign manager hired online trolls to harass several of the country's largest media outlets.

2

Attacks on free expression grew more common around the world. In a record 55 of the 70 countries covered by *Freedom on the Net*, people faced legal repercussions for expressing themselves online, while people were physically assaulted or killed for their online commentary in 41 countries. The most egregious cases occurred in Myanmar and Iran, whose authoritarian regimes carried out death sentences against people convicted of online expression-related crimes. In Belarus and Nicaragua, where protections for internet freedom plummeted during the coverage period, people received draconian prison terms for online speech, a core tactic employed by longtime dictators Alyksandr Lukashenka and Daniel Ortega in their violent campaigns to stay in power.

3

Generative artificial intelligence (AI) threatens to supercharge online disinformation campaigns. At least 47 governments deployed commentators to manipulate online discussions in their favor during the coverage period, double the number from a decade ago. Meanwhile, AI-based tools that can generate text, audio, and imagery have quickly

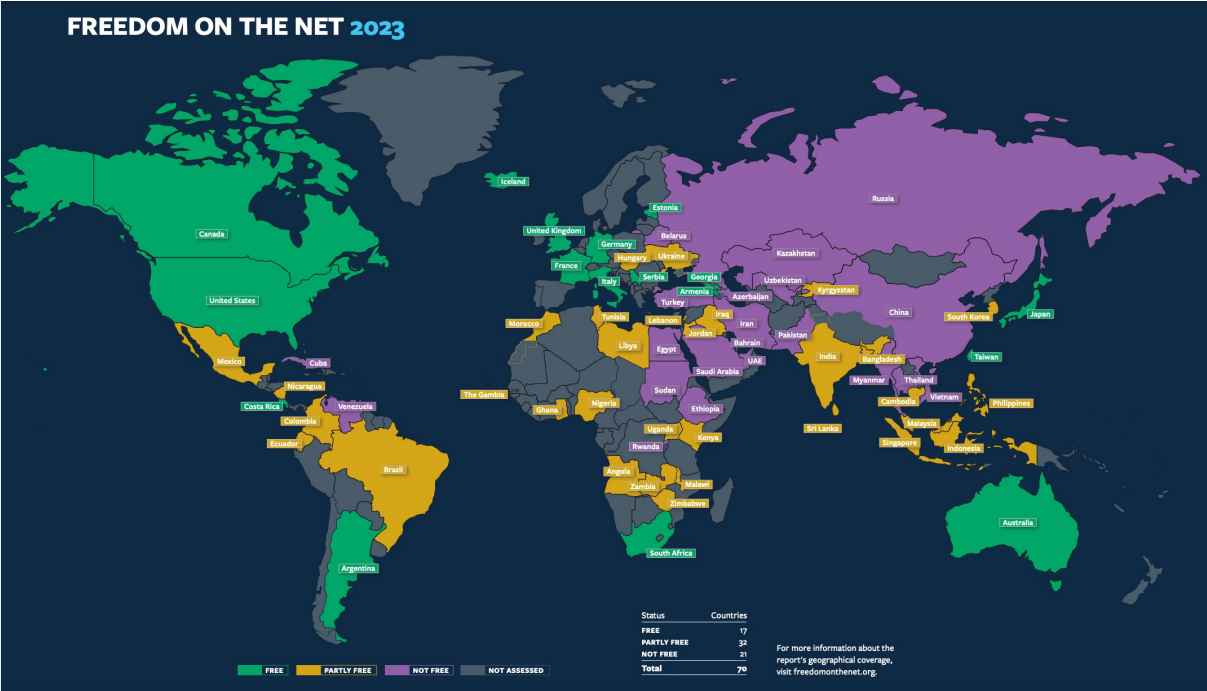
grown more sophisticated, accessible, and easy to use, spurring a concerning escalation of these disinformation tactics. Over the past year, the new technology was utilized in at least 16 countries to sow doubt, smear opponents, or influence public debate.

4

AI has allowed governments to enhance and refine their online censorship. The world's most technically advanced authoritarian governments have responded to innovations in AI chatbot technology, attempting to ensure that the applications comply with or strengthen their censorship systems. Legal frameworks in at least 22 countries mandate or incentivize digital platforms to deploy machine learning to remove disfavored political, social, and religious speech. AI, however, has not completely displaced older methods of information control. A record 41 governments blocked websites with content that should be protected under free expression standards within international human rights law. Even in more democratic settings, including the United States and Europe, governments considered or actually imposed restrictions on access to prominent websites and social media platforms, an unproductive approach to concerns about foreign interference, disinformation, and online safety.

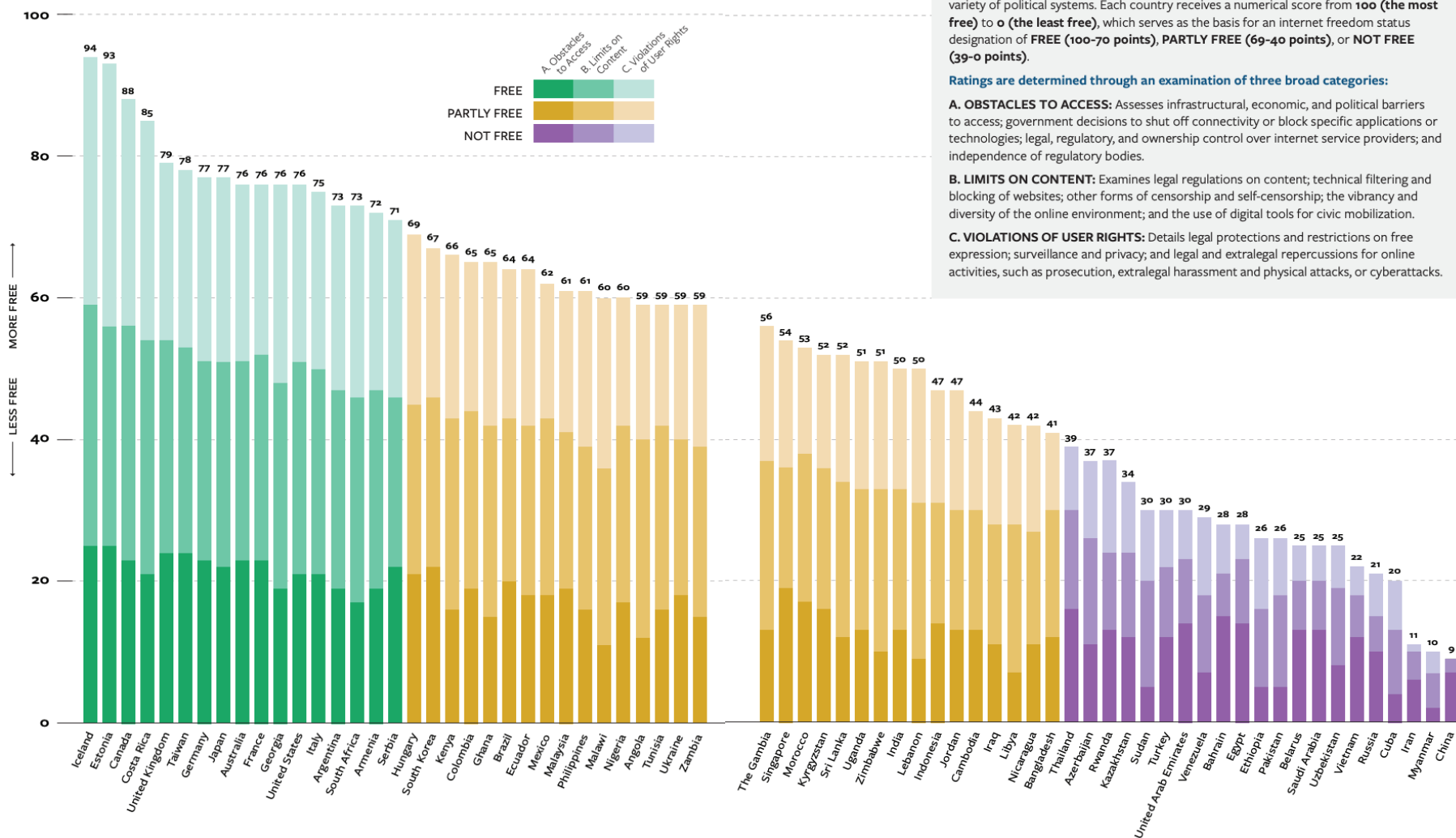
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To protect internet freedom, democracy's supporters must adapt the lessons learned from past internet governance challenges and apply them to AI. AI can serve as an amplifier of digital repression, making censorship, surveillance, and the creation and spread of disinformation easier, faster, cheaper, and more effective. An overreliance on self-regulation by private companies has left people's rights exposed to a variety of threats in the digital age, and a shrinking of resources in the tech sector could exacerbate the deficiency. To protect the free and open internet, democratic policymakers—working side by side with civil society experts from around the world—should establish strong human rights-based standards for both state and nonstate actors that develop or deploy AI tools.



<https://freedomofnet.org/report/freedom-net/2023/repressive-power-artificial-intelligence>

100 = Most Free 0 = Least Free



Freedom on the Net 2023 covers 70 countries in 6 regions around the world. The countries were chosen to illustrate internet freedom improvements and declines in a variety of political systems. Each country receives a numerical score from **100 (the most free)** to **0 (the least free)**, which serves as the basis for an internet freedom status designation of **FREE (100-70 points)**, **PARTLY FREE (69-40 points)**, or **NOT FREE (39-0 points)**.

Ratings are determined through an examination of three broad categories:

A. OBSTACLES TO ACCESS: Assesses infrastructural, economic, and political barriers to access; government decisions to shut off connectivity or block specific applications or technologies; legal, regulatory, and ownership control over internet service providers; and independence of regulatory bodies.

B. LIMITS ON CONTENT: Examines legal regulations on content; technical filtering and blocking of websites; other forms of censorship and self-censorship; the vibrancy and diversity of the online environment; and the use of digital tools for civic mobilization.

C. VIOLATIONS OF USER RIGHTS: Details legal protections and restrictions on free expression; surveillance and privacy; and legal and extralegal repercussions for online activities, such as prosecution, extralegal harassment and physical attacks, or cyberattacks.

Forms of Direct Censorship

- **Government monopolization of a communication medium**
 - E.g., the government owns all television stations, or all printing presses, and so controls the message
 - Doesn't work so well with the Internet (though see Saudi Arabia; China)
- **Prepublication review**
 - Certain kinds of information must be reviewed before they can be published
 - E.g., nuclear/military secrets
- **Licensing and registration**
 - You can't operate a TV station without a license
 - Necessary because of limited bandwidth
 - Opens the door to regulation of content (as in Canada)

Self-censorship

- Most common form of censorship
- Group decides for itself not to publish
- Reasons
 - Avoid subsequent prosecution
 - Maintain good relations with government officials (sources of information)
- A “soft” form of self-censorship: ratings systems
 - Movies, TVs, CDs, video games
 - Nothing similar has happened on the Web
 - At least, not consistently.

Challenges Posed by the Internet

- **Many-to-many communications**
 - Hard for the government to shut down (but not at all impossible)
- **Dynamic connections**
 - Computers coming and going all the time; hard to know who's who
- **Huge numbers of Web sites**
 - Hard to control access to online information
- **Extends beyond national borders, laws**
 - Governments may have limited authority to shut down sites
- **Hard to distinguish between minors and adults**
 - Important for initiatives that seek to restrict children's access

Ethical Perspectives on Censorship

- Kant opposed censorship

- Product of the Enlightenment: reaction to institutional control
- “Have courage to use your own reason”

- Mill opposed censorship

1. No one is infallible: we may silence the truth.
2. Even if not, an opinion may contain a kernel of truth.
3. Even if not, the truth must be rationally tested and validated.
4. Ideas are most persuasive if they're tested rigorously.

Principle of harm: “The only ground on which intervention is justified is to prevent harm to others; the individual's own good is not a sufficient condition.”

When, if ever, do you think censorship is justified?

Case Study: Bill C-18

- The federal government introduced Bill C-18 in April 2022 with the goal of compelling digital giants, such as Meta and Google, to compensate news publishers for the use of their content. The bill aims to push tech platforms to stipulate “fair commercial deals” with Canadian news publications, without the need for government supervision. This way, tech platforms will be bound to pay news outlet for using their content on their platforms. According to the government, more than 470 media outlets in Canada have closed since 2008, and at least one-third of Canadian journalism jobs have disappeared over that same time period. The compensation obtained by news publishers from these digital giants is intended, in large part, to fund the creation of new content, ensuring the “sustainability of the Canadian news ecosystem,” according to the government.
- In response, Meta stated that news makes up about three percent of the content on Facebook feeds, and Google claimed that less than two percent of searches are related to news. Consequently, both Meta and Google argued that news doesn't generate much revenue for their companies and are contemplating ending local news on their platforms altogether, which would negatively impact Canadians' access to diverse news sources.
- At the same time, some Canadian publishers are concerned about potentially losing millions of dollars in revenue if their content is blocked by Google and Meta. Bill C-18 is modeled after a similar law in Australia, the country that first compelled digital companies to pay for the use of news content. According to the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, more than \$190 million has already been paid to Australian media companies since the law was enacted last year.

Argue for or against the following statement: The Canadian government should require tech giants such as Meta and Google to enter into agreements with news publishers to pay them for news content that appears on their sites if it helps the tech giants generate money.

(Inspired by : <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/online-news-act-meta-facebook-1.6885634>)

Freedom of Expression: History

- **De Scandalis Magnatum (England, 1275)**
 - You could be imprisoned for weakening loyalty to the King
 - Not so different from lèse-majesty laws today, esp. in Thailand, Morocco, Jordan (see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lese-majesty>)
- **18th century: freedom of the press in England**
 - Anyone could print what they liked
 - Punishment for libel: publication causing harm, even if truth
- **American states adopted bills of rights including freedom of expression**
 - Freedom of expression in 1st amendment to U.S. Constitution: “Congress shall make no law ... abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press”

Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms

1. The *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* guarantees the rights and freedoms set out in it **subject only to such reasonable limits prescribed by law** as can be demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society.

2. Everyone has the following fundamental freedoms:

- (a) freedom of conscience and religion;
- (b) freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of communication;**
- (c) freedom of peaceful assembly; and
- (d) freedom of association.



Freedom of Expression not an Absolute Right

- Right to freedom of expression must be balanced against the public good
- Various restrictions on freedom of expression exist
 - e.g., Section 1 of the Canadian Charter is used to justify laws against hate speech, even though these limit expression

In pairs:

Which restrictions on freedom of expression do you think are justified?

Case Study: Facebook and Anti-Vaccine Pages

- In late 2020, at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Facebook took the decision to remove one of the major anti-vaccine pages from their platform. Around the same time, Facebook also became more aggressive at removing posts about vaccines with claims that had been debunked by the medical community, and started promoting more content from reputable public health and scientific sources.
- However, Facebook's architecture and engagement algorithms still allowed anti-vaxxers to easily move to a new group when an old one was shut down, and to keep spreading their content to other communities that the platform identified as having "similar interests".
- A recent study conducted by George Washington and Johns Hopkins universities reports that Facebook's policies were effective at reducing the overall volume of misinformation circulating (by 32%, according to the study's estimate).
- The same study also reveals that engagement with anti-vaccine content grew 33% more than what would have been anticipated based on pre-removal trends, suggesting that the measures implemented by Facebook have not been effective at reducing the influence of harmful misinformation.

Argue for or against the following statement: Facebook should not have changed their policy regarding the removal of anti-vaccine content on their platform.

Networked Communications

“Any social network that employs moderators should be required to make it impossible to share posts flagged as false.”

A total of 61 voter(s) in 640 hours

