Freedom to read? – getting a picture of the internet censorship

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People often experience that the space of free speech has increased during the internet era. However, this feeling may be related to users´ geographical location and social position. In fact, there is an opposite trend going on. Internet censorship has extended during last decade from a couple of countries to over 60 countries. As a response to these challenges two Finnish Universities together with IFLA´s FAIFE committee have launched a research project to study new forms of censorship.

Control over the internet extends

It is easy to find support for the view of extended sense of liberty based on fast and easy access on the internet and fluent usability of social media. Lack of visible controlling forces also develop users' sense of borderless, safe and casual environment.

In practice, different efforts to restrict access to and use of the internet or to take control over the use of its´ contents are increasing. Although the most severe restrictions have been taken in use in so called closed countries, also different kinds of mechanisms to restrict and control the use of the internet have been applied in Europe and the USA. Major internet companies, like Google and Facebook, gather data as well on users and their information behaviour extensively.

Future plans to extend methods of control through national or international regulations are well on their way. Governments have on several occasions suggested establishment of mechanisms which would practically give them control over the users' content on the net. ACTA agreement, Hadopi laws ("3 strike laws") and British Digital Economy Act are some examples of these kinds of practices. Lately even Nicholas Sarkozy proposed strengthening of global internet control for G8-meeting. Users and their behavior on the net are increasingly becoming under control and surveillance.

New formulation of problem is needed

Among the speeches of IFLA presidential meeting in The Hague 2011, Marietje Schaake, Member of the European Parliament from the Netherlands, stated that at the moment there are three core problems concerning intellectual freedom: access to information, copyrights and internet censorship. Although access to the net is a crucial issue, it is no more the most problematic issue. Access only does not solve the problems of restricted use of the contents or data surveillance.

It seems inevitable that we face a growing problem with restricted access to internet contents. Accordingly, research on this field would be very necessary. Internet censorship extends, new forms of censorship develop and these developments are accelerated by different parties. Also, as Marietje Schaake underlined, decision makers would need a clearly defined message of the situation and considerations about how they could support the user's rights.

The new forms of censorship have become very complex. Tools of control may be in the hand of government bodies, private companies or regular

Helsingin Sanomat representing a leading Finnish media company.

The project will be supported by a advisory board. Among the board members are professor and FAIFE's former chairman Paul Sturges, IFLA's senior policy advisor Stuart Hamilton and director of ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom Barbara Jones.

FAIFE involves in discussion

The outcomes of the project will be shared in different forms and media including scientific journals as well as social media. The main theme of internet censorship will be divided to group of topics studying, e.g. internet culture, technologies, privacy and anonymity and forms of censorship in different articles. All these topics will get attention on FAIFE's web pages, FAIFE Newsletter and FAIFE's social media channels.

Internet censorship and freedom of speech will also be a major topic of discussion in several events which are targeted both at professionals and general public. IFLA Conference 2012 in Helsinki will be the main event to bring up these topics. 📖

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people. Also, there may be various commercial, political or religious goals behind new forms of censorship and data surveillance. Even groups of citizens may desire to use filtering, forced identification or surveillance cameras to control the internet use based on child protection or crime detection. Maybe the most worrying part in the new forms of censorship is that they become mostly hidden from the user.

Up-to-date picture of censorship – research project launched

There are plenty of good reasons to study the development path and future perspectives of control mechanisms and users' rights on the internet during last decade. FAIFE will participate in this work through a research project.

Freedom of speech and censorship in the internet era project was launched in January 2011. Chairman of FAIFE, professor Kai Ekholm, is a leader of the research project which will be completed 2011-2012. The research project is a co-operative between two Finnish universities, the University of Helsinki and Tampere University Department of Information and Interactive Media Studies (INFIM). The research project is funded by the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation –