

Book Review

Access Denied – The Practice and Policy of Global Internet Filtering, Edited by Ronald Deibert, John Palfrey, Rafal Rohozinski and Jonathan Zittrain 2008, The MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts Paperback, ISBN 978-0-262-54196-1

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In mid-2010 the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia announced their intention to ban the use of Blackberry phones on the grounds of national security. The actions of these countries were a very visible illustration of the concern felt by a number of governments around the world that such devices compromise the ability of governments to safeguard national security. The ban elicited widespread criticism, from Research in Motion, the maker of the Blackberry, the Canadian government and those eager to protect privacy and civil liberties.

Many of the issues that are now being discussed in relation to this ban are dealt with in this book. Indeed, one could say that to fully appreciate the ban, its legality, how it is going to be implemented and its ramifications, a useful starting place for the curious but uninformed reader should be *Access Denied*. This book explores the tense relationship between those who wish the Internet to be a means of free and open information distribution and those who wish, for whatever reason, to censor its content.

The book is divided into three parts. In the first part, which amounts to 149 pages, six chapters analyse recent data on the practice of Internet filtering and discuss some of the issues that emerge. The second part of the book contains a series of regional overviews of Internet filtering, followed in the third part by 40 individual country summaries.

The first part of the book begins with a short introduction by Jonathan Zittrain and John Palfrey. They use the World Summit on the Information Society in 2005 in Tunisia to introduce the notion that governments block access to parts of the Internet to different extents for a variety of reasons, and do so using a range of different techniques. One result of this practice is that it may be more accurate to discuss the existence of ‘multiple’ Internets rather than a single global Internet, since the content that is accessible to individuals differs depending on which country they live in.

The introduction highlights that this book is the first ‘systematic, academically rigorous global study of all known state-mandated Internet filtering practices’ (page 2). It establishes that the aim of the book is to present data collected by this systematic study (page 2) and, interestingly, states that ‘finger pointing’ will not be entered into (page 3). These statements set the tone for the remainder of the book.

The introduction is followed by six chapters, the first of which is *Measuring Global Internet Filtering* by Robert Faris and Nart Villeneuve. This outlines a methodology that was used to test for Internet filtering in forty countries in 2006, and presents data showing evidence of Internet filtering in twenty-six of those countries. Different dimensions of Internet filtering are presented and discussed. The first dimension is the differing depth and scope of Internet filtering between countries, and the differing motives or rationales for carrying it out. Internet filtering may be motivated by political reasons such as to limit the effectiveness of opposition parties, by the desire to maintain or impose social norms and morals on society or by a perceived threat to national security. Saudi Arabia, for example, has heavily filtered social content and although it has also filtered political content this is done with less scope and depth. Iran, in contrast, extensively filters both political and social content.

Secondly, *how* Internet filtering is implemented differs across the twenty-six countries where it was found to occur. Filtering commonly occurs at one of two levels: the ISP or the international gateway. A variety of techniques may be used in Internet filtering, and four – IP blocking, DNS tampering, blockpage and keyword – are used to assess the techniques across the twenty-six countries. Blockpage is the most extensively used, followed by IP blocking, DNS tampering and keyword. The discussion of these four techniques includes a number of examples that illustrate how they are implemented in practice, highlighting, among other things, how filtering strategies are combined and the extent to which their imposition is evident to users.

The Internet contains both international sites available in a global language like English as well as country-specific sites. Thus, a third dimension highlighted by the chapter is that many countries focus their filtering efforts on home-grown rather than international content. Ethiopia is one such country, and Syria another. China blocks more international content than these countries. The chapter also shows that some content providers are more likely to be blocked than others, with, for example, the proportion of political party-generated content blocked being considerably more than content provided by international NGOs.

Fourthly, the relationship between Internet filtering and the rule of law is not straightforward. It is not the case that countries that do not obey the rule of law engage in Internet filtering, and vice versa. However, countries engaging in substantial filtering also score poorly when it comes to voice and accountability. Having said this, there are exceptions for both political and social filtering.

Chapter two, *Internet Filtering: The Politics and Mechanisms of Control*, is by Jonathan Zittrain and John Palfrey. This chapter, in essence, examines how Internet filtering occurs. The chapter argues that Internet filtering can occur through three different mechanisms – legal, technical and social norms – and then discusses where it occurs and what is filtered. The chapter establishes that a range of filtering techniques is employed, with the choice made shaped by the type of content that is to be filtered.

In keeping with the preface's stated intention of not 'pointing fingers', this chapter acknowledges that there are some legitimate reasons for governments to engage in Internet filtering. However, it argues that because of the technical limitations associated with Internet filtering, governments end up blocking either too much or too little content.

The title of the third chapter, *Tools and Technology of Internet Filtering*, by Steven J Murdoch and Ross Anderson aptly describes its contents. In contrast to the other chapters, the discussion of Internet filtering here is technical, focussing on the techniques available. The chapter illustrates how technology facilitates the cat-and-mouse relationship between those who are watching and those who are watched.

Another perspective on Internet filtering can be found in the following chapter, *Filtering and the International System: A Question of Commitment*, by Mary Rundle and Malcolm Birdling. This chapter explores how Internet filtering and the international obligations made by governments in areas such as basic human rights relate to one another. To this end, the chapter starts by outlining relevant parts of international law before applying these to Internet filtering. The authors argue that, although the international obligations of states when it comes to Internet filtering are clear, the compliance of states is difficult to obtain.

The discussion leads onto other ways of ensuring state compliance such as trade policy, with the denial of freedom of expression being cast as a market access issue under the World Trade Organisation. Whether you agree with the merits of such an argument is in some respects irrelevant, as the underlying message is that new ways of enforcing freedom of expression are needed given the failings of the international system in this area. To this end, several alternatives are suggested in the later part of the chapter.

The focus shifts once more in Chapter five, *Reluctant Gatekeepers: Corporate Ethics on a Filtered Internet* by Jonathan Zittrain and John Palfrey, to the role of businesses in Internet filtering. The chapter starts with a dilemma: when businesses are asked to do something in a foreign country that is at odds with the ethics of their home market, what should they do? Through exploring the ethics of Internet filtering, not only does the discussion highlight the scope of possible business participation in Internet filtering but it also illustrates the types of tensions that emerge as practices in one country collide with those of another. The latter part of the chapter explores how ethical issues faced by businesses could be resolved, through self-regulation, legal measures or international governance.

The final chapter of the book is *Good for Liberty, Bad for Security? Global Civil Society and the Securitization of the Internet* by Ronald Deibert and Rafal Rohozinski. In this chapter, the focus moves to the role of the Internet for civil society, and the ambitions of civil society to share information in contrast with the wish of states to limit its distribution. The start of the chapter explores this relationship with respect to three different aspects of civil society - civic networks, resistance networks and 'dark nets'. The focus then moves to blogs, showing not only that they can be an effective way of disseminating information and co-ordinating activities but that they are, as a consequence, targeted by states in a variety of ways'. Importantly it is not simply a matter of 'blogs good, states bad' as the chapter also highlights the criminal usage of blogs.

Some readers may be tempted to stop at this point, which would be unfortunate as the remaining two parts of the book are informative, albeit quite different, from the six chapters that have just been outlined. The second part of the book comprises eight regional profiles – Asia, Australia and New Zealand, Commonwealth of Independent States, Europe, Latin America, Middle East and North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa and the United States and Canada – accompanied by a brief introduction. The eight regional profiles differ in their structure, reflecting the differences that exist around the globe with respect to Internet filtering, legal systems and socio-economic attitudes. The profiles are relatively short, all eight and the introduction amount to just over 80 pages, are easy to read and make extensive use of examples. The third and final part of the book is formed from forty country case studies, which, with the accompanying introduction, run to almost 200 pages. Each of the country profiles summarises the research that has been undertaken, with a consistent framework facilitating the drawing of comparisons drawn between countries.

This is an interesting book. It draws attention to an issue that many Internet users will probably not have considered, and places it at the confluence of other issues that we are probably more familiar with such as human rights and the ethical dilemmas faced by businesses. Any lack of familiarity with Internet filtering is overcome through the frequent, sometimes extensive, use of examples as well as the well-written nature of the book. Moreover, the arguments are both succinctly and clearly made. Quite simply, the book is easy to read.

The arguments made in the various chapters are well supported by data. This book reports the findings of an extensive research project, and does so informatively partly due to the structure that has been adopted. The first part of the book focuses on themes and issues that cut across the regions and countries described in more detail in the second and third parts of the book. Of course, data dates. The book presents, analyses and discusses data collected during 2006 in a 2008 publication. In some respects, the dating does not matter that much given the nature of the arguments being made but it does mean that the book is effectively a snapshot of Internet filtering at one particular point in time. Having said this, the authors do point readers towards the resources available online at the Open Net Initiatives (<http://opennet.net/>).

Perhaps the biggest 'niggle' this reviewer has with this book is that the six substantive chapters amount to less than half its length. Their relative shortness limits the extent to which the issues raised are

explained and discussed, and although links between the chapters are made these are often made only fleetingly. A lack of a concluding and summarising chapter may disappoint some readers, not least because if placed after the regional and country profiles this would have acted as conclusion to the whole book as well as a reminder of the main issues raised by the first six chapters. Having said this, in many ways the first chapter is the summarising chapter.

In summary: this is an interesting and well-written book. The book tackles an issue that should appeal to a broad readership, drawn from those interested in the Internet on the one hand and civil liberties on the other. And at less than £20, the book is also good value for money!

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