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Internet Censorship in China

For many centuries, government authorities tried to control the flow of information and impose censorship on objectionable public discourse. Some state officials impose censorship for the sake of national security or to prevent vulnerable populations—for instance, the youth to be exposed to disturbing content—whereas other countries suppress topics threatening their political regimes to keep citizens under control. Keeping this in mind, one should say that China is not only a nation that fits in the second category, but also a country using modern technological means to control how people perceive public discourse. Even though there is a degree of transparency when it comes to using the Internet and social media in China, without a doubt, extensive governmental efforts are made to control and sensor data moving through the digital world. Keep that in mind, though some may argue that the Internet in China is censored for the sake of people's protection, the evidence suggests that the Chinese government is making an extensive effort to prevent people from expressing themselves freely, making it impossible for individuals to use their constitutional rights.

When it comes to China, one can trace a long history of authoritarian government-population relationships. Following such a logical thread, the authors of the article titled “Understanding Support for Internet Censorship in China: An Elaboration of the Theory of

Reasoned Action,” argue that “China has a long history of institutionalized censorship” (Guo and Feng 34). As a result, with the emergence of new information technologies, allowing millions of people to share massive amounts of information almost instantly, it seems natural that the Chinese government made everything possible to gain the upper hand in having control over the freedom of expression. Strikingly, according to an article written by Kentaro Toyama, in China, there is an army of 50,000 Internet police officers who track down potentially dangerous Internet content day and night (Toyama). However, one should say that what the government labels as “dangerous,” almost every time means something that can cause public upheaval or undermine the reputation and authority of the ruling Communist Party. In such a sense, it is clear that not allowing people to express themselves on the Internet creates a fundamental problem, undermining the freedom of expression, the core of any democratic society—the system China claimed to become after the rule of Mao Zedong came to an end. Additionally, deciding which information to show people and which to censor gives the government control over truth. In such a context, the Chinese government can easily manipulate its citizens, giving people an adjusted version of the truth. As a result, controlling and censoring the Internet and social media for personal authoritarian merit is something that makes China a country where the government decides for people what is true and what is false, undermining the core premise of any democratic society.

However, it is apparent that not all people share the perspective described above. Naysayers in the discussion often argue that Internet censorship is not only useful but often a necessary tool for keeping people protected from content that may be disturbing or inappropriate. In such a context, there are people who argue that censorship is something essential for maintaining young generations of Internet users from becoming victims of pornography or any

other disturbing content that may circulate the Web (Anti). Going further, while arguing that there should be limits of freedom, though people often do not deny that freedom of expression should be granted per se, there are individuals fearing that without censorship, an era of absolute freedom can start, thus plunging the world into chaos (Anti). Finally, perhaps the most acceptable objection is that Internet censorship helps strengthen national security, both helping to control illegal activities within the country and protect the nation from external threats. In this era of global terrorism, the Internet and social media are often used to spread propaganda and to manipulate people into believing that democracy is something that should be fought against. Perhaps, while some may argue that similar reasons can be used to justify Internet censorship in China, the reality is that the Chinese government predominantly uses censorship to control informational flow, thus subjugating public opinion.

As a refutation to potential counter-claims to the thesis expressed in this paper, one should appeal to the words of prominent political scientist Gary King who believes that Internet censorship in China is the “most extensive effort to censor human expression ever implemented selectively” (as qtd. in Toyama). As a result, the debate brings one to the point where it becomes evident that the Chinese government, while trying to control its population via censorship, does it for the sake of keeping leading political forces in the country in power. Additionally, referring to secondary arguments, one should say that maintaining a huge army of experts who analyze and censor the information on the Internet is an endeavor requiring massive governmental funding, something that comes from the taxes of the population (Anti). In such a sense, one can argue that Internet censorship in China does not only deprive people of their inalienable right of freedom of expression, but it wastes enormous amounts of money as well. Instead, the finances spent on censorship could be used for different social policies and battling crucial social issues. Finally,

even though there are particular reasons why the Internet should be censored, there is also a thin line between doing so for the sake of people and trying to impose authoritarian rule over people to whom the governmental officials are sworn to serve. Fortunately, recent evidence shows that people in China understand the value of the freedom of expression as well as think that Internet censorship should be handled with greater transparency. In one of the studies, Guo and Feng found solid evidence suggesting that the young generation of Chinese people feel strong resentment toward Internet censorship in their country, something that has been “on the rise in recent years” (48). As a result, it is clear that Chinese people feel that the way their government censors the Internet is incorrect. In fact, to avoid manipulation and the control of informational flow in China and many other countries, it is crucial to increase transparency, so that people can see that censorship is used for their sake.

Considering everything above, it is evident that Internet censorship is a sensitive issue that requires particular attention. However, regardless of the fact that there are reasons why disturbing and inappropriate content should be censored, the way it is handled in China shows that censorship can be used for keeping people under control, subjugating them and not allowing them to express themselves freely via modern informational platforms. Following such logic, it is evident that the Chinese model of Internet censorship is unacceptable and that it should be abolished. People need to understand that the Internet and social media serve as a voice of the public, allowing millions of people to share valuable information, as well as express their concerns regarding governmental actions. Without such opportunities, any democratic country can find itself as an authoritarian apparatus, trying to keep the ruling elites in power by all means possible.

Works Cited

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