The number of states that limit access to Internet content has risen rapidly in recent years according to the OpenNet Initiative (ONI) which has been monitoring Internet filtering around the world since 2002. (Internet filtering normally refers to the technical approaches to control access to information on the Internet). For example, Google admits that in China it is filtering searches for about the Tiananmen Square massacre. A spokesperson for the company confirmed that despite the publication of images from the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre - a sensitive topic for the Chinese government - the search results are still filtered according to the country's law. However China, though one of most intensive users of filtering, is only one in a long list of countries doing so.

Currently, more than 40 countries are filtering the Internet to varying degrees, while a number of others, including Australia, Iraq, and Spain, are considering enacting filtering policies. So, just how many people are censored online around the world? We have estimated a number based on the number of Internet users that reside in countries which practice substantial filtering - in terms of the number of sites and/or type of content blocked. The number we have come up with is 563,018,414, or approximately 32% of all Internet users.

This number necessarily includes several subjective decisions. We have not included countries, such as the Nordic countries and the UK, that block a modest number of sites alleged to include child pornography. We have not included Germany, which blocks a small number of sites related to extremist groups, and Russia which has just started on a path to do the same. North Korea is omitted from the list. There is also an untold number of users from countries around the world who have no access to the Internet at all due to an unknown combination of poverty, geography and deliberate neglect by governments that would prefer to keep their citizens offline. Nevertheless, this is a huge and growing number.

Drawing on arguments that are often powerful and compelling such as "securing intellectual property rights," "protecting national security," "preserving cultural norms and religious values," and "shielding children from pornography and exploitation," many states are implementing extensive filtering practices to curb the perceived lawlessness of the medium. Many others are debating the enactment of similar measures and pursuing technological solutions to complex sociological issues.

* ONI is a collaborative partnership of four leading academic institutions: the Citizen Lab at the Munk Centre for International Studies, University of Toronto;
Berkman Center for Internet & Society
at Harvard University; the Advanced Network Research Group at the
Cambridge Security Programme
, University of Cambridge; and the
Oxford Internet Institute
, Oxford University.
Its aim is to investigate, expose and analyze Internet filtering and surveillance practices in a credible and non-partisan fashion. The group says it intends to uncover the potential pitfalls and unintended consequences of these practices, and thus help to inform better public policy and advocacy work in this area. For more information go to http://opennet.net

Questions

- Should states have the right to control Net access?
- Under what grounds?
- If so can the Net really be described as free?
- What limits should be put on Net access and freedoms?
- What forms of control, if any are desirable. For example could a country with numerous ethnicities and religions be justified in controlling certain material which could lead to sectarian violence?
- In the light of the evidence from OpenNet survey, could filtering ultimately lead to censorship and a loss of freedoms of expression?