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THE INTERNET

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DEBATING MATTERS
TOPIC
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MOTION:

"THE INTERNET NEEDS TO BE REGULATED"

CONTENTS

KEY TERMS

Censorship

Freedom of Speech

Internet regulation

Internet service providers

Moral panics

In a remarkably short space of time the internet has become one of the most powerful mediums in history. In the early days of the internet, 'digital utopians' [Ref: Electronic Frontier Foundation], where ideas and goods could be exchanged freely. However, a spate of recent incidents including the Bridgend suicides [Ref: Times Online] has restarted the debate about the 'dark side of utopia' and the potential of the internet to cause harm. Following the publication of the Byron review [Ref: Department for Children, Schools & Families] earlier this year, and the subsequent report from the Select Committee for Culture, Media and Sport [Ref: Parliament UK] , the UK government is now pressing for regulation to protect children from harmful material on the net. Highlighting the increased use of the internet to promote and plan acts of terrorism, home secretary Jacqui Smith also stated that the 'internet can't be a no-go area for government' [Ref: Guardian]. But Britain's rules on internet censorship came under sharp scrutiny recently when the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) [Ref: Internet Watch Foundation] blocked pages on Wikipedia [Ref: Wikipedia] relating to a 1970s album cover [Ref: The Register] featuring a picture of a naked girl. A number of commentators have raised concern about the ease with which unaccountable bodies such as the IWF are able to impose censorship on web users and the sophistication of the 'architecture for censorship' in the UK [Ref: Guardian]. The trialing of the Australian 'cyber-safety plan' [Ref: BBC News], a filtering system to be imposed by internet service providers on all Australian web connections, has also sparked controversy across the globe.

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Who controls the internet?

The fact that the internet is not controlled by any single authority means that global regulation of the internet is both complex and evolving. Captured in Lawrence Lessig's now famous dictum 'code is law' [Ref: Stanford University] regulation of the web is different to that of other media, with developments in technology dictating the way in which the internet is policed as much as legislation. As the organisation that technically administers the net it is the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) [Ref: Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers] that underpins the degree to which it can be regulated. However, with the huge global growth in internet users, decisions about regulation are also increasingly in the hands [Ref: New York Times] of internet service providers (ISPs) [Ref: Webopedia], search machines and companies such as Google. Governments are also clamouring for influence, and as broadband use expands it is likely that state agencies will play a more influential role in deciding what web users can access. Whilst government censorship in countries such as China has been criticised in the Western press, many other countries have also banned certain website content [Ref: Electronic Frontiers Australia]. In the UK the only websites that ISPs are expected to block are those that the IWF has reported as containing images of child pornography, but the Home Office is considering access to articles on the web deemed to be 'glorifying terrorism' [Ref: Guardian].

Does the internet cause harm?

Although Byron and others who follow her view suggest that we should be wary of moral panics [Ref: Media Know All], they also state that the protection of children from online dangers cannot wait for evidence of causal links. It should be based instead on probability of 'risk'. Similarly, although research carried out on pro-suicide sites is inconclusive about the relationship between exposure to such information and increased risk, many researchers have recommended preventative measures, including advising regulation be taken by ISPs to block access to sites considered dangerous [Ref: A Typeon Link]. Concerns about the spread of terrorism and incitement to racial or religious hatred have also caused some to call for the banning of certain groups' websites [Ref: Social Cohesion]. But critics are sceptical of the claim that people absorb ideas like 'mindless sponges' [Ref: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies]. They argue that ideas on the internet don't transform people on their own, but that we all actively engage with content according to previously developed models of the world we have internalised. Instead of looking at the internet as determining our actions, they argue we should understand the web as a reflection of society – problems in society will not be solved by taking down a web page but by deliberations in the real world.

A moral question?

The debate about how we should response to controversial sites returns to the question of how we weigh freedom of expression against other considerations. Proponents of regulation argue that an uncompromising commitment to freedom of expression blinds us to other moral imperatives. Writing on free speech rulings in the Unites States, theologian David Hart wonders how society has got to a point where it values the rights of pornographers above those of children [Ref: New Atlantis].

British journalist Yvonne Roberts argues that for the YouTube generation a bit of moralising is 'desperately required' if we are to avoid brutalising young people [Ref: Guardian]. But others have questioned the need for unelected councils, such as the recently launched UK Council for Child Internet Safety [Ref: BBC News], to decide what children should be allowed to view. They argue that it is the unregulated nature of the internet that encourages us to behave like adults in deciding what we and our children should and shouldn't view. Defenders of free expression on the internet underline the argument that a key principle of democracy is that unfettered information facilitates public enlightenment [Ref: Boston Globe]. As the most powerful information medium in the modern world, our attitudes to regulation of the internet are a testing ground for our commitment to free speech [Ref: spiked].

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Children's web watchdog launched
BBC News 29 September 2008

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IAN GRANT, CEO, BRITANNICA