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# **INTERNET REGULATION**

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**MOTION:**

**“THE INTERNET NEEDS  
TO BE REGULATED”**

*Produced by*



**GLOBAL UNCERTAINTIES  
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## KEY TERMS

Censorship

Freedom of Speech

Internet regulation

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Moral panics

# INTRODUCTION

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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’ hailed the dawn of a new age, where ideas and goods could be exchanged freely [Ref: [Hache](#)]. But in recent times there has also been much talk about the ‘dark side of utopia’ and the potential of the internet to cause harm. In 2009 the Iranian government faced criticism for clamping down on social media’s use in post-election protests [Ref: [Reuters](#)] and, in January 2010, revelations that Google had suffered a ‘sophisticated’ cyber attack originating from China [Ref: [BBC News](#)] sparked condemnation across the globe. Furthermore, when US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton delivered a speech a few days later in defence of online freedom and called on China to lift restrictions on the internet, many celebrated the robust responses from Google and Clinton as a victory for free speech. But debate about online freedom isn’t limited to Iran and China. Following the publication of the Byron Review in 2008 [Ref: [DCFS](#)], and the subsequent report from the Select Committee for Culture, Media and Sport [Ref: [Parliament.co.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](#)]. Britain’s own rules on internet censorship came under sharp scrutiny recently when the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) blocked pages on Wikipedia relating to a 1970s album cover featuring a picture of a naked girl [Ref: [The Register](#)]. This comes on top of revelations that anti-terror powers to intercept personal communication, which had been extended to over 800 bodies by a 2003 amendment of the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 [Ref: [Home Office](#)], had been used to monitor everything from animal rights campaigners to school catchment areas [Ref: [Daily Telegraph](#)]. A number of commentators have raised concern about the ease with which such unaccountable bodies could be able to impose censorship on web users, and the sophistication of the ‘architecture for censorship’ in the UK.

## 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. As the organisation that technically administers the net it is the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) 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 of internet service providers (ISPs) [Ref: [New York Times](#)], search machines and companies such as Google. Governments are also clamouring for influence. In the UK this has been seen most recently in the furore around New Labour's much criticised 'Intercept Modernisation Programme' [Ref: [LSE](#)], a proposal to introduce legislation allowing government to access data from all electronic communication made by the public. 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](#)]. But whilst many feel that such concessions are a small price to pay for greater security, others vehemently disagree and retort that we must remain idealist about the freedom the internet presents us with. "The exchange of thoughts and items that profoundly offend your sensibilities", says one commentator "is a necessary (and relatively small) price to pay for the greatest communications medium in human history."

## Does the internet cause harm?

Although Byron and others suggest that we should be wary of moral panics [Ref: [mediaknowall](#)], 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'. Concerns about the spread of terrorism – particularly given the internet's use in planning terrorist attacks such as those in Mumbai in 2008 [Ref: [WebUser](#)] – and incitement to racial or religious hatred have also caused some to call for the banning of certain groups' websites [Ref: [Centre for Social Cohesion](#)]. In particular, suggestions that many linked to extremist organisations have been 'groomed' over the internet have increased calls for regulation. But critics are sceptical of the claim that people absorb ideas like 'mindless sponges'. 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 [Ref: [Guardian](#)].

## The moral question

The debate about how we should respond 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 United States, theologian David Hart wonders how society has got to a point where it

## DEBATE IN CONTEXT CONTINUED...

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values the rights of pornographers above those of children. 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. But others have questioned the need for unelected councils, such as the recently launched UK Council for Child Internet Safety, 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 and a universal exchange of ideas. One recent and widely lauded instance of internet freedom occurred when an attempt to ban reporting of parliamentary questions on the investigation of Trafigura was publicised widely in the unregulated and instantaneous world of the blogosphere, causing law firm Carter Ruck to back down and provoking fierce debate on UK libel law [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. 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](#)].

## Defending online freedoms

Hillary Clinton *Guardian* 24 January 2010

## Free speech and the internet

Various *Guardian comment is free* 11 November 2008

## Is the Internet out of control?

Matt Warman and Shane Richards *Daily Telegraph* 31 July 2008

## Double standard spreads to cyber world

*Global Times* 25 January 2010

## For

## We can and must control extremism on the web

John Ozimek *Guardian* 19 March 2009

## Protection from preachers of hate

David Toubé *Guardian* 15 November 2008

## Voice of reason?

Yvonne Roberts *Guardian Comment is free* 28 May 2008

## Using the web as a weapon: the internet as a tool for violent radicalization and homegrown terrorism

Mark Weitzman *Testimony before the US House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security* 6 November 2007

## The pornography culture

David Hart *The New Atlantis* July 2004

## Against

## The best Christmas present of all: a network free from control

John Naughton *Guardian* 27 December 2009

## Keep the web free

Frank Fisher *Guardian* 29 December 2008

## Is internet radicalization possible?

Bill Durodié and Ng Sue Chia *RSIS Commentaries* 21 November 2008

## The dangers of internet censorship

Harry Lewis *Boston Globe* 5 November 2008

## Internet freedom

Sandy Starr *New Humanist Magazine* April 2002

## In Depth

## Googles gatekeepers

Jeffrey Rosen *New York Times* 30 November 2008

## Safer children in a digital world: the report of the Byron Review

Tania Byron *Department for Children, Schools and Families* 27 March 2008

## How modern terrorism uses the internet

Gabriel Weimann *Asian Tribune* 21 February 2007

## The internet as friend or foe of intellectual freedom

Elizabeth A Buchanan *International Journal of Information Ethics* November 2004

## Excerpt from “Not in front of the children: ‘indecent’, censorship and the innocence of youth”

Marjorie Heins *Electronic Frontier Foundation* May 2001

The virtual revolution : how 20 years of the internet has changed our lives

BBC

Don't blame the internet for extremism

Tim Stevens *Guardian Comment is free* 14 December 2009

Free speech and the internet

Various *Guardian comment is free* 11 November 2008

Caught in the web

*Battle of Ideas debate on FORA.tv* November 2008

Don't have security nightmares

Bill Thompson *BBC News* 21 October 2008

The internet smokescreen

Tim Stevens *openDemocracy* 21 August 2008

Policing the internet: Q&A

Oliver Luft *Guardian Media* 31 July 2008

Virtual Caliphate: Islamic extremists and the internet

James Brandon *Centre for Social Exclusion* 11 June 2008

Suicide and the internet

Lucy Biddle et al *British Medical Journal* 12 April 2008

China's latest export: web censorship

Holden Frith *Times Online* 10 February 2007

Why broadcast rules won't work on the internet

Anthony Lilley *Guardian Media* 26 June 2006

Should we censor the internet?

Caspar Hewett *The Great Debate* 26 November 2002

Code is law: on liberty in cyberspace

Lawrence Lessig *Harvard Magazine* 1 January 2000

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*Internet Law and Policy Forum*

## ORGANISATIONS

American Civil Liberties Union

Index on Censorship

Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN)

Internet Watch Foundation

Reporters Without Borders

UK Council for Child Internet Safety

## IN THE NEWS

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## NOTES

Web censorship in China? Not a problem, says Bill Gates  
*Guardian* 25 January 2010

Hillary Clinton criticises Beijing over internet censorship  
*Guardian* 21 January 2010

China gives first response to Google threat  
*BBC News* 14 January 2010

Home Office spawns new unit to expand internet surveillance  
*The Register* 10 January 2010

Twitter hacked, attacker claims Iran link  
*Reuters* 19 December 2009

BBC condemned for hosting web debate on execution for homosexuals in Uganda  
*The Times* 17 December 2009

Iran creates Internet crime unit  
*Sydney Morning Herald* 14 December 2009

Michelle Obama racist image sparks Google apology  
*BBC News* 25 November 2009

Trafigura: A few tweets and freedom of speech is restored  
*Guardian* 13 October 2009

Google accused of aiding Mumbai attack  
*Web User* 10 December 2008

Wikipedia falls foul of British censors  
*Guardian* 8 December 2008

Australian firewall trials start  
*BBC News* 3 December 2008

Microsoft, Google and Yahoo pledge to protect internet freedoms around world  
*Guardian* 29 October 2008

Children's web watchdog launched  
*BBC News* 29 September 2008

Finnish gunman's video puts YouTube policies back in spotlight  
*Guardian* 23 September 2008

Council admits spying on family  
*BBC News* 10 April 2008

Byron report targets Google, YouTube in internet safety shake-up  
*Times Online* 27 March 2008

US seeks terrorists in web worlds  
*BBC News* 2 March 2008

Pro-anorexia site clampdown urged  
*BBC News* 24 February 2008

Campaigners hit by decryption laws  
*BBC News* 20 November 2007

Gangs and gun crime rekindle the debate on tighter internet regulation  
*Times Online* 31 August 2007

Terrorist 007 'was internet propagandist for al-Qaeda'  
*Times Online* 26 April 2007



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# “TEENAGE CITIZENS THINKING DEEPLY ABOUT...SOCIAL ISSUES”

IAN GRANT, CEO, BRITANNIC

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