World Wide Web (Block):
Understanding and Exploring Online Censorship and
Content Distribution Around the World

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Abstract

The 21st century has advanced the accessibility and functionality of the Internet exponentially, eventually giving rise to the social media technologies commonly utilized today. In the present day, the ability to connect with the Internet - from both desktop and mobile devices - has given rise to many communication platforms and services; including shopping, social, educational, and more. However, with the widespread use of digital information in much of the developed world also comes the ability to block or censor certain content. The restriction of data can be caused by social and cultural values, the prevention of harassment, or in some circumstances, the control and ideals of certain governments. The goal of this meta-analysis thesis is to explore the various methods and causes of censorship around the world, and to understand how to better control and respond to the restriction of specific groups of content. Through quoting and analyzing a diverse range of scholarly literature concerning digital technologies within the last 13 years (2009-2022), my research aims to evaluate several trends/examples of censorship, and as a result, formulate suggestions as to how Internet consumers can achieve safe, secure, yet also independent encounters on the web.
Thesis Objectives

Upon writing and the completion of this thesis, my objectives are to:

- Discuss various examples of online censorship/content restriction.
- Develop a greater understanding of the relationship between people and digital media.
- Explore the positives and negatives associated with censorship and media control.
- Use thorough analyses from current literature to promote strategies for the handling of censorship.
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Introduction

The expansion of digital media hardware and applications has significantly shifted the cultural landscape of most of the developed world. We are able to communicate with almost anyone around the world through social platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, we are able to purchase and exchange goods through shopping networks like Amazon, and we're even able to obtain the latest news stories and events through viral news networks. Over the past few decades, daily interactions have become almost instantaneous - especially with the influence of mobile phones and other cellular devices - thanks to an always evolving digital climate. However, with our access to the Internet, are we really as free to explore as it seems?

While the digital market has certainly given its consumers a fair share of opportunities for contribution, censorship has restricted how the public can respond to distinct forms and revenues. Whether it be through political, social, or even cultural means, there have been many forms of content prevention that exemplify the harsh reality of technological freedom (or lack thereof).

But what can be done about censorship? How can the Internet be improved upon for a safe, secure, and independent experience? In order to answer these questions, it’s critical to discuss the various methods and examples of content restriction as a means to analyze potential solutions on how to ‘bridge the gap’ between the general public and the forces that have implemented certain censors in the digital environment. Through evaluating specific instances of digital censorship, the purpose of this paper is to help others become more socially aware of their impact online.
The Definition of Censorship

Before diving into the different types of censorship, we must first have a clear understanding of its definition. Certainly, many of us have a vague idea of what censorship entails. You’ve probably heard certain words being censored on television for ‘inappropriate language’, maybe you’ve seen statements or comments get deleted due to what some marginalized groups deem as ‘offensive’, or perhaps you’re familiar with specific networks or communities establishing their own guidelines and protocols based on social etiquette. All of these are technically examples of censorship, but it can mean more than simply ‘blocking’.

As defined by Merriam Webster, the act of censor(ing) is to “...suppress or delete (something) as objectionable.” However, the act of suppression isn’t necessarily as concise as the above definition would have you believe. As to be discovered and analyzed throughout this paper, the power of censorship can fall to oppressive governments to eliminate any resistances of their ideals, to powerful businesses who fear negative publicity, to outdated social constructs and ideals, to the further distancing of beliefs, and more. This isn’t to suggest that all forms of censorship are harmful - certain toxic behaviors and expressions should be prevented for the health and safety of everyone - but rather that the indifferent ability to control media access can wield just as much ‘bad’ as ‘good’. With censorship, the goal isn’t to eliminate it from existence, but rather to educate the majority on being aware of those negative scenarios and learning how to respond and/or overcome them.
Authoritarian Governments vs. Media

Over the past decade or so, the shifting of communication to digital formats has allowed for the spreading of opinions and expressions to a much larger and faster scale than ever before. As stated in Elvin Ong’s *Online Repression and Self-Censorship: Evidence from Southeast Asia*, “…ordinary citizens are articulating their opinions on various political issues, sharing like-minded political opinions from their social networks and engaging in active debates about political events;” (1) and while this may present itself as a benefit at first, the affordances of widespread online communication - as we’ll soon see - allow governmental powers to censor or even target certain individuals all too easily. While previous frameworks made it more difficult to track and locate a person, Internet databases and networks provide no such secrecy.

For many, the aspect of the government imposing censorship on certain topics, sites, and platforms - much less the idea of physical repercussions - may not seem all that threatening. The foundations of democratic process and the belief of ‘freedom of speech’ make certain countries more confident in their Internet consumption; and while the democratic systems and policies of censorship aren’t without essential flaws (more on that later), several southeastern nations - home to authoritarian rule - don’t experience that same sort of luxury.

Irina Shklovski and Nalini P. Kotamraju’s *Online Contribution Practices in Countries that Engage in Internet Blocking and Censorship* highlights a fundamental mistake many often misinterpret considering media access, that being in the context(s) of their location. As their article states:

“Individualized approaches to understanding contribution practices tend to be insensitive to context. They tend to assume that contributors face few, if any, structural consequences as a result of their contributions. People’s willingness and ability to contribute to social
media, however, are also shaped by their contexts, and, in particular, their relationship to
the state.” (1109)
And in the case of authoritarian societies, the punishment for posting and accessing what that
nation deems as ‘offensive or against the practices of the state’ often equals severe consequences.
“In countries with strong protection of freedom of speech and relatively democratic legal
systems, the negative potential consequences are relatively slight: loss of a job for
inappropriate postings or merely social embarrassment. For much of the rest of the world,
however, the negative potential consequences—whether actual or perceived—are far
greater.” (1109)
Postings of said punishable nature are often claimed to go against the rulings of said
government, and to call upon changes or the up-ending of their respective officials, or as
Elizabeth Stoycheff, G. Scott Burgess and Maria Clara Martucci’s *Online Censorship and
Digital Surveillance: The Relationship Between Suppression Technologies and Democratization
Across Countries* quotes:
“...coordinated and disruptive political participation unites individuals around a shared
cause or injustice, efficacy, and identity (Duncan), with the specific goal of challenging
political authorities to produce change.” (2)
While at first, this may seem like a fair and justifiable consequence, governments in authoritative
rule structure are often known for what is referred to as “blanket internet shutdowns”, which
Stoycheff et al explain is:
“...a crude and politically risky form of censorship that disrupts information flows during
times of crisis, like Egypt in the midst of the Arab Spring uprisings (Howard et al),
Turkey throughout its protests of President Erdogan, and India, over 60 times in 2017 as a response to violence brought on by social media (Human Rights Watch).” (3)

In fact, Google’s 2017 Transparency Report (in the above article) confirmed, “...governments of all types are far more likely to cite defamation or national security concerns than obscenity in their requests for content removal.” (3) All of these facts and findings combined showcase a focus for many nations to digitally control their people under what could be considered a borderline dictatorship, a statement that many in the west are either unaware of or blissfully ignorant to. Later sections will go more in depth with specific cases of activism versus the retaliation of these regimes, but for the moment, let’s look at how these populations (and their governments) have responded to one another.

Figure 1: A Visualization Example of Data Presented from Google’s Transparency Report(s) (https://transparencyreport.google.com/)

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Pushing Back?

While many peoples’ first instinct against government censorship would be to stand up and fight back in a sort of patriotic response, it's important to note that many southeastern nations - specifically in Asia - have legalized laws to delete and prosecute any forms of digital rebellion. Before any instances of activism even take place however, many digital users often partake in what is referred to as ‘self-censorship’. Social media self-censorship can be best described, from Elvin Ong’s *Online Repression and Self-Censorship: Evidence from Southeast Asia*, as, “...when the expected pay-off for expressing one’s political opinion online is negative.” (2) With Ong’s definition though, he also mentions that “the degree of self-censorship is likely to vary depending on the expected costs of online political expression,” (2) which reasons to understand that many under authoritarian control are already self-censoring from fear of repercussions.

Despite the ‘cause and effect’ structure that self-censorship creates, there are still activists present in regions where this is relevant - albeit in smaller amounts than a democratic nation - and thus does generate a bit of hope. However, as Ong notes, the legislations crafted by these governmental powers often leave little room for their voices to be heard. Specifically, these laws portray a vague terminology of ‘critical’ or ‘offensive’ language, which works against the foundation of freedom of speech.

“Governments typically first use existing legislation, such as existing sedition laws or defamation laws, or create new legislation, such as Thailand’s Cyber Crimes Act, to criminalize critical online political expression. They often legitimize and justify rhetorically these laws as necessary to maintain societal law and order (Pepinsky). These ‘catch-all’ laws are typically broadly worded to give incumbent governments wide
discretion to define critical speech freely as somehow threatening to the state or society, therefore authorizing legal prosecution and incarceration.” (5)

Figure 2: A Summary of Violations from Thailand’s Cyber/Computer Crimes Act
(https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/952009/nla-updates-computer-crime-punishments)

Once these laws are set into motion, these governments then target who they deem as the ‘biggest offenders’ in the form of “… high-profile online critics…” (5) for “… harassment, arrest, prosecution and incarceration…” (5), which as a result, causes greater fear - and more importantly - a greater reason for citizens to participate in self-censorship, or to stay away from online contributions altogether. When activists believe they are ‘moving forward’, the harsh
reality of the situation is that these nations are actually ‘pushing further back’, in large part because there are small(er) numbers of opposition, making it easier for them to diminish their attempts and prevent potential future activists from trying.

I feel I should include a disclaimer that my writing is in no way, shape, or form an attempt to attack any countries, or to invoke any forms of revolution. More so, my providing of analysis and reflection is meant to encourage those reading to be more aware of their own online presence - whether it be a democracy, authoritarian, etc. - and to consider ways that they could influence themselves and those around them to lead more safe and knowledgeable experiences online. If this does motivate activism in oppressed environments, then all the more power to it.

The point I’m trying to make here however, is that in order for there to (potentially) be changes and freedoms in more digitally censored countries, there needs to be more of an aware and able presence - both in external and internal communities - to strive for greater online expression.

Plus, there is a significant distinction between ‘attacking’ a government and ‘voicing their opinions/complaints’ that needs to be made, for as Ong explains:

“Freedoms of speech and expression are stifled when those freedoms are not exercised because of self censorship. In this way, autocratic leaders boost their perceived popularity, creating a snowball effect of further legitimizing and strengthening executive aggrandizement. This is how online repression and self-censorship entrenches autocrats and encourages democratic backsliding.” (19)
Digital Repression Examples from Singapore

Continuing the discussion on government forms of online censorship, Elvin Ong’s work (Online Repression and Self-Censorship: Evidence from Southeast Asia) includes three distinct examples from Singapore of social media activist prosecution that illustrates the continuous ‘snowball effect’ of digital repression in certain areas of the world, as well as the need for more active voices to be heard. Described by many - including Ong - as a “...robust electoral authoritarian regime,” (6) Singapore’s more recent incarcerations and/or warrants yield some unfortunate implications within.

First was blogger Roy Ngerng, who in 2014 was sued by Prime Minister, Lee Hsein Loong, for what was described as, “…implying in his blog that the prime minister was guilty of criminal misappropriation of monies from the city state’s pension funds (Sim).” (6) Ngerng was found guilty, and as a result, “…ordered to pay more than $150,000 in damages to the prime minister.” (6)

![Figure 3: A Photo of Singapore Blogger and Activist, Roy Ngerng.](https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/blogger-roy-ngerng-to-pay-150000-in-damages-to-pm-lee-in-instalments-lawyer)
Later in 2015 and 2016, YouTuber Amos Yee was charged for “...uploading videos that ‘wounded the religious feelings of Muslims and Christians’ as well as for offending viewers with remarks and images that criticized Singapore’s late prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew (Chong).” (6) Despite this, Yee was only sentenced to around 50 days in jail for those two incidents.

![Figure 4: A Photo of Singapore Blogger, Amos Yee.](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-39388810)

Lastly in 2017 came the prosecution of Li Shengwu, who was nephew of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and grandson of former prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew. Shengwu was reported for commenting on Facebook that “...‘the Singapore government is very litigious and has a pliant court system’.” (6) As a result of his comments, Shengwu was told his comments posed “...‘a real risk of undermining public confidence in the administration of justice’.” (6)
While these 3 instances seem miniscule in actuality and could be considered an overreaction by the Singapore government, Ong brings attention to a shocking revelation in regards to these cases, being that “These three critics – Ngerng, Yee and Li – were all prosecuted under different kinds of existing laws that had no direct relation to online speech in particular.”

(6) The quote below explains how each case was coded under a law that failed to differentiate online with offline speech:

“Ngerng’s case was a private lawsuit initiated by the prime minister under Singapore’s existing defamation laws. Yee was charged under Section 298 of the Penal Code for deliberately intending to wound the religious and racial feelings of a person. Li is very likely to be charged under Section 3 of Singapore’s Administration of Justice (Protection) Act of 2016, which criminalizes any act that undermines the public perception of the judiciary, broadly speaking. Not only do their cases demonstrate that critical online speech is treated no differently from critical offline speech, they also signal to
anti-regime critics that multiple legal provisions can be used to target them if necessary.”

(6)

On one hand, the comments made by these critics being seen as something ‘offensive’ does have merit; there should obviously be no call for racial, religious, or any form of prejudice hate in a civilized online landscape. On the other hand however, the difference(s) between the facts reported and the charges enforced by the Singapore government portrays a clear disconnect between what was perceived and what actually happened. Most likely the result - again, as explored by Ong - was a method of discouraging any voices or opinions that raise any questions or statements that could (potentially) be against Singapore’s reign, which as presented previously, decreases the chance of future activists standing up and voicing their opinions.

Another point worth mentioning is how these cases represent a negative aspect of the affordances associated with digital technologies. If Ngerng, Yee, and Li had expressed their complaints in a more offline venue, their presence(s) could’ve possibly been ‘under the radar’ from government surveillance until their ideas had gained mass public support; but as it stands, their online mediums of choice have resulted in their detection and punishment(s) by Singapore law. This in itself creates a conflicting argument: while activists are able to utilize social media in order to spread their voices and gain supporters much more efficiently and effectively, they risk the attention of backlash; on the other hand, activism is a much more subdued, yet potentially safer, process when performed in person. This isn’t meant to discourage online activism, but rather make people aware of the advantages and disadvantages with both options that are relevant until the looming threats of authoritarianism and/or censoring are no longer present. Nevertheless, activism has found a great deal of success through blogging and video platforms provided there is a large quantity of able support behind it.
If the cases mentioned above were bullying or harassment, it would be a different story, but as it stands here, people have been denied the ability to openly communicate and express any constructive criticism they have for their government. By instilling fear in the form of prosecution, Singapore is silencing any semblance of discussion for the sake of strengthening the hold and image of the country. While the cases mentioned are indeed unfortunate, this only adds to the argument that more active participation is needed.

**China’s Curious Censoring System**

In further understanding the logistics behind an authoritative control on online formats, one of the most well-known examples of a strict power is the Chinese government. Being the most populated country in the world, it makes sense to conclude that a leading power like China also possesses the most amount of people online. In reference to this, Ling Han and Chengpang Lee’s *Nudity, Feminists, and Chinese Online Censorship: A Case Study on the Anti Domestic Violence Campaign on SinaWeibo*, notes:

“China presents one of the most interesting and puzzling cases in research on the Internet and social movements. It is the world’s largest authoritarian state, and it has the largest population of netizens (network-citizens). The sheer number of Chinese netizens presents a dilemma of control for the Chinese government. The advancement of Internet and information and communications technologies greatly facilitates the efficiency of the government, and such technologies are promoted by the government as one of the nation’s economic development strategies. The online economy has been burgeoning in China in the past decade and has created many giant Internet companies (e.g. Alibaba). At the same time, online activism has also grown explosively. The tension between
developing a vibrant information economy and preventing the Internet from becoming an incubator of anti-government efforts has been theorized by several scholars.” (3)

As such, the Chinese government enforces both a strict, yet complex censorship system; one that involves three core components, as elaborated by Han and Lee:

“...[1] the ‘great firewall’ that prevents the exposure of the ordinary Chinese people to foreign media; [2] an automatic keyword block that preempts the appearance of sensitive materials; and [3] a massive team composed of trained individuals with the primary goals of not only removing dangerous posts but also propagating pro-government discourse online.” (3 + 4)

Despite there being a sort of basic comprehension surrounding the ideas and tools that make up China’s censorship system, Han and Lee wanted to understand how this system functions from a logical standpoint (ie: how it determines what is censored, what keywords or elements it looks for, etc.). To achieve this goal, they conducted research using the 2012 ‘Anti-Domestic Violence with Nude Photos Campaign’: “...a campaign to assist the work of women’s organizations seeking to reform Chinese family law and to push for the enactment of a law on anti-domestic violence.” (2). Through this opportunity, the authors utilized “17 feminists (who) posted their nude photos on SinaWeibo (a large Chinese microblogging platform) and created a campaign homepage to gather support for the online petition,”(2) to survey which (if any) posts were removed from SinaWeibo’s platform. Seeing as the photos posted contained what is deemed as ‘pornographic content’, plus the fact that the messages associated with the campaign were from an activist perspective, Han and Lee reasoned that the photos were likely to be censored.
Surprisingly though, after posting a total of 16 photos on the social media site, the outcome only resulted in 2 being censored during the campaign period. The participants, coming from a wide range of backgrounds (“Thirteen participants were self-identified females, two were males, and one was a male-to-female transgender. Most of the participants were in their 20s. One was in her 30s and two were in their 40s,” (7)) experienced a varying amount of shares and comments on their posts - the most being 1400 shares with the least coming in at 15 - and yet, the ones that ended up censored were in the middle of said data. Even in censoring, Han and Lee noticed:

“...the censors only removed the image but did not remove the messages nor the whole post. Netizens could still see the post and their comments attached to the original post, but they could not see the photo. This was the case with photo No. 6. However, the censors removed the entire post containing photo No. 11.” (10)
Figure 7:

Descriptive Information of Posters and Posts in the Anti-Domestic Violence with Nude Photos campaign.

(Nudity, Feminists, and Chinese Online Censorship: A Case Study on the Anti Domestic Violence Campaign on SinaWeibo, 9)

So, with a seemingly random correlation between content and censoring, how does the system work?

Upon further evaluation by the authors, they realized that the point of censoring wasn’t based on the content, or even necessarily the amount of shares, but rather the amount of support and discussion behind the post. When comparing two specific posts - No.1 which wasn’t censored, and No.6 which was - the authors took notice of the quality of responses being posted as opposed to quantity.

“These two cases were almost identical in many aspects. They both drew high public attention when posted. No. 1 had the highest number of shares and comments, and No. 6 was second in terms of shares and third in total number of comments. Both posters were
of similar age with similar activist backgrounds and both were fervent feminist
activists… In the case of No. 1, the initiator of the whole campaign, the photo attracted
all sorts of discussions, criticisms, mockery, and attacks… Since the discussion did not
move in any one clear direction, we label the interaction pattern in No. 1 as constrained.
In contrast, where No. 6 is concerned, we observed from the very beginning that the
discussion was dominated by activists who supported the original poster by defending
their ideological position and responding to netizens’ critiques… The active participation
of activists in this case further popularized the photo, and the involvement of SinaWeibo
celebrities caused a greater increase in the online interaction. We argue that this pattern of
escalating interaction accounted for the removal of No. 6 but not No. 1.” (12 +13)
The connection to be made here, as a result, is that China’s authoritative censorship aims to
target posts or ideas that generate a large amount of collective action and unity against the state’s
desires, rather than simply the subject of the post itself. If there’s a large amount of rejection or
dismissal of a statement, then there’s no need for China to see it as a threat; but if such a post
gains a lot of support and pushes critical, collaborative discussions, then there’s a need for it to
be removed. In a bit of contrast to the examples from Singapore, there’s more of a unified front
to generate calls for change and progressive action, which forces China to (slightly worryingly)
push back in response. Part of this revelation may be due to the enormous population that the
country boasts, but there’s still more of a desire to ‘open the doors’ nonetheless.

Although the authoritarian China’s digital presence proves to establish a firm and
grounded censorship system; with critical analysis, the research example shown also illustrates
the ability for their digital consumers to generate publicity - both online and in traditional media
- (ie: establishing a campaign) to “…prolong the survival of their voices on the Internet.” (16)
Because of this revelation, there is hope for people to be able to openly express themselves, even in repressed societies as seen here. Whether change generates on a large-scale is yet to be seen, but the photos presented as part of the ‘Anti-Domestic Violence with Nude Photos Campaign’ are an indicator that voices are out there.

**Political Party Pressure**

Though the last few sections have provided an in-depth look into authoritarian strongholds on their digital populations, and the resulting tensions created, that doesn’t mean democratic societies aren’t without their own issues in regards to online traffic. On the contrary, certain countries like America are perhaps more politically divided now than they have ever been.

Despite the much more open policies that democracy advertises, these policies allowing for frequent and easy sharing on media channels - as mentioned before - create both a blessing and a curse depending on how people portray themselves online. Reflecting this, Marco Dohle and Uli Bernhard’s *Presumed Online Media Influence and Support for Censorship: Results From a Survey Among German Parliamentarians* quotes:

“...political communication in the online world takes place at a much faster pace. In addition, many more people can participate in political communication than the limited circle of journalists—some even take part from an anonymous position. Furthermore, a completely free Internet also means that political groups with radical or even undemocratic views can spread their positions without restrictions and to a potentially unlimited audience.” (4)
There are still restrictions as to what can be said online - most of these restrictions can be attributed to what is commonly seen as a form of hate speech or bigotry - but these factors don’t stop highly opinionated individuals from expressing their thoughts. Combining the frequency of polarized opinions with the ability to openly post and distribute content, plus the rapid advancement of technological design and programming, results in the catastrophe many have dubbed: ‘Fake News’.

Using America as the primary example for discussion, Justin E. Lane, Kevin McCaffree, and F. Leron Shults’s *Is Radicalization Reinforced by Social Media Censorship?* illustrates that social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Reddit have gradually become more popular in contemporary society; and thus have become hosts for online news channels, articles, and findings to become publicized. Despite these successes, it has become all too easy for people to generate and share their own news postings, regardless of sincerity or factuality, leading to the appropriately titled, ‘Fake News’. As Lane, McCaffree, and Shults explain:

“*In a polarized and cynical political environment, individuals driven by a desire for ‘chaos’ and disruption will be motivated to generate and spread empirically false, politically hostile, news rumors online. Empirically false news stories with a negative emotional valence spread more quickly and are shared more widely compared to empirically true news stories.*” (2)

And while initial reactions may suggest simply ignoring such links or posts, the thinning of lines between mainstream and independent creators leaves malicious or ‘troll’ content to appear almost exactly similar to real, accredited sources. In the eyes of the general public, who often don’t possess the knowledge to recognize such scams, these viewpoints are then spread at a quick pace, as “Simply being exposed to false news stories increases the likelihood that people
will accept such stories as accurate, even if such a story is ‘flagged’ as problematic by third-party fact checkers.” (2)

An important point to consider, in regards to the nature of social media sites, is that the individual is likely to have ‘friends’ or ‘followers’ with the same political viewpoints: people who may end up creating and/or sharing more of the polarizing content in question. This creates what the authors consistently refer to as ‘echo chambers’, or situations in which a particular viewpoint or idea is often amplified and repeated. By creating these echo chambers, the distribution of political content effectively forms large groups of radicalized ideologies who are very likely to be firm in their beliefs. Unfortunately, more often than not, discourse only increases from there, as heavy-handed criticisms and arguments only serve to fuel the desire to defend an individual or group’s perspectives further. As the authors mention, “... individuals are more motivated to defend their position when they perceive their cause to be under threat, and their perception of a false consensus might therefore motivate them to defend their position.” (3) This results in a repetitive process in which there are no winners, only more radicalized and borderline extremist parties.

So, if groups are attacking others for their personal stances, why doesn’t the government and/or the network censor such comments? What if the focus was on removing fake news stories and dismantling the framework for discourse? Unfortunately, it’s not as easy as it seems. In a democratic society, where people have grown institutionalized by the concept of ‘Freedom of Speech’, the sudden rejection of their ideals often creates more of a metaphorical ‘avalanche’. As explained by Lane, McCaffree, and Shults:

“When an individual is censored from expressing themselves on a social media platform, this can be experienced as a form of identity non-verification, i.e., a feeling that they have
been denied the possibility of expressing their sense of identity in the future…

individuals may therefore seek to fortify their identity by enhancing its degree of cohesiveness and clarity…when individuals ruminate about shared dysphoric experiences, they can experience an increased motivation to cooperate with one another, as well experience an increased fusion of their personal identity with that of the group.”

(4)

In other words, this is a situation which simply can’t be rid of via censorship. “While it may serve to create ‘safer’ spaces for online communities, the overall health of the real-world community could be viewed as compromised when extremist views are not dealt with, but digitally ‘swept under the carpet’.” (13) A prime example of this statement being the attack of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, where the media dismissal of recent election results (and later on, the banning of former President Donald Trump on Twitter) caused thousands of right-wing extremists to feel the need to take action into their own hands.

Figure 8: A Photo of Protestors Surrounding the U.S. Capitol Building on January 6, 2021

(https://fsi.stanford.edu/news/legacies-january-6)
So, if fake news sources can’t be stopped, and the censoring of extremist groups may accentuate political tensions, what can be done? The answer lies in proper education and communication. First and foremost, it’s crucial to be more ‘socially aware’ in regards to how you receive and process information online. Spending time to learn - and teach those close to you - how to detect fake news will lower the chances of falling victim to it. Research what news stations and/or networks are credible to make sure you’re getting your news from a proper source, and proceed to decide which one you personally enjoy. And of course, take time to be able to formulate your own viewpoints. Just because others around you feel one way or the other, doesn’t mean you have to as well. Decide for yourself and become more educated in the process “...by allowing individual users to pick and choose with whom they want to interact, rather than through centralized censorship mechanisms such as banning individuals from platforms.” (13)

In terms of communication, the most essential point to consider is being open to thought-provoking and civilized conversations, even if someone’s opinions may be different than yours. As Lane, McCaffree, and Shults briefly mentioned, it’s difficult to understand, much less accept, viewpoints that contrast with your own. Sometimes, when encountering opposing ideals, comes the urge to protect your point of view. However, if there aren’t any discussions with varying perspectives, then political parties will only become more polarized. By providing suggestions and a diversity of identities can societies become more connected and enlightened.

Much like the conflicts between activists and authoritative governments in the eastern part of the world, the solution here isn’t simple by any means, but the potential is there for the taking. Becoming more informed and communicable are processes that take time and practice, but as shown so far, they are important tools for differentiating and overcoming negative examples of censorship in a digitalized world where voices are much more prominent.
Negative Reviews and The Psychology of Consumerism

The majority of the focus so far has been on digital censorship as a governmental or political force; and while these terminologies carry a great amount of significance, it's also highly beneficial to discuss it from a social/cultural perspective. The next three sections will analyze the effects of online restriction from a more generalized context, being scenarios that convey more domestic occurrences.

Surely, many are familiar with the aspect of online shopping. Whether pursuing through a certain online retailer, or utilizing an e-commerce organization like Amazon, hundreds of thousands of people daily participate in digital consumerism. As the global market has gradually shifted to a more digital landscape, where products are purchased online and delivered to doorsteps and package rooms, there is greater priority in establishing an online marketplace. Specifically though, reading information and customer reviews about a product or retailer before purchasing has become commonplace. As stated in Jennifer L. Stevens, Carol L. Esmark Jones, and Michael Breazeale’s *Title Redacted: The Impact of Negative Online Review Censorship*, “...nearly 90% of consumers believe it is important to read reviews posted by fellow consumers before purchasing a product (Trustpilot), and most believe those reviews to be as trustworthy as personal recommendations (Murphy);” (1) but with this statement also comes the ‘yin and yang’ of critique: those with an unfortunate experience and/or outcome.

Seeing as the above source showcases the amount of trust that consumers place in other reviews, it can be logically concluded that negative reviews can easily result in a large portion of an audience developing a negative attitude (or at least reluctance) towards a brand or product. Stevens, Esmark Jones, and Breazeale’s research agrees with this concept, directing to what is referred to as the Congruity Theory, which states:
“...conflicting information relating to an object will cause stress and a pressure to reconcile the conflicting accounts. Attitude toward the source of information can impact attitude toward an object, such that people want sources they like to approve of objects that they like and reject objects they do not like (Osgood and Tannenbaum).” (2)

In correlation, this can result in fewer sales for certain companies, and even a damaged reputation in more frequent and prominent cases. Naturally, the main objective of a brand is to make a profit through what they are selling, and the presence of negative reviews - whether they are deemed ‘authentic’ or are simply ‘hackers’ - prevents such a goal from being achieved. So, what can brands do to a review that is threatening their very being? The solution has been to censor or remove the negative review(s) in question, but as soon to be discovered, this can actually make the situation worse.

The idea of simply censoring a negative response aimed towards the company may sound promising at first, and while certain scenarios such as offensive or derogatory language may actually prove this reaction correct, consumers are often shown to develop a worsened perception of a brand when they see that a review or comment has been removed. Stevens et al refer to this as Reactance Theory, in which:

“...If a poster has his/her freedom to express their opinion – in this case, a review censored—a free behavior of the poster has been eliminated. Building on reactance theory, (Ashmore et al.) found that the censorship of a communication has the power to change a subject’s attitude toward the position held in the censored communication. For instance, if a consumer is predisposed to disagree with a negative online review, that attitude may change if the company removes that review.” (3)
An example of this can be observed with Amazon’s deletion of a high number of negative reviews concerning Hillary Clinton’s book in 2017. While Amazon claimed that the deleted reviews were either from “...unverified purchases or violated their (website) terms,” (Title Redacted: The Impact of Negative Online Review Censorship, 2) a majority of the public felt that Amazon “...was deleting valid negative reviews and trying to boost the overall review score of the book.” (2) The behavioral patterns of the common consumer points to greater trust in the inclusion of comments, whether good or bad, than in the brand itself. Also, as mentioned earlier with the discussion of political blocking, this sort of censorship by a social power also leaves the censored reviewer to experience a form of ‘identity non-verification’ in which the individual feels they have been prevented from expressing their opinions, and thus are prompted to share their encounters or viewpoints in greater clarity (such as with friends or via other online platforms).

Figure 9: A Photo of Hilary Clinton and her 2017 publication, What Happened, which was the focus of criticism when Amazon deleted one-star reviews of the memoir.

(https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/sep/14/amazon-redacts-one-star-reviews-of-hillary-clintons-what-happened)
By no means is this to suggest that every instance of censorship on the digital consumer market is egregious - as mentioned earlier, there are cases in which the language and content of a post must be blocked for everyone’s safety and well-being - but that there are plenty of instances in which a company trying to protect its reputation from (assumed) unsatisfied consumers proves more fatal via a restriction of freedom of speech. So, what can be done in response to negative reviews? There are actually two key suggestions brought from Stevens et al that are worth mentioning.

The first is for the brand itself to view negative criticism as an opportunity to create a greater relationship with its consumers. This can be accomplished by attempting to resolve the issue with the poster, thus further advertising the quality of the product, or as the article states:

“(Abney et al.) found that companies who properly communicated with upset customers and adapted online responses were able to successfully recover customers and maintain a future relationship with them. Successful recovery responses from the brand, through warmth-oriented messages, may even lead to improved service perceptions.” (5)

This way, the consumers on a retailer site or platform can witness firsthand how a brand cares about their audience(s) and firmly believes in the strength of their public relations.

Another method of response actually lies more so in the trust of those loyal to the brand, rather than a direct approach by the company. This can be achieved by the company enlisting what is referred to as a ‘brand advocacy program’ where advocates come to the defense against accounts of negative critiques. As mentioned in the article:

“...by fostering brand advocates, who work to defend the brand either in an official or unofficial capacity…a company may be able to protect itself against the harmful effects of negative (reactions)...Brand advocacy programs not only foster engagement with
current satisfied customers, but also provide other consumers with secondhand trustworthy content (Mangold and Smith).” (8)

While placing trust in the hands of others may seem like a risky endeavor, brand relationships have nevertheless been proven to be an effective source of repeated sales and profit. Trust in either responding to criticisms with poise, or in having confidence in loyal supporters, provides a display of assurance in a brand that isn’t possible with censoring a handful of backlash or opinions. This also signifies to the general public that their feedback is regarded as valuable, and are thus more trusting of the brand’s actions.

Digital consumerism has increased exponentially within the last decade, mostly thanks to the advancement of mobile technology and the growing relevance of shipping centers like Amazon Prime; but with the rise in online sales comes more opportunities to share personal accounts with everyone. Yet, just because an account may hold a negative experience with a certain brand or product doesn’t mean it should be censored from public viewing. As much as there’s a possibility a comment possesses malice or deceit, so does the chance it contains valid input from someone who’s used a company’s items and/or services. As a brand, the focus shouldn’t be on censoring a review based on fear of reputation (or lack thereof) but rather on repairing consumer-brand relationships and potentially establishing new ones. When we use a product or service, we want it to be the best it can possibly be; and it is that kind of attitude that should be repeated and reflected on a corporate level. Again, there are certain circumstances where censorship is all but inevitable for the safety of everyone, yet it should be performed sparingly and with good reason.

As Stevens et al quote, “In the past, a brand had almost complete control of building its reputation, but the internet has shifted some of that power to consumers.” (1) As a brand, it is
their choice whether they adapt to the evolution of the online marketplace via the strategies mentioned above, or whether they lose all semblance of control. While the individual does have the right to make their own decisions in regards to what products they purchase, the social foundations of chat and blogging features allow many to seek out choices or advice they themselves have difficulty making. The evidence discussed throughout this section showcases how the viewing of other perspectives and accounts has resulted in a great amount of comfort and validation for millions online, and it is up to brands to earn that sort of reputation. While this concept may seem frightening, public idolism holds several of the same basic values as the celebrity endorsements in public magazines or the commercials on television (albeit much more critically and honestly). In modern day, the advancements of media technology have allowed the public to possess the potential of company models; and while this boasts a great amount of power, it’s also built upon the same society that has adapted through decades of pop culture beforehand.

The LGBT(IQ) Community as an Example of Outdated Social Censorship

Censorship is often regarded as a means of restricting content that is viewed as ‘inappropriate’ based on a group’s ideals or beliefs. The sections and topics discussed so far have proven that there is much more depth in practice(s) and uses than this, but there is an underlying connection in that it does take something considered ‘offensive’ or ‘harmful’ to be censored.

Much like with culture and society, our technologies are always changing and evolving to reflect the values of the current time. New standards are commonly accepted over time (albeit gradually) to adapt to ideals integrated by humanity; or in the case of technology, to meet the needs of the digital communication realm. However, sometimes there are those that refuse to
acknowledge such changes accepted by others, which leaves a gap in perceptions even decades later. The same can be said through online measures, leaving to an ‘outdated’ censorship of materials that many still reject.

For an example of outdated censorship, we’re going to be taking a look at the LGBT community. A crucial thing to note is that the actual acronym for the pride community is often debated without a full consensus. The article used throughout this section uses ‘LGBTIQ’ but some may not agree with this, so I’m going to refer to the ‘standard safe’ LGBT. Please be aware that this or the material presented is not meant to offend, hurt, or isolate anyone, and is meant to be discussed in an accurate and informative manner.

The LGBT community, now often accepted for their lifestyles, were once commonly ridiculed by mainstream society. For much of the 20th century, it was considered taboo to be gay, transgender, or any non-heteronormative identity, much less to openly present any material pertaining to it. Thankfully, as stated before, societies have and/or are starting to evolve to accept various sexual and gender orientations with open arms, but there are still certain conservative or authoritative parts of the world that reject this notion. And while many in modern America may not recognize this as an issue, LGBT content can often still be censored from both physical and online library databases. Rachel Wexelbaum’s *Censorship of Online LGBTIQ Content in Libraries* comments:

“Historically, librarians in the United States have addressed censorship of LGBTIQ print materials. Most of the time, school and public libraries have chosen to ‘self-censor’. In other words, librarians will either choose not to select LGBT materials, shelve LGBT materials in hidden locations, fail to promote LGBTIQ materials, “hide” LGBT materials
And while many deem this unconstitutional, the outdated prospect of viewing anything LGBT as ‘sexual content’ is still a prevalent issue today, or as Wexelbaum puts it:

“Americans feel the need to ‘protect’ children and teens from content they perceive as ‘inappropriate’. Librarians, pressured by the Children’s Internet Protection Act (CIPA) and the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Rule (COPPA), as well as the desires of concerned parents, are reconsidering ‘freedom of access’ to anything that the community would consider pornographic or sacreligious.” (205 + 206)

An important note to consider is that a majority of school and public libraries often utilize internet filtering softwares which, “…restrict or deny access to social media sites, blogs, or websites that contain particular keywords or images,” (207) and in which “The administrator can choose the level of restriction, keywords, and URLs that he or she does not want computer users to see.” (207) With this dilemma, it then either falls on the respective administrator (and the surrounding community) to remove keyword filters associated with LGBT content, or for new guidelines from the government to be enforced that prohibits its restriction. More so than that though, the filtering of content which can be used to educate (ie: education to abolish LGBT prejudices) “…creates an information and digital divide between students in underserved and affluent school districts, as well as poor individuals without their own devices and wealthy ones with access to their own personal filter-free devices (or the technical skills to hack the filter),” (208) which further accentuates the gap in social acceptance and in educational practices.

Particularly in the southern part of the nation, known for upholding more ‘traditional values’, the censoring of LGBT content is still an acceptable response that has left a negative
impact for the youth who are a part of that community. For a specific example, Wexelbaum brings up Tennessee high school student, Andrew Emitt, who “…discovered that he could not search for LGBT scholarships in his school computer lab, or websites from well-known LGBT organizations, but he could retrieve websites promoting ‘reparative therapy’ by ‘ex-gay’ ministries.” (208) Cases such as these are examples of administrators being able to select what types of information are restricted, much like the authoritative countries discussed in China and Singapore. And much like those cases, there needs to be a call for others to stand up and push for change to happen; this also means that the opinions of those who reject change can’t be forced, but as said earlier, society in America has gradually become progressive with the emergence of new ideals.

Fortunately, there is a call to action - at least in regards to America - that has diminished such prejudice censorship. Wexelbaum has noted that “As more states include sexual orientation and gender identity in their non-discrimination laws, school and public libraries will need to revisit their filtering policies and how they promote LGBTIQ resources through their websites,” (210) but she also points out that it’s up to the individual to at least come to terms with the shifting of culture, in the case of librarians to “…reflect upon their self-censorship practices, and come up with strategies to change those thought processes and behaviors.” (210) With the example of Andrew Emitt, he was able to create a positive change in filing a lawsuit against his school district, which as a result, “…forced all of the school districts in Tennessee to lift the restrictions on all LGBTIQ websites.” (209) Such changes are indeed resulting in a more inclusive society that many are thankful for today, despite its steady process.

While I used the LGBT community as an example of social censorship, there are many other minority groups and cultures who have not received equal representation on account of old
prejudices allowing for the censoring of materials. Still to this day, there is a disconnect in the opinions relating to a marginalized group based on their proximity to said group. Ultimately, the key in handling social censorship, and the driving force behind invoking positive change, lies in education. By calling for administrators and other officials to remove filters on (now) accepted social constructs, the information divide diminishes, allowing for people to interpret their own feelings about such concepts rather than relying on what is strictly taught to them or passed down through previous generations. To allow open educational opportunities is to allow the ideals needed for society to continue to evolve as it has been. Of course this isn’t to suggest that censors be removed from all material(s) deemed as ‘offensive’, but rather recognize that the definitions of what is offensive changes over time, and we must be prepared to adapt for an enlightened and accepting world.

Censorship and the Prevention of Cyberbullying

With the expansion of social media platforms, people are able to interact instantly with friends, family, peers at work or school, practically anyone. However, as the saying goes, with great power comes great responsibility; and such power has allowed those with ill intentions to partake in a newer form of communication: cyberbullying. As defined in Sweta Agrawal and Amit Awekar’s Deep Learning for Detecting Cyberbullying Across Multiple Social Media Platforms, Cyberbullying is referred to (according to the National Crime Prevention Council) as “...the use of the Internet, cell phones or other devices to send or post text or images intended to hurt or embarrass another person.” (1) From the days of Myspace and Facebook, to the current trends of Snapchat and Instagram, cyberbullying has become a more prominent alternative to traditional bullying around the world.
A great portion of the population has been a target or a witness of cyberbullying, but perhaps the biggest extent of this is in the school age(s) of teens and adolescents who are more naive to their social media impact. Dorothy L. Espelage and Jun Sung Hong’s *Cyberbullying Prevention and Intervention Efforts: Current Knowledge and Future Directions* mentions, “…according to a national study (Beran et al.) in Canada, which consisted of 1001 children ages 10 to 17 years, 14% of children reported being cyberbullied once or more in the past month, (with) other studies report(ing) much higher rates of cyberbullying than the aforementioned study.” (375) From the typical tactics of taunting and name-calling, to more aggressive forms including public humiliation, shaming, and even death threats, cyberbullying has taken a significant mental toll on youth with “Targets of cyberbullying report(ing) greater depression, anxiety, risk behavior, and suicidality than their peers who do not report these experiences.” (375)

Around the world, there have been several incidents of cyberbullying that have escalated to the point where the victim feels the need to take their own life. Examples include, as referenced by Espelage and Hong:

“…13-year-old Megan Meier (2006), a cyberbullying victim in the United States, hang(ing) herself due to constant bullying about her weight…Phoebe Prince, a 15-year-old teenager in the United States (2010), hang(ing) herself after enduring several months of cyberbullying from her classmates…15-year-old Amanda Todd from Canada (2012) kill(ing) herself shortly after she was being bullied by her classmates, with prior to her suicide, she posted a video on YouTube describing her torment…(and) 17-year-old Rehtaeh Parsons from Canada (2013), (where) a photo of her severely intoxicated and
being sexually violated by a male who gestured a thumbs-up to the camera was the main source of her torment and subsequent suicide.” (375)

Figure 10: A photo of U.S. teenager, Megan Meier, who committed suicide in 2006.

(https://cyberbullying.org/indictments-filed-in-megan-meier-case)

Figure 11: A photo of U.S. teenager, Phoebe Prince, who committed suicide in 2010.

Figure 12: A screenshot from Canadian teenager, Amanda Todd’s YouTube Video, which was filmed just before her suicide in 2012.


Figure 13: A photo of Canadian teenager, Rehtaeh Parsons, who committed suicide in 2013.


These cases represent various levels of malice and harassment, but each showcase a fundamental flaw with social media networks, being the ability for any content to potentially leak and/or go viral. Though bullying has been a social issue for generations, the affordances associated with
digital communications have allowed cyberbullying to become a grander and more severe form of torment for many.

Most first instincts would point to censoring cyberbullying content as a solution. After all, if governments and businesses can filter democratic movements and criticisms, who’s to say the filters can’t be applied to hate speech? Unfortunately, as Agrawal and Awekar (Deep Learning for Detecting Cyberbullying Across Multiple Social Media Platforms) point out, being able to track and censor incidents proves to be a challenge. First of all, the definition of what constitutes cyberbullying is highly subjective and can vary from platform to platform:

“For example, frequent use of swear words might be considered as bullying by the general population. However, for teen oriented social media platforms such as Formspring, this does not necessarily mean bullying…Depending on the topic of cyberbullying, vocabulary and perceived meaning of words vary significantly…” (1 + 2)

What may be a response for the censors on one platform may go undetected on another, which leads to an inconsistent understanding of what is meant by ‘bullying’. Context can also vary greatly as a linguistic tool; a conversation between friends may involve the use of swear words, but does not equate to bullying or malicious intent.

Another thing to keep in mind is that the methods of communication can vary greatly, “For example, Twitter posts (being) short and lack(ing) anonymity. Whereas posts on Q&A oriented SMPS (Social Media Platforms) are long and have the option of anonymity.” (2) In correlation with this, tracing a hacker or a bully may be hard to achieve, for as Agrawal and Awekar note:

“Fast evolving words and hashtags in social media make it difficult to detect cyberbullying using swear word list based simple filtering approaches. The option of
anonymity in certain social networks also makes it harder to identify cyberbullying as the profile and history of the bully might not be available.” (2)

If there’s anything that can be taken away from the above quotes, it's that while censorship has been proven to be a powerful framework - regardless of perspective - it can also be inconsistent. The rapid nature of digital communication proves to alter the terminologies of popular culture, making it difficult for any potential tracking. Unlike with the previous sections, where an authoritative government can obtain clear guidelines on what constitutes as ‘rebellious’, an online retailer can rely on similar sites and reviews for protection, or administrators can easily go by their perceptions, there’s no one definitive answer for what is or can be limited. Unless all forms of social media and texting were to be abolished - which would undoubtedly prove egregious considering the uses of digital networking we’ve grown accustomed to - cyberbullying can’t simply be blocked.

So then, what solutions or suggestions can (at the very least) reduce the instances and impact of cyberbullying? How can we provide a safe networking experience, especially for our youth? One major method - and a common theme of censorship awareness - is taking cyberbullying (prevention) as an educational opportunity. By promoting online safety and post consideration, especially at a younger age, can we encourage everyone to become more conscious about their social media presence. For younger audiences, Espelage and Hong (Cyberbullying Prevention and Intervention Efforts: Current Knowledge and Future Directions) claim “…setting appropriate limits on screen time, monitoring their children’s use of the technology, talking to their children about Internet safety and privacy, and identifying why their children are not talking to them about their online experiences,” (378) can play a vital piece of the puzzle. Children do have a right to some semblance of privacy, but it’s equally valuable for
parents and guardians to become more involved in case of events where cyberbullying becomes an issue. For more generalized education (for all audiences), cybersecurity programs and resources should be highly encouraged, though Espelage and Hong do warn that viewers “... should be cautious when reviewing information… and should focus on online resources that are provided by government agencies and advocacy groups that use research to guide their recommendations.” (378) Creating more informed online users, regardless of age, is crucial in developing progressively responsible communities.

Another suggestion, though this one may prove to be more unlikely, is for governments and networks to establish universal guidelines (filters) across all social media platforms. However, as mentioned earlier, different platforms possess different affordances that result in varying groups and practices; Snapchat’s photo-format is a sharp contrast from the likes of Twitter posts, just as a specific instance. Determining a consistent structure in dictating cyberbullying language may be a substantial challenge, especially considering the various context(s) of language; for as the article, Deep Learning for Detecting Cyberbullying Across Multiple Social Media Platforms addresses:

“Past works on cyberbullying detection have at least one of the following three bottlenecks. First (Bottleneck B1), they target only one particular social media platform. How these methods perform across other SMPs (Social Media Platforms) is unknown. Second (Bottleneck B2), they address only one topic of cyberbullying such as racism, and sexism. Depending on the topic, vocabulary and nature of cyberbullying changes. These models are not flexible in accommodating changes in the definition of cyberbullying. Third (Bottleneck B3), they rely on carefully handcrafted features such as swear word list
and POS tagging. However, these handcrafted features are not robust against variations in writing style.” (2) 

Nevertheless, there is still hope that the increased awareness of these limitations can push forward the necessary changes.

Cyberbullying is an unfortunate byproduct of the instant communication feature(s) that digital technologies have provided, and it may be a relevant issue for a long time. However, there is hope that the quantity of cyberbullying will diminish. From a general perspective, it’s highly beneficial to develop an understanding on the impact of a post or comment; and from a more youth-focused perspective, it’s important to be involved with your children’s social media activity, and to adopt cybersecurity programs for expanded knowledge, so that they can become more socially aware of their digital interactions. Realizing that there are dozens of social media platforms is also effective in self-determining what constitutes cyberbullying or hate speech. While censorship is not as active in regards to this topic, the message here is to expand knowledge for a better online experience where censorship isn’t necessary.

**Conclusion**

Throughout the majority of this paper, I’ve analyzed a plentiful collection of scholarly literature from the past decade to look at various examples of digital censorship from social, political, and cultural means. By obtaining a comprehension on the scope and consequences of these instances, the term “censorship” is recognized as a more diversified concept than simply “blocking.” Such control and surveillance in online environments has created a significant impact in the lives of millions, whether intentional or not. So then, how can societies withstand the threats towards technological independence, while also experiencing safe and inclusive
encounters? My proposed solution(s) lie in the universal themes/suggestions I’ve included throughout many of the previous discussion points.

First and foremost, it’s essential to educate both ourselves and each other on the concepts and implications of censorship. A large amount of the aforementioned censorship struggles have been a result of lacking social awareness; in regards to authoritative restrictions, this is due to the lack of activism needed to rebel government control, whereas many of the social and political examples see people (and/or higher organizations) failing to realize the situations that digital censoring has caused. By taking the time to reflect on our ‘online presence’, and on solutions to how we can properly communicate any conflicts, can the need for outside interference decrease. From understanding how certain censorship systems work, to recognizing the importance of online advocates, to even thinking about how we present ourselves online, there are many opportunities for knowledge to lead a more healthy and productive internet.

Speaking of communication, many of the instances observed call for the ability for different groups and communities to communicate. Failure to direct positive and active discussions has led to many of the described censorship scenarios; from the furthering of the political divide in radicalized nations (the U.S.), to the continued ban of now culturally progressive and inclusive content, and even the absence of possibly constructive criticisms. In order to achieve any semblance of progress in these digital landscapes, there must be civilized conversations that’ll improve our daily interactions. To challenge previous conceptions and to create new ideas, there must be the presence of multiple perspectives that are able to express their insights.

Another theme I wish to briefly touch upon is the idea of exercising freedom of speech. Pivoting back to the disclaimer I made earlier, the purpose of this paper isn’t meant to cause any
acts of force, aggression, or revolution, but rather to emphasize the importance of healthily challenging instances of oppression or control. While certain institutions may be more difficult to invoke any sort of change, there needs to be strength in numbers through the general population, which can be gained through educating and communicating with others. For safer and independent online navigation, there needs to be resolutions; and for there to be resolutions, there needs to be those who believe and are willing to justify them. Many of the rights and freedoms earned throughout history have followed a similar formula, and certain articles throughout this paper embody that sort of optimism.

While the universal themes and strategies provided appear simple in regards to individual effort, these steps need to be conducted by a majority in order to equate to any noticeable success. This may sound pessimistic, but the reality is that any significant advances need a large quantity of those willing to support it. However, much like technology has rapidly evolved, I believe that so can our perceptions of the online realm. Through the advancements of digital communications, humanity is able to connect with millions almost instantly; true, this may present itself as a double-edged sword concerning some of the scenarios observed, but this also allows us to broadcast information effectively and efficiently. As a result, educational resources and discussions can be provided, assuming there is a surplus of conscious effort. Regardless of location - authoritarian state or not - participation is possible, therefore the greatest challenge lies in collective action. To quote Irina Shklovski and Nalini P. Kotamraju’s Online Contribution Practices in Countries that Engage in Internet Blocking and Censorship, “...censorship must be understood as socially framed and experienced phenomena rather than merely forms of blackouts of information…” (1117)
Before undergoing this research, I was only vaguely aware of the intensity in which
digital censorship creates a bind in terms of how we are able to articulate; however, I was also
aware that online access was becoming more of a controlled sector within the past decade,
especially with social media guidelines such as Twitter and YouTube. Taking what I’ve
discovered, I’m thankful for the results of this project, as I feel it has taught me to critically
consider the impact of my decisions online and how I can utilize such factors to their greatest
potential; what/how I can drive online conversations, what sites or resources to be alert to, how
content can be perceived and delivered, and more. In addition to my impact though, I also realize
that there are many others who could benefit from such information in order to improve the
overall experience of the Internet. The digital world we live in today is unlike anything humanity
has been a part of before, and we are still learning new facets and outlets of it everyday. Some
may call this revelation scary, but I believe that the pros of such expansive communication
should be embraced, and I wish to improve myself alongside an evolving culture.

In my writing, I hope to have demonstrated a framework for those reading to obtain an
in-depth comprehension of the ‘umbrella term’ that is censorship, and in turn have helped
encourage others to consider improving their own digital identities. Understandably, this is in no
way meant to suggest that every single instance of censorship be eliminated, as there are cases in
which it is valuable to prevent highly offensive or threatening material, but rather in recognizing
that the examples discussed are detrimental to the advancement of a civilized world in which
ideas and opinions are positively expressed. Unfortunately, there will always be those unwilling
to portray themselves in an appropriate manner, yet there is ample opportunity for improvement
from a general standpoint. With the technological innovations and affordances of the 21st
century, we can’t be afraid to adapt alongside them.
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