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Governments Worldwide Censor Web Content: New Study Analyzes Where, Why and How Access to the Web Is Controlled?

Where you live in the world largely determines how freely you can access the internet. The level of cyber censorship in different countries around the world is directly related to how authoritarian the governing regime is, according to Barney Warf from University of Kansas. His comprehensive analysis of the geographical nature of Internet censorship is published online in Springer's GeoJournal.

By mid-2010, more than 1.9 billion people used the Internet, making it a tool of communications, entertainment, and other applications accessed by approximately 28 percent of the world's population; yet the distribution of these netizens is highly uneven. For many, access to the internet is no longer a luxury, but a necessity. In spite of this, many governments across the world aggressively limit access to the internet and shape the contents of what their citizens can view online.

Warf's paper clarifies the reasons, types, extent of, and opposition to, government limitations of internet access, functionality and contents. It also maps the severity of censorship worldwide and assesses the number of people affected. This analysis shows that the degree and type of censorship reflects how democratic and open to criticism different political systems are.

Countries in northern Europe, the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Japan have minimal or no censorship. At the other end of the spectrum, China, Vietnam, Burma/Myanmar, Iran, North Korea and Turkmenistan exhibit the most severe and extensive restrictions. In between these extremes lies a range of states with modest to moderate forms of internet censorship that reflect their diverse systems of governance, the presence or absence of civil liberties, and the ability of various groups to defend their ability or right to use the internet in whatever manner they choose.

"The global diffusion of the internet has created a growing challenge for many authoritarian regimes and greatly enabled the growth and effectiveness of global civil society. Government censorship, ranging from relatively mild steps such as anti-pornography measures to the arrest and execution of cyber dissidents, has become an inescapable dimension of the geographies of cyberspace," says Barney Warf. He warns: "In attempting to manage internet access and content, states must take care not to alienate investors, tourists, entrepreneurs, and software developers, as routes to economic growth and improved productivity."