

World narrow web

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Abstract

Censorship and how govt reacts to it may push us to country-specific networks

Twitter, a popular micro-blogging service, recently announced that “[today] we give ourselves the ability to reactively withhold content from users in a specific country — while keeping it available in the rest of the world”. In a move a few weeks ago, Blogger, Google’s blogging service, in effect announced something similar, by saying that default they would redirect Blogger users trying to get to Blogspot.com addresses (like <http://example.blogspot.com>) to their respective country sites (like <http://example.blogspot.in>). Twitter’s announcement was greeted with much disapproval by many Twitter users, as a move towards censorship, with some talking (on Twitter) about a boycott. Blogger’s move was hidden away, deep within a help page, and is being noticed now, and is causing quite a stir as caving in to censorship. Are these concerns justified? Before answering that question, let’s look at what the platforms’ announcements really say.

Twitter has given itself the ability to withhold specific tweets and users in particular countries where that content is legally required to be removed (generally with a court order). Their earlier option, they inform us, was to block the offending tweets and users in all countries. Apart from this, they will publish a notice for each tweet/ user that is blocked in a country. They will also be proactively publishing every removal request they receive at ChillingEffects.org, which allows us to hold them to account and question their decision to remove tweets.

Google, by redirecting you to the country-specific Blogger, is allowing for country-level removal of both blogs and individual blog posts. However, they also note that you can circumvent this by using a special “no redirect” address. Google currently forwards all search-related removals, but does not do so for Blogger-related requests, and all copyright-related complaints to ChillingEffects.org. Google does publish aggregate data relating to censorship of Blogger, on which free-speech advocates have been asking them to provide more granular information.

There are three problems. First, while Twitter was just as open to repressive

governments' requests last week, by making this change, they are advertising this fact to such governments. Thailand has noted it, and has congratulated Twitter.

Second, as Rob Beschizza, managing editor of the website Boing Boing, pointed out, there have been no instances of political content having been removed by Twitter. Even British courts' super-injunctions (injunctions on speech, that prevent you from mentioning the fact that there is an injunction) were defeated by Twitter users, which only showed that attempts to censor material results in even more attention being drawn to it (which is popularly known as the "Streisand Effect"). So, does this now mean that Twitter will start applying local laws to judge "valid and applicable legal requests", instead of American laws? What if the law is as bad as that which exists in India, where they are required to remove content within 36 hours based on any affected person's complaint — without a court order? Will they still act on it? If they don't, will the government or courts order Twitter.com to be blocked in India, finding it liable for illegal omissions?

Third, this trend points increasingly to the fact that we are witnessing a Balkanisation of the Web as more countries start asserting their sovereignty online. As Chinese dissident journalist Michael Anti pointed out recently, it seems we now need visas (read "circumvention techniques") to visit the international Web. But even then, there is no longer a singular "international" Web, but an Indian Web and a Guatemalan Web, and an Angolan Web. And the government's recent proposal of requiring companies to locate their servers in India is a move towards this (apart from being a move towards killing cloud computing).

That having been said, the reality is that the CEOs of Google, Google India, and Microsoft have been summoned to appear in Indian courts for allowing their users to publish material which they don't know about, which is in a sealed envelope (and most of the accused companies haven't been shown yet), and which they weren't even asked once to remove.

The Intermediary Guidelines Rules passed by the Department of Information Technology in April 2011 do not require the user, whose content it is, to be told that there is a complaint, nor to be given a chance to defend themselves. It does not even require public notice that the content has been removed.

The truth is, the transparency around censorship that Google and Twitter are providing is far better than what most other companies are providing. For instance, Big Rock, an Indian DNS provider, suspended the CartoonsAgainst-Corruption.com web address on the basis of a seemingly not legal request by the Cyber Cell of the Mumbai Crime Branch, and did so without any public notice and without even informing the cartoonist whose web address it was. At least Google and Twitter are pushing back against non-legal requests, and refusing to remove content that doesn't violate local laws. Single-mindedly criticising them will only put off other companies from following in their footsteps.

Instead of criticising those who are actually working towards transparency in censorship, we should encourage them and others, push intermediaries not to cave in to unreasonable censorship requests, prevent them from over-censoring on their own, and push hard for the government to incorporate their best practices as part of the Intermediary Guidelines Rules.

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