

# CS 3001-A: Computing, Society, and Professionalism

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Week 9: Freedom of Speech  
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# Implications of Internet Technologies




# Censorship

(Warf 2010)

# Censorship: Definition and History

- *Censorship is the attempt to suppress or regulate public access to material considered offensive or harmful*
- Forms of censorship
  - Direct censorship
    - Gov't monopoly, e.g., former USSR
    - Prepublication review; e.g., can't publish classified material
    - Licensing & registration, e.g., TV stations must comply with decency laws or lose license
  - Self-censorship
    - CNN suppressed negative reports on Iraqi gov't to keep Bagdad Bureau open
    - Publishers wanting to maintain good relationship with the government
    - Voluntary rating systems, like the mature label on games



Does the Internet pose new challenges to censorship? How?



# Platform measures



# Children and Inappropriate Content



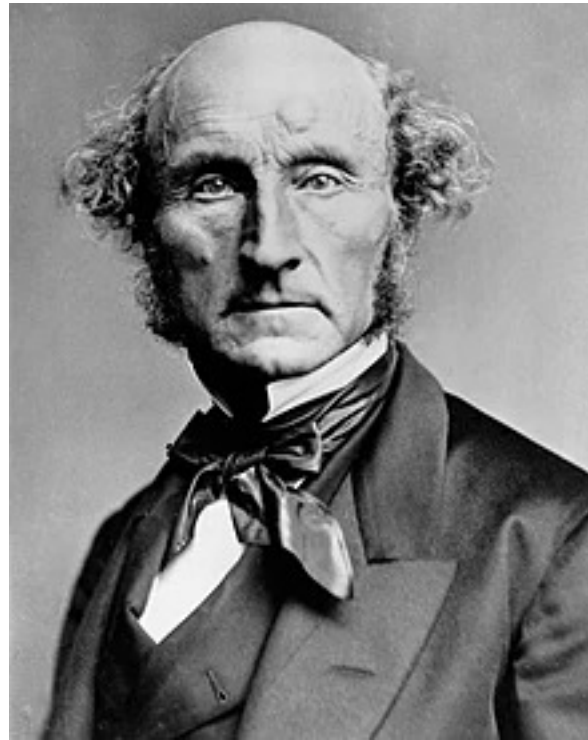
# Child Internet Protection Act





# Is Censorship Ethical?

# John Stuart Mill



# Kant's vs. Mill's Views on Censorship

- Radically different ethical theories, but had similar views on censorship

# Kant's View

- Kant asked: “Why don't people think for themselves?”
- He replied rhetorically: “Laziness and cowardice are the reason why so great a portion of mankind, after nature has long since discharged them from external direction, nevertheless remain under lifelong tutelage, and why it is so easy for others to set themselves up as their guardians”
- Kant believed he lived in a time in which many obstacles prevented people exercising their own reason

# Mill's View

- Mill championed freedom of expression
- He offered four reasons
  - Preventing someone from voicing their concern could be silencing truth
  - A person can be erroneous, but all opinions need to be heard to assess the whole truth
  - Truth needs to be rationally tested and validated
  - An opinion that has been tested through open discourse is likely to have a “vital effect on the character and conduct”

# Mill's Principle of Harm

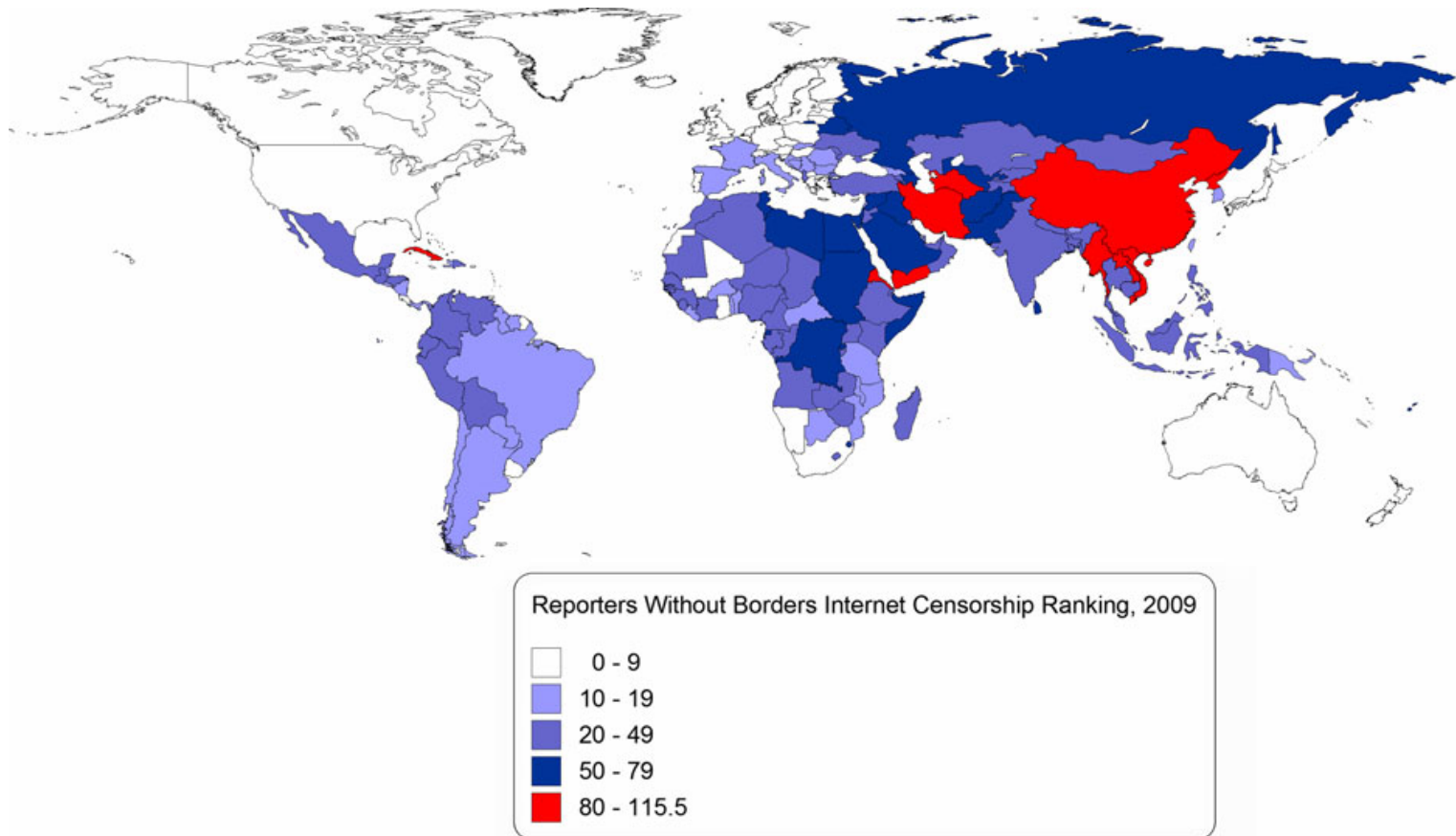
- “The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over by any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant”
- Why use of adult porn by adults should not be censored by the government

# Censorship and Internet

- Warf (2010) mapped the severity of censorship worldwide and assesses the numbers of people affected, and used the Freedom House index to correlate political liberty with penetration rates.
- Many governments employ filtering of or restricting access to certain Internet content
  - North Korea
  - Middle East
  - China
  - Germany
  - United States

# Censorship and Internet (Warf 2010)

Freedom House Index of political freedom



**Fig. 2** Reporters Without Borders Internet Censorship Ranking 2009. *Source:* data drawn from <http://www.rsf.org/en-classes/ment1003-2009.html>





# Freedom of Expression



# First Amendment

Protects political as well as non-political speech

The first amendment makes government responsive to the will of the people.

Primary goal political, but can extend to other domains



# First Amendment


Existing restrictions on speech – balancing  
private right and public good




# First Amendment

Private groups can censor all they want and in some cases may seem to violate the first amendment

E.g., Facebook's Terms of Service disallow the sharing of explicit or violent content  
In general written with "offensive"/  
controversial speech in mind



*Discussion point:* In the US, television commercials for cigarettes are banned. Should there be a ban on commercials for violent video games too?



*Discussion point:* Should people publishing accusations against others on their blogs or Facebook pages be held responsible if they disseminate false information (e.g., false news, anti-vax content, COVID-19 infodemic, Russian invasion of Ukraine)?



# Misinformation

- Should social media companies delete any misinformation?
  - If so, what kinds?
  - Twitter deleted Covid misinformation until Elon Musk bought the platform. Which approach is better?
- Should social media companies put a warning on articles that are false?
  - What about statements made by politicians?
  - Should they fact-check political ads?



## Further Discussion: Hate speech

- Hate speech is legal in the US, illegal in many other countries
  - What is the argument in favor of making it illegal?
  - What is the argument in favor of keeping it legal?
  - Which argument do you prefer?
- A private platform can have stricter rules than what is technically “legal”
  - Suppose you started a successful social media platform
    - Would you restrict hate speech?
    - Would you ban users for hate speech?






Spam

# Spam

- What is spam?
- With ease of internet access, businesses looked for ways to capitalize on market opportunities associated with Internet communications – easier/cheaper to send emails than physical mails
  - How to find email addresses though?
  - Crawling the web; scrape address books with viruses; listen to chatroom conversations; sneaky way to sign up; dictionary attacks on ISPs
- This entrepreneurial behavior has given rise to a new set of legal and ethical problems



# Spam Case Study



*Discussion point:* Why is “cold calling” considered to be an acceptable sales practice, but spamming isn’t?