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## Internet censorship in Turkey: University students' opinions

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### Abstract

The aim of this paper is to study university students' opinions toward online censorship with references to their socio-political and economic variables. Considering the upwards trend and the increasing number of online restrictions in Turkey, the opinions of university students (n=138) are thought to give significant findings. The questionnaire aimed to collect data on some chosen aspects of censorship which are internet access regulation by legal authorities, online pornographic content, websites distributing illegal and crime related information and the political and religious aspects of the internet censorship. The findings about these four basic aspects toward the online censorship revealed that despite the high proportion of approval, participants have a confused and inconsistent attitude towards the issue especially within the application and the idea of censorship. In a broader aspect, the findings can be interpreted as a sign of university students' insufficient knowledge and understanding towards the current situation and the possible future of online censorship in Turkey.

*Keywords:* Internet; censor; censorship; restriction; regulation

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Literature Review

Censorship simply suppresses human expression (Caso & Collins, 2008). History shows that rulers,

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religions and any other social institutions with power have used their authority to control, manipulate and prohibit different kinds of human expression for various reasons. Today, perhaps more than ever, censorship is primarily used by governments, religious groups or authorities, democratic entities, and even corporations as a means of retaining power. Again today, many people throughout the world believe that censorship maintains a useful method of conserving society's values. Tsui (2003) argues that a government's control of the Internet can be compared to the concept of the Panopticon on prison since the watcher can see all prisoners without being seen by any of them.

The Internet can be described as a social, cultural, commercial, entertaining and educational global communication system which aims to benefit and empower users of it by overcoming the limitations and obstacles for the creation and the distribution of content throughout the world (Akdeniz & Altıparmak, 2008, p.1). The Internet has been a popular domain for exercising power through censorship. Since the mid 1990s, we are experiencing the power of the Internet accumulating knowledge into all aspect of life. The communist government of China exercises strict control over the Internet by regularly blocking access by its 290 million online users to any site deemed a threat to the political or social order, including those on pornography (Treble, 2008). The communist government of China is not alone in his fight against human expression. The current government of Turkey, which continuously claims to keep extending the democratic rights of citizens, continue blocking users' access to various Internet pages and sites within the borders of the country. While the number of censored websites has been increasing in Turkey, the voice of online users against this censorship has become weaker and eventually they are made to use some convoluted and risky ways of accessing online information. The excessive variety and number of software programs that help parents to control and watch their children's online activity and the free will of adults has been neglected by authorities when it comes to censoring individuals' online activity. Similarly, it is seen that the Turkish government primarily aims to control those websites which, in Marsden's (2008) words, can be called "user generated websites" (such as YouTube) showing that the government targets the individual's access and contribution to the Internet. This involvement can be considered acceptable in nondemocratic societies since, as Søraker (2008: 40) claims, "the explosive growth of frameworks such as Second Life, YouTube, and Wikipedia, could lead to a transfer of regulatory power away from heavily regulated Internet Service Providers in nondemocratic regimes, into the hands of intermediaries that are more likely to uphold freedom of expression."

Although the rest of the world had already experienced censorship as a problem, governments' direct involvement with the Internet in Turkey started in 2001 especially with 'offensive' sexually explicit content and socio-politically 'dangerous' activity. The cases about online crimes before this date could be defined as the violation of article 159(1) of the previous Turkish Criminal Code which is: (TBMM: Turkish Criminal Code, 2004).

"Whoever overtly insults or vilifies the Turkish nation, the Republic, the Grand National Assembly, or the moral personality of the Government, the ministries or the military or security forces of the State or the moral personality of the judicial authorities shall be punished by a term of imprisonment of one to six years".

The article cited above was not directed to the Internet, but to the general speech- related crimes. In 2001, Turkish government introduced a new project about the regulation of online publications; however the former President of Turkey, Ahmet Necdet Sezer, vetoed this parliamentary bill stating that leaving the regulation of the Internet to public authorities completely and linking it to the Press Law does not fit with the characteristics of Internet broadcasting (Ibid.). Nevertheless, the following year, the Bill Amending the Supreme Board of Radio and Television (RTUK) and Press Code (Law No. 4676) were approved by the Parliament (Tissad: RTUK Kanunu, 2008). This new code regulates not only the establishment and broadcasting principles of private radio and television stations, but also all online content.

The trend of online censorship in Turkey can be classified according to the origin, type and content of the websites. Although the exact number of websites is unknown, restricting or banning access to international websites are drawing public attention. Before starting to analyze the international website censorship, a closer look to the current situation controlled by the governmental authorities in Turkey would be beneficial. Table 1 shows percentages of distribution of the notifications according to the complaint topics made by the web users via online forms, electronic mails and telephones to the website mentioned above (<http://www.guvenliweb.org.tr>).

**Table 1.** Complaint notifications by web users

Complaints	%
Pornography	59
Child Abuse	11
Against Ataturk	10.8
Prostitution	9.6
Gambling and betting	5.1
Favoring suicide	2.1
Favoring drug or substance abuse	1.1
Others	1.1

The total number of notifications received by the website is 32,358. A large number of which (7.925) were found unnecessary or invalid and 8.128 of them were excluded for being repeated notifications. Hence, 16.305 of them were valid notifications among which 59% of them was about pornography, 11% on child abuse, and almost 11% about being against Atatürk.

**Table 2.** Censorship of crime related web pages (<http://www.guvenliweb.org>)

Type of Content	Judicial Notice	Court Decision
Giving information about acquiring hazardous substances to the health	0	0
Favoring suicide	1	0
Betting/Gambling	36	3
Providing place and opportunities for gambling	69	17

**Judicial Notice** refers to recognition by the court of a fact that is not reasonably disputable and without the introduction of supporting evidence.

Among the web pages banned, there is a large quantity of personal web-blogs, news portals and file share pages. When the user tries to access the mentioned web sites, the following screens

appear with different designs and contents, which may include court decision and other related information (see Screenshot 1).

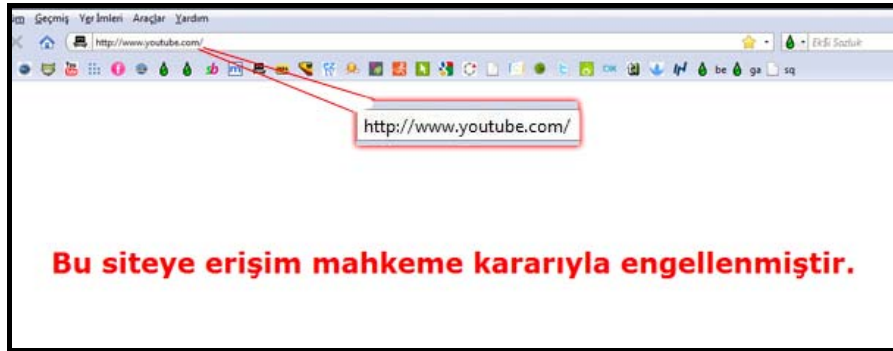


Figure 1. Notification screen of a censored web page without information related to the court decision

As mentioned above, majority of banning of international web pages happen to those web sites with a large number of users. Among others, the censorship of Wordpress, Blog Flickr, Blogger, YouTube and Richard Dawkins' web pages are the most popular ones. Despite the fact that web users can access to these web pages using alternative ways, the prohibition of these online contents should be studied with a larger and deeper perspective.

Hence, the aim of this paper is to study the relationship among university students' opinions toward online censorship and their socio-political and economic variables. Considering the large number of complaint notifications from the web users, the possible reasons of the discomfort about the certain content on the Internet and the variables of university level students' opinions toward cyber censorship seems to be valuable to study. This study focuses on the restrictions of public access to online content. Issues related to political and religious ideas, pornographic content and the distribution of illegal information related to criminal acts and drug abuse are chosen as the most distinct topics for the study. Hence, this research study aimed to collect the opinions of university level students toward censorship on the Internet content.

## 2. METHOD

### 2.1. Participants

Participants (n= 138) were chosen by simple random sampling from Hacettepe University's Faculty of Education. Of all participants, 80% of them were females and 20% of them were males, representing the expected distribution common in this context. The political views of the participants are as follows:

Table 3, The political views of the participants

Political View	%
Conservative	10.4
Social Democrat	26.9
Liberal	9
Undecided	26.9
Do not want to express	26.9

## 2.2. Data Collection and Analysis

A 15-item Likert type questionnaire was developed by the researchers, along with 9 items developed to gather demographics including place lived from age 0 to 15, gender, parental occupation, family income, parental education, parental knowledge of English, and participants' political views. 15 items are designed to collect data about four main issues, which are attitude towards online censorship by means of access regulation by the courts, online pornographic content, and distribution of illegal information such as criminal acts and drug abuse and the opinions related to political and religious point of view toward online censorship. The reliability coefficient was calculated and Cronbach's alpha value was found to be .834, indicating that the instrument can be considered as a reliable tool. The results of the questionnaire were computed using a statistical package. Percentages were used in representing the data. Demographics and findings were also cross-tabulated and those that show important relationships are mentioned in this report when necessary.

## 3. FINDINGS

As can be seen in Table 4, items 1, 2, 5, 8, 11, 14, and 15 are directed to draw a large picture of the attitude of the subjects toward online censorship (percentages given range from "strongly agree" to strongly disagree, "N.S." indicating "not sure").

### 3.1. Attitude towards Online Censorship

**Table 4. Attitude towards Online Censorship Research findings**

Item	S. A.	A.	N. S.	D.	S. D.
1. Courts should be able to ban the access to any web page that contains inappropriate information.	8,7	34,8	13,8	28,3	14,5
2. It is right to ban Youtube with court decision.	2,2	13,8	13,0	40,6	30,4
5. Censorship boards made up of student community members should have the power to ban dangerous web pages.	5,8	29,0	29,0	26,1	10,1
8. A parent or group of parents should have the right to demand the ban of a web page from the computer laboratories in schools if they find it offensive.	13,8	51,4	18,8	8,7	7,2
11. People's free will is not enough to have a safe internet.	10,1	45,7	21,0	15,2	8,0
3. Access to the pornographic materials on the Internet should be banned.	26,1	26,8	20,3	19,6	7,2
4. The production and distribution of pornographic content should be a serious crime and the authors and publishers should be imprisoned.	21,7	21,7	20,3	25,4	10,9
6. Web pages that include information about drug use should be banned.	21,0	32,6	15,9	26,1	4,3
9. Web pages that describe how to commit crimes or how to destroy property should be banned.	31,9	43,5	10,1	12,3	2,2
7. Other religious ideas should be kept away from the youth.	5,1	10,9	20,3	39,9	23,9
10. Web pages criticizing the politicians or political decisions related to governments should be banned.	2,2	1,4	12,3	39,1	44,9

Item 1, as it can be seen above, is designed to obtain the ideas about the legal regulation of the online content through courts. As it is obvious in the results the court censorship is supported by the 43.5% of participants. While the number of the subjects who are not sure has the least proportion,

the negative attitude is very close to the opposition with 42.8%. The tendency over the approval of legal control on the online content is changed dramatically on the Item 2 which is also related to the same issue.

Item 2 indicates that the number of the participants who disagree with the court decision related to ban of Youtube.com is quite high when compared to the ones who agree to the ban. The dramatic change of ideas between the first two items should be regarded as an important finding. Participants, who seem to approve the censorship in the results of Item 1 given above, do not support the censorship order of the court related to the Youtube.com. The attitude about censorship can be regarded as selective; despite the fact that subjects approve the idea of censorship, they are against the application of it. This selective idea of censorship which is actually based on the personal choice, in other words free will of the web user and the application of censorship via legal authorities and orders are obviously two colliding approaches on the horizon of the solution to the safe and free online content.

**Table 5. Attitude towards Online Censorship Research findings (2)**

Item	Always	Usually	Rarely	Never
15. I support governmental control over the Internet.	5,1	26,8	39,9	27,5
14. I make complaints to legal authorities about a web page if I think it is hazardous or offensive.	2,9	19,6	44,9	31,9
12. I can express my religious ideas better when my personal information is not asked by a web page.	17,4	39,1	27,5	15,2
13. I can express my political ideas better when my personal information is not asked by a web page.	17,4	41,3	26,8	13,8

The general attitude which can be drawn from the numbers presented in Item 15 displayed in Table 5 shows that, 67.4% of the participants rarely or never supports the governmental control over the Internet. This number shows that ratio of negative attitude about the legal control over the Internet significantly is higher than the approval of censorship. The cross-tabulation of this item has revealed that family income seems to have an effect on participants' decision on governmental control over the Internet since it is shown that there is negative correlation between participants' income level and support of governmental control over the Internet. Although 52.3% of those with income between 0-999 Liras per month agree or definitely agree with item 15, this rate drops to 33.4% in the group with 1000-1999 Liras, 21.4% in 2000-2999 Liras, and to 0% with an income above 3000 Liras. In short, it can be claimed that as one's income increases, his or her demand for an Internet without governmental control increases as well. Similarly, political views of the participants seem to be related with the results from item 15. Although 71.4% of the conservative students support governmental control over the Internet, this rate drops down to 33.4 in social democrats and liberals equally.

The second perspective about the attitude of the subjects toward online censorship can be classified as the individual participation related to the regulation of the Internet access and self control. Item 5, 8, 11 in Table 3 and item 14 in table 4 deal with this point of view to the issue.

Item 14 represents an important attitude of the participants toward the undesired online content. The results indicate that 76.8% of the subjects rarely or never make complaint notifications to the legal authorities to regulate the access to the hazardous or offensive content. This result is pretty

impressing when the result of Item 1, which shows that 43.5% of the subjects approve censorship, is considered. The implication drawn here is the fact that although subjects support censorship, they are disinterested and reluctant to be active for the safety or cleanness of the online content.

For the Item 5 and 8, positive response including the choices of "I agree" and "I definitely agree" represents the attitude of the participants in common. Individual or a group of individuals' choices or opinions about web content are given importance in Item 8. Both in Item 5 and 8, the large ratio of the participants approves groups who control the Internet access in educational institutions. Although these groups are gathered independently from the legal authorities such as courts, the idea assigning groups composed of adults, parents or selected students does not support the idea of the sufficiency of the self control over the Internet access. This implication is also sustained in the Item 11.

As stated above, the reliance on self control for the regulation of online content is low as only 55.8% of the participants agreed regarding the insufficiency of people's free will for a safe internet. The attitude of the participants in the research implicates that they need a higher authority than the web users, which also includes them. This tendency can be seen as the reason behind the approval of the censorship.

### **3.2. Attitude towards Online Pornographic Content**

Pornographic content is the issue of greatest concern for Turkish web users, as represented in the Table 1. Given the 59% of disapproval about pornography on the Internet, this controversial issue plays an important role in online censorship. The opinions about the existence of the pornography on the web and the distribution of related content are represented in the results of Item 3 and 4.

Item 3 displays that the general attitude towards access to the online pornography favors the ban of such content with 26.1% "strongly agree" and 26.8% "agree." The results of Item 4 represent the ideas related to the distribution of pornographic content and its production. Penalty of imprisonment for the production and distribution of such content is not approved by the 36.3% of the subjects. However the dispersal among the other choices is close to each other as seen in Table 4 Item 5.

### **3.3. Distribution of Illegal Information Related to Criminal Acts and Drug Abuse**

The number of crime and drug related web page bans is relatively high when the number of other online censorship justifications is considered as displayed in Table 2. The ratio of complaints given in Table 1 and the cases concluded with court decision of censorship may lead to a deeper critical study about the reasons of online censorship and their origins in Turkey. The ideas of participants related to these issues are displayed through Item 6 and 9.

Results for both of the Items displays common attitude towards the ban of websites that give dangerous information related to drug abuse and criminal acts. The number of complaints to this content given in the Table 1 is quite low despite the effects of such content may be classified as more dangerous and misleading than the other online censorship justifications given in this paper.

### **3.4. The Attitude Related to Political and Religious Choices toward Online Censorship**

Political views, choices and religious beliefs seem to have an effect on how students perceive and react against the reality or ideas of other people. Item 7 and 10 designed to examine the effects of religious and political concepts of the subject toward online censorship while Item 12 and 13 mainly deals with the freedom of expression such concepts on the Internet referring to the safety and anonymity of the information on the network.

Item 7 mainly deals with the religious ideas of others and censorship. It demands the idea of the participants about the effect of other religious ideas to the young people who are thought to be more sensitive as their religious beliefs has not been established. Despite the fact that the religious belief attributed to the young is imposed by the parents or social environment, the general belief is that parents do not want other religions affect their children. The results of Item 7, on the other hand, displays that 63.8% of participants do not agree with the idea given in the questionnaire. This result can be considered as a sign of the support and good intention to individuals to find their own belief system. It is possible to describe this finding as an interesting one which shows difference with the common belief about the society's and parents' approach to the issue.

The access to information about governments and their activities is a controversial issue in today's world. While some support the transparency for the information related to governments and authorities, others disagree and consider the distribution of official content as a threat to the safety and secrecy of the country. In the current research 84% of subjects disagree with the bans of web sites criticizing politicians and their decisions. The opinions about freedom of the individual to express ideas about religion or politics are studied through item 12 and 13.

Item 12 and 13 represents that the participants feel more secure when their personal information is not demanded by a web page while expressing their personal ideas about religious or political matters. These findings may refer to a security issue and freedom of expression on the Internet. Being aware of the fact that online content and information traffic are watched by the government to some degree makes participants reluctant to express their ideas when their personal information is demanded.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

The results of the study indicate the opinions of students at Hacettepe University toward online censorship. By questioning specific aspects of censorship on the Internet in Turkey, which has been in an increasing tendency since the beginning of the millennium, this research reveals the opinions of the participants about online censorship by means of court decisions, online pornographic content, distribution of illegal information such as criminal acts and drug abuse and the opinions related to political and religious point of view toward online censorship.

The attitude toward court decision and judicial notice about the ban of certain web pages conveys a significant variation when Items 1 and 2 are considered. While the percentage of participants in favor of legal regulation of web access is 43.5%, this ratio decreases to 16% when the opinions about court decision related to Youtube are questioned. This difference may bring about the idea that the



popularity and the purpose of a web site as perceived by users may shift the attitude toward online censorship. This selective attitude between the idea of censorship and the application of it not only displays the lack of knowledge and experience about the possible results of censorship but also the discussion about which content is to be censored to what degree will continue. Item 15 also represent another interesting finding as 67.4% of the subjects do not support the government's control of the Internet. These three items can lead us to an interpretation that the participants are not in favor of online censorship however they only do subject to the ban of favorite and frequently used web pages. This finding can also be construed as a submissive and complacent attitude towards online censorship. Similarly, the results have also shown that family income and political views can be considered as predictors of society's views on censorship on the Internet since students with lower income and those who label themselves as conservatives are strongly in support of governmental control of the Internet. Hence, future studies should study these relationships in a more detailed manner and with more appropriate data collection and analyses methods.

The results of Item 5, 8, 11, and 14 showed opinions related to the role of the web users in person or in group about the regulation of the web access and the control of the content. The common response to the development of parent or student groups active in the regulation of the Internet access and the control of online content is positive. This result again implicate that there is a need for an authority assigned control over the Internet. Moreover, the suggestion that people's free will is not enough to have a safe internet is approved by 55.8% of the participants. On the other hand, the results of Item 14 indicate a contrast with the previous implications related to the role of the individual. Only 22.5% of the participants usually or always make complaints to legal authorities about a web page if they think it is hazardous or offensive. The rest of the participants seem disinterested and reluctant to be active in making the Internet cleaner as implied by the orders of the courts. The implication that participants who approve censorship also are in favor of civil control mechanism but they do not want to deal with the uncomfortable situation by themselves can be made. Therefore, saying that censorship supporters just demand an authority to assign the ability and the responsibility to watch the safety and cleanness of the Internet is not difficult.

A web page of Family Safe Media reveals some interesting figures and numbers about pornography (Family Safe Media: Pornography Statistics, 2006). Pornographic content creates the 12% of the total websites on the globe with 4.2 million web pages. With the facts such as every second 372 Internet users are typing adult search terms into search engines and every 39 minutes a new pornographic video is being created in the United States and released on the Internet, it is hard to control this online data and content transfer by censorship. Moreover Turkey stands in 4<sup>th</sup> place in the list of Search Engine Request Keyword Trends of 2006 with the key word of "sex". The results of the current research display opinions favoring censorship of online pornography about 50%. However the percentage of subjects who do not approve the censor on the stated content is about 30%. Saudi Arabia, Iran, Syria, Bahrain, Egypt, UAE, Kuwait, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Kenya, India, Cuba, and China are the top Pornography Banning Countries of 2006. The current situation of Turkey related to pornography has not been revealed by more contemporary surveys. However when the trends in Google search engine with some certain key words, the tendency from 2004 up to date can be seen.

Despite the increasing number of censored web pages includes pornography during the years shown in the graph above, the frequency of searching “porno” on Google.com does not show significant decrease in the stated trend. Moreover the keyword which is presented as “Rising Searches” by Google between the same years (2004-2008) can be seen from the list below.

Considering these drastic changes the results of the study and presented numbers above points to the general characteristics of measures and attitude towards pornography in Turkey: Inefficient and complacent. Although the aim of this paper is not to find a way to solve this problematic issue, maybe another way of solution should be developed by the legal authorities.

Participants believe that the online content which distribute information related to criminal acts requires censorship with 31.9% of them “definitely agree” and 43.5% of them “agree” with the banning of such sites . However the relatively low number of complaints and court decisions related to the stated content may create new research in the field. Drug abuse content which is researched by Item 6 reveals that 53.6% of the subjects agree on censorship on this issue while 30.4% disagrees. This interesting scatter of positive and negative opinions may be resulted by the notion of the educational and didactic nature of the information about drugs, drug abuse and its depressing results. However the accuracy of the information given in these illegal web pages should be used and controlled with the parental watch or authorized people.

An interesting interpretation of the items 12 and 13 can easily be made both of which are related to freedom of expression. The participants displayed that they do not feel secure to express their ideas about politics and religion when their personal information is demanded. This feeling of insecurity may stem from the control of the government or other legal authorities over the Internet and in real life. The fear of being disclosed, socially or legally judged or even penalized can easily be developed under these circumstances all of which obviously signal the existence of problems with freedom of expression in Turkey.

The overall analysis of the results obtained in this research signals that the opinions of the participants about censorship vary. However, the results display lack of interest and information related to online censorship which should be taken into consideration by all members. With a large scale research and analysis of the situation, new approaches to the online content should be developed by authorities to create a safe, secure and free way of access to the information which should be seen as not an option but a must in today’s world.

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