THREAT TO FREE INFORMATION AND FREEDOM OF INFORMATION[1]

Ulrich Müller
Universität Karlsruhe (TH)

Abstract: *"Imagine a world in which every single person on the planet is given free access to the sum of all human knowledge. That's what we're doing."* [2]

At a time when internet access is widely available, information is spread around the globe rapidly. This development enables people in various parts of the world to gain access to information faster than ever before imagined.

A lot of the information on the net comes free of charge, which allows access regardless of money.

However, as everybody is able to provide information more or less anonymously on the net we have to focus on the quality of the information supplied.

1. LACK OF OBJECTIVITY

Never before has propaganda reached such a sophisticated level as in the current Iraq conflict. The parties involved in conflicts use the internet to convince people of their point of view. That is nothing new, but unlike in previous wars like World War II the target group for the propaganda is not limited to ones own people. It's rather an attempt to change the world's view of its own position. Radical groups use the internet to recruit new fighters for their cause. That is how Al-Qaida and other radical groups recruit young men to take part in terrorist attacks without significant physical contact. "They are mostly single males that are born and raised in Europe[...] Given the fact that more than 40 percent of them were born in Europe and an additional 55 percent have been raised in European countries or are long-term residents, the label 'home-grown' is very appropriate to this group." (Bakker, 2006)

Take the recent incident between Iran and Great Britain, where 15 British military personnel were captured for entering Iranian Waters. The German online news bulletin Spiegel online referred to the techniques used as "Propagandakrieg" (English: War of Propaganda).

---

[1] This paper was initially published in Proceedings of the International Conference on *European policies on business development*, Iași, Romania, 26-27 October 2010
[2] Jimmy Wales (founder of Wikipedia) July 2004

While on one hand letters alleged to have been written by marine Faye Turney were published addressing Prime Minister Blair asking for a retreat from Iraq, on the other hand the British Government tried to convince the United Nations Security Council of the illegitimacy of the Iranian action. That caused Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinedschad to accuse Britain of using propaganda instead of solving the crisis diplomatically (Spiegel Online).

This example raises the question of just how objective can information on the internet be, and especially free information?

One issue with any information, but particularly with feely published information provided at no cost is that we have to bear in mind the intention of the author and why he publishes this information on the net. This does not only touch upon major political issues. It already starts with simple things for everyday use.

Just imagine you are looking for information on a product you are considering buying. What kind of information would you get from the producers or the retailers webpage? Obviously these pages will rather provide articles in favour of the product and will point out all and possibly only the good qualities it has. If you search for information on the same product on pages where customers can rate the product, you are likely to find much more discerning thoughts on that product especially because unsatisfied customers more often feel the need to express themselves publicly than do satisfied customers.

What is very obvious from this simple example is that truth often lies somewhere between at least two points of view. In our example independent information could be supplied by a testing institute that is not funded by the industry.

With political topics the solution to the question, what is true and what false, can not be found that simply. On these topics it was already difficult to get reliable information from the classic print media, where you had people responsible for what was written in their Magazine or newspaper.

2. ANONYMITY VERSUS CREDIBILITY

How do we figure out how trustworthy information on the net really is? Even if we believe a statement was given by an author we trust, how can we be sure who it really was written by? In the digital world there are plenty of ways not only to fake articles, but even worse to fake identities.

In some situations the traceability of a publication to its real author is not wanted for a variety of different reasons. Being identifiable is a mayor concern to those authors who have to fear prosecution because of political or religious beliefs that are prohibited in their home countries. The Chinese poet and journalist Shi Tao was sentenced to 10 years in prison for writing an email about

directive by the Communist Party of China to a recipient abroad. The US company Yahoo enabled the prosecution by providing Shi Tao's user data to Chinese authorities (Amnesty International).

Anonymity on the net is a blessing for people who live in countries that suppress freedom of speech. That way they get the chance to make their situation public without risking their health or worse their life. If internet providers collaborate with such regimes they ruin this valuable chance. On the other hand anonymity on the net can also become a curse. During May 06 anonymous authors began to polish the critical article about head of Siemens, Klaus Kleinfeld on wikipedia. After being discovered they continued correcting the article with a Siemens signature (ZEIT online).

Anonymous users can do major damage not only to articles, but also to a victim about whom they write unjust articles. Daniel Brandt points out on his website that "there is no recourse for the victim, and no one can be held accountable" (Wikipedia Watch).

Jaron Lanier points out the problems that occur when the majority decides what is right and what is wrong rather than the experts who should know best. In his article "Digital Maoism" (Janier, 2006) he demonstrates impressively how the smattering of the public can overrule a single author even in his personal biography.

The questions and thoughts about who decides what is true are not completely new. They for example already appeared in George Orwell's book "1984" long before the invention of the internet.

Lanier speaks of "a new online collectivism" based on "the idea that the collective is all-wise". Phrases are taken from different contexts and authors to form so called meta information that seems to be very objective and therefore very good. But by ripping text passages from its context information gets lost. These problems not only frequently occur on information platforms like Wikipedia, more widly websites participate in a race to become "the most 'meta' site" available.

Another problem with this kind of information is the border between facts and opinions. What part of an article is fact and where do personal points of view influence the quality of information? On platforms like Wikipedia, where everybody can edit the material, this can lead to so called "edit-wars". Two authors of different opinions alter each others articles in turn because they can not agree on what really is true.

To improve the reliability of information on the internet and to prevent masquerade, digital signatures where invented. Digital signatures use an asymmetrical encryption method. This means you need a different key to decrypt than to encrypt. And as long as the private encryption code remains secret, while the decryption code can be publicly accessible, the authenticy of the author is proven.

3. CENSORSHIP

Censorship is one of the oldest methods used by officials to suppress people. It is one of the most severe threats to free information.

The best information is completely worthless if it is not accessible.

Does complete freedom of speech exist on the internet? Or does "Democracy on the web work(s)" as google states in their company philosophy at number 4?

Honestly we have to answer these questiones with NO!

Spiegel online, reports that 30.000 Chinese censors crawl through the net everyday (Spiegel Online) (Kuhn, 2007).

Amnesty International accuses search engines of censoring search results in China. According to Amnesty International Microsoft, Google and Yahoo have signed a contract with the Chinese government. Topics that are not accessible in China anymore are: Taiwan, Tibet or the massacre on Tiannamin square after the democracy movement in 1989 amongst others.

Google is risking its credibility. By this agreement Google has managed to break 6 of its 10 precepts that up to now form the company's cooperate philosophy. For example "Google has steadfastly refused to make any change that does not benefit to the users[…]" (*Google Corporate Information: Our Philisophy*) or "[…]our mission is to facilitate access to information for the entire world[…]" (*Google Corporate Information: Our Philisophy*)

Sadly Yahoo now takes censorship one step further. Yahoo changes words in emails that could be part of Javascript commands into similar words that don't exist in Javascript. According to ZDNet this problem could easily be solved by simply removing the Script-Tags instead of changing the words (Olsen and Müller, 2002).

If you now think that at least Europe is not affected by censorship you are wrong.

Google identifies the country of origin of a person who uses their service using the IP address. This information is used to filter search results. For users in Germany, Switzerland and France websites with a lot of swastikas like stormfront.org don't appear in search results (Schröder, 2002).

The worst thing about this is that Google does not see a need to inform its customers about this. And when asked, Nathan Taylor of Google replied:

"Google does not manipulate its search results. We do however remove pages from our index if a webmaster requests it."

But those are not the only companies who think they know what's best for their customers. Censorship has become increasingly fashionable. Countries have started do grasp the potential of the internet and how to use it to their advantage. Never have filter techniques been more advanced.

Furthermore besides new techniques such as word filters, the tried and tested older techniques like blocking large parts of the internet are still used.

From simple to sophisticate whenever the means of publishing become widespread and potentially more democratic the hidden hands on the levers of power find ways to manipulate it. It was ever thus.

REFERENCES

Amnesty International, *Yahoo's data contributes to arrests in China*, accessed at
http://web.amnesty.org/pages/chn-310106-action-eng.

Bakker , E. (2006), *Jihadi terrorists in Europe, their characteristics and the circumstances in which they joined the jihad*, Clingendael CSCP, accessed at
http://www.clingendael.nl/cscp/publications/?id=6480&&type=summary.

Google Corporate Information: Our Philisophy, accessed at
http://www.google.co.uk/intl/en/corporate/tenthings.html.

Huhn, J. (2007) *Internet Filter – Die neue Architektur der Zensur*, accessed at
http://www.spiegel.de/netzwelt/web/0,1518,476504,00.html.

Kuhn, J. (2007) *Internet Filter – Die neue Architektur der Zensur*, accessed at
http://www.spiegel.de/netzwelt/web/0,1518,476504,00.html.

Lanier, J. (2006) *DIGITAL MAOISM: The Hazards of the New Online Collectivism*, accessed at
http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/lanier06/lanier06_index.html.

Olsen, S., Müller, D. (2002) *Yahoo-Filter verändert E-Mails*, ZDNet.de, accessed at
http://www.zdnet.de/news/tkomm/0,39023151,2119312,00.htm.

Schröder, B. (2002) *Zensur bei Suchmaschinen und jugendschutz.net*, Telepolis, accessed at
http://www.ix.de/tp/deutsch/inhalt/te/12948/1.html.

Spiegel Online, *Propagandakrieg zwischen Teheran und London verschärft sich*, accessed at
http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/0,1518,474777,00.html.

Wikipedia Watch, *Begging for a lawsuit*, *Wikipedia is*, accessed at http://www.wikipedia-watch.org/.

ZEIT Online, *Die anarchische Wiki Welt*, accessed at
http://www.zeit.de/2006/37/wikipedia?page=all