Restricting Internet Access in Russia: Overview

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The issue

Being from America, many people don’t realize how much more freedom they have than other non-democratic countries. Most people living in the U.S. don’t have to worry about posting an unthreatening post regarding the government online and being punished for it, but sadly this is not the same for internet users in Russia. Many times Russians are fined, jailed, and even killed for speaking out against the government. Internet restriction in countries such as Russia, North Korea, and Iran is not new, but the war in Ukraine has influenced some new policies and rules to implement these strategies. Since the war has started, Russia has entered a sort of digital seclusion. Major social media sites, such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, and news platforms have been blocked from the Russian public by the Russian Government. The cybersecurity strategy I will be writing about is Internet Censorship in Russia.

Although Russia is not the only country to censor their internet, they are one of the countries with the strongest hold on internet censorship. Azhgikhina (2011) describes Russia’s internet restriction as, “The most extreme form of censorship is violence against the free word and against journalists and editors.” Since the beginning of mass media, Russia’s leadership has found a way to monitor and influence all information that is put out in their country. This censorship is an issue because it takes away one’s freedom of speech, cuts off ones’ access to accurate information, and violates the privacy of internet users.

The History

The censorship of internet in Russia began as early as 2007, when the Russian court ordered four of their internet provider services (ISPs) to block websites that they considered to be “extremist motivated” (Ensafi, 2019). Russia first implemented this strategy to block extremist propaganda from influencing Russian citizens. In 2012 the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media in Russia released a blocklist to all ISPs listing several domains that should be blocked from user access (Ensafi, 2019). Russia has even gone so far as to use cyber-attacks against Social Media platforms for twitter to comply with Russia’s content removal requests. The Russian government began throttling Twitter on a global scale in March 2021, marking the first time a large-scale, focused throttling for censorship was used. (Basso, et al., 2021). The Russian government also implemented policies that affect user privacy and human rights which will be discussed further in this essay.

Policies

The Russian government has put many policies in place to censor intent usage. On July 26, 2016, President Putin signed Federal Law No 374-FZ, commonly known as Yarovaya Law (Korovela, 2016). This law was said to be created to combat terrorism, but, it does more harm then good. This policy has a direct impact on ISPs forcing them to abide by new data retention rules. Under this policy, ISPs are obligated to terminate all communication services to a user if they fail to confirm their identity to the authorities, to store all metadata related to the receipts and delivery of communications, and the contents of communications (Korovela, 2016). In other words, Russia wants to store, in their country, receipts of message deliveries, delivery of all media types, and actual copies of every voice message, text message, picture, video, and such in their country. Another Policy that has a heavy impact on Russian internet is Federal Law No. 31-FZ, also known as the Fake News Law. This law blocks all media that the government considers “Fake News” and information showing “blatant disrespect for the authorities in an indecent form” (Barata, 2019). People and corporations who violate these laws can face high fines up to $23,000 and even jail time up to 15 days.

These policies don’t fall into national or international policies because it violates human rights and privacy, which these policies fight to protect. One organization, The European Convention on Human Rights, protects users from invasion of private data and other metadata owned and stored by an individual, and to information communication technologies-based systems and networks (Pitman). Russia’s policies disagree with this organizations’ policy because the Russian government stores this personal data in their own database instead of keeping it private for users only. These policies also disagree with the UN Universal Declaration on Human Rights. Article 19 of the declaration states, “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.” (Pitman). In Russia, internet users are not protected by the UN policy. Many people fear speaking out publicly against the government. Self-censorship practices of Russian Internet users on social media have been studied, and patterns have formed that link self-censorship to sense of social belonging, political views, and fear of alienation from family (Bodrunova, 2021). These references are representing a small number of policies that violate international policies protecting internet users.

Current Situation

As the war in Ukraine progresses, Russia will only strengthen their internet censorship. During this tragedy, Russia has blocked all news stations that are not working with the government from spreading news on their platforms. The have been arresting people illegally posting against their political views as well as people protesting the government. This can be considered a crisis because people in Russia do not get access to information not approved by the government, leaving them unaware of what events take place in the world around them. In the next essay I will further discuss the implications that arise from censorship in Russia.

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