Dreams of Control: Israel, Global Censorship, and the Internet

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"Under the cover of darkness, there is no limit to the expansion of Big Brother."

Ilan Gilon, Meretz Party (Israel), Times of Israel, Feb 4, 2016

While Israel's central justification for its often reactionary policies is couched in hyper-exceptionalist rhetoric, current interest in censoring the Internet is far from exceptional.

Like a machine of justification against its critics and its enemies, Israel enlists various projects under the banner of the remarkable and precious, when it is simply accomplishing what other states have done before or since: the banal and ordinary. All states want to limit expression, control criticism and marginalise the sceptics. Some do it more savagely, and roughly, than others.

Israel's military censor, Col. Ariella Ben Avraham, who is part of the IDF's Directorate of Military Intelligence, gave a good example of this in February by insisting that social media activists and bloggers submit material relevant to security matters for approval prior to posting.[1] The move also revealed an increasing interest to police the digital realm, previously considered an anarchic jungle incapable of effective policing.

Up to 32 Israeli bloggers and social media activists were informed about the directive, one of the first being Yossi Gurvitz, a left-wing activist running the "Friends of George" Facebook page. In rather unceremonious fashion, he was informed via Ben Avraham's private Facebook account that he was obligated to run future submissions by her office. To his credit, he promises to defy the order.

Internal censorship is but one aspect of this policy. Israel Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan has dipped into the discourse of censorship to convince others that limiting various social media platforms on a global scale is the way to go. In January, he revealed the inner ambition of Israel's security establishment to internationalise the censorship effort.

To achieve that goal, Erdan speaks of an "international coalition" that would make limiting criticism of Israel its primary objective. The central aim is hardly imaginative: making such providers as YouTube, Twitter and Facebook face up to responsibility as to what they host on their sites.

The Erdan plan suggests that various countries would form a "loose coalition that would keep an eye on content and where it is being posted, and members of the coalition would work to demand that the platforms remove the content that was posted in any of their

countries at the request of members." The simple idea behind this collusion is extra-territorial cooperation, effectively circumventing the global nature of such platforms.

As for the scurrilous subject matter itself, the issues are universal fare for states keen to control matters that supposedly stimulate the darker side of human nature. (Read: contrary to state interests.) Erdan's office gives the example of material from a Palestinian (of course) disclosing the best locations on the body to inflict fatal stab wounds.

This begs that grand question about how far such an effort goes: control the more sordidly violent sides of the Old Testament because it encourages various unsavoury practices? Limit suggestive literature being discussed in the whirl of social media, buzzing away with malicious promise? The mind is an untidy place filled with remarkable things, and not all of them necessarily make it to actual perpetration. This is a point that continues to elude the mighty warriors of the security state.

Another justification is being thrown in: they, the social media giants, rake in the proceeds, and should therefore man the barricades. "We are planning to put a stop to this irresponsibility," claimed Erdan's office, "and we are going to do it as part of an international coalition that has had enough of this behaviour as well."

Other governments have also done their bit to limit the internet and content available to their citizens. Most famously, Beijing runs its own "Great Firewall of China", overseen by the Ministry of Information Industry (MII), while the State Council Information Office and the Chinese Communist Party's Propaganda Department examine content.

In recent times, countries of a supposedly democratic character have taken to the blinds and endeavoured to do what Erdan dreams about. Dangerous thoughts are seen as the reason for dangerous actions. To that end, the country that gave Europe the Enlightenment has been busy forging its own vision of global internet censorship, using a mixture of security and privacy concerns.

The latter has proven to have potentially pernicious consequences, framed largely as an effort to protect the privacy of the French citizen. From that vantage point, a vision of global control has been built on a premise forged in European law: the right to be forgotten. The Court of Justice of the European ruling of May 13, 2014 (Google Spain v Agencia Española de Protección de Datos, Mario Costeja González) has supplied the subject matter for the latest enlargement of censorship powers.

The French response has been intrusively enthusiastic, with the privacy regulator, CNIL, fining Google 100,000 Euros in March for not applying the right to be forgotten across the global network. In the chilling words of the regulator, "For people residing in France to effectively exercise their right to be delisted, it must be applied to the entire processing operation."[2] Erdan may well be irritated he did not come up with that one.

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Notes:

[1] http://www.timesofisrael.com/military-censor-seeks-control-over-blogs-facebook-posts/
[2] http://www.wsj.com/articles/internet-censorship-a-la-mode-1459380903

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