EXPLORING TRENDS AND TACTICS OF CONTROL ON THE INTERNET: A GLOBAL ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL MEDIA BLOCKING AND CENSORSHIP

EXPLORANDO LAS TENDENCIAS Y TÁCTICAS DE CONTROL EN INTERNET: UN ANÁLISIS GLOBAL DE LOS BLOQUEOS Y CENSURA EN REDES SOCIALES

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The research was conducted to examine the control practices implemented by various entities and governments in the online realm. The aim was to understand how these actions affected freedom of expression, access to information, and online privacy. **Methodology:** The research involved a comprehensive review of literature and specialized sources in the field of Internet censorship. Databases and specialized search engines were utilized, applying specific search terms to gather relevant data on censorship in particular countries and social media platforms. Additionally, a meticulous search was conducted in major European media outlets to corroborate and expand the collected information. **Results:** The research findings revealed a variety of Internet control and censorship practices, including website blocking, content filtering, mass surveillance, and restrictions on access to information. Common patterns were identified across different regions of the world, alongside significant differences in strategies employed by various actors, such as governments, private companies, and lobbying groups. **Conclusions:** Internet control and censorship pose a significant threat to digital rights and freedom of expression online. While some measures may be justified in the name of national security or user

protection, many of these practices lack transparency, are arbitrary, and can be used to suppress dissent and critical thinking.

Keywords: Digital censorship; online restrictions; Content regulation; Freedom of expression; social media; Internet.

RESUMEN

Introducción: La investigación se llevó a cabo con el objetivo de examinar las prácticas de control implementadas por diferentes entidades y gobiernos en el ámbito de la red. Se buscaba comprender cómo estas acciones afectaban a la libertad de expresión, el acceso a la información y la privacidad en línea. **Metodología**: La investigación incluyó una revisión exhaustiva de la literatura y de fuentes especializadas en el campo de la censura en Internet. Se utilizaron bases de datos junto con motores de búsqueda especializados. Se aplicaron términos de búsqueda específicos para recopilar datos relevantes sobre la censura en países y redes sociales particulares. Además, se llevó a cabo una búsqueda minuciosa en los principales medios de comunicación europeos para contrastar y ampliar la información recopilada. **Resultados**: Los resultados de la investigación revelaron una variedad de prácticas de control y censura en Internet, que incluían bloqueo de sitios web, filtrado de contenido, vigilancia masiva y restricciones al acceso a la información. Se identificaron patrones comunes en diferentes regiones del mundo, así como diferencias significativas en las estrategias utilizadas por diferentes actores, como gobiernos, empresas privadas y grupos de presión. **Conclusiones**: El control y la censura en Internet representan una amenaza significativa para los derechos digitales y la libertad de expresión en línea. Si bien algunas medidas pueden estar justificadas en nombre de la seguridad nacional o la protección de los usuarios, muchas de estas prácticas carecen de transparencia, son arbitrarias y pueden ser utilizadas para reprimir la disidencia y el pensamiento crítico.

Palabras clave: Censura digital; restricciones en línea; regulación de contenido; libertad expresión; redes sociales; Internet.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Internet censorship

Internet censorship is a complex phenomenon that encompasses various forms of control and restriction of online information. Tufekci (2017) addresses this issue by examining how social networks have transformed the dynamics of social movements and protests in the digital age. The author highlights the crucial role of platforms such as Twitter in the organization and dissemination of protests, while highlighting their vulnerability to censorship and manipulation by governments and authoritarian stakeholders.

On the other hand, Morozov (2011) takes a critical view of the idea that the Internet necessarily promotes freedom and democracy. In the author's book, Morozov argues that, in many cases, authoritarian regimes use the same technology to reinforce their control over information and repress dissent, which challenges the optimistic notion of

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the digital revolution. MacKinnon (2012) examines the tensions between the power of large technology companies and the rights of users on the Internet. MacKinnon argues that while these platforms can promote freedom of expression, they also have a responsibility to protect users' privacy and security in the face of state censorship and corporate surveillance.

Deibert (2008) delves into how Internet censorship is carried out globally. Deibert describes Internet filtering practices and policies in different countries, as well as their implications for freedom of expression and access to information. Finally, Zuckerman (2013) offers a perspective on digital connectivity, although not focusing exclusively on censorship. Zuckerman explores how global connectivity through the Internet can affect perception and participation in social and political issues, which also has relevance in the context of online censorship.

1.2. Regulation of social networks

The regulation of social networks is a topic of growing importance globally, and various authors have analyzed the laws, policies, and practices that influence content censorship on digital platforms. Gillespie (2018) examines how content moderation decisions on social networks are influenced by a range of factors, including cultural values and regulatory pressures.

For his part, Balkin (2004) proposes a theory on freedom of expression in the information society. Balkin explores how freedom of expression can be preserved in the digital context, considering the challenges posed by the regulation of social networks and the moderation of online content.

Klonick (2018) analyzes the role of new stakeholders involved in the regulation of online speech. Klonick examines how people, norms, and processes influence the governance of discourse on the Internet, and how this affects freedom of expression on digital platforms.

Keller (2019) delves into how Facebook regulates political speech on its platform. Keller examines the implications of regulation of political speech by a private company and how this may affect the exercise of free speech and democratic participation online. Finally, Douek (2020) provides an overview of the global struggle to govern the Internet by examining how governments, technology companies, and other actors attempt to regulate online speech and the tensions between freedom of expression and other considerations, such as security and user protection.

1.3. Censorship and freedom of expression

The relationship between Internet censorship and freedom of expression is an issue of great relevance in contemporary society, and several authors have contributed to the analysis of this topic from different perspectives. Chomsky (1988) examines how the mass media can exercise a form of censorship by limiting the spectrum of opinions and perpetuating narratives that favor certain political and economic interests. O'Neil (1991) addresses the issue of free speech in the academic context by exploring the limits and responsibilities of free speech in educational settings, considering how censorship can affect the exchange of ideas and academic debate. Garton-Ash (2003)

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offers a broader approach to freedom of expression by presenting the fundamental principles for protecting freedom of expression in the digital environment, highlighting the importance of ensuring diversity of opinion and open access to information.

Goldsmith and Wu (2006) examined the power dynamics surrounding control of the Internet and how this affects freedom of expression online. The authors explore how various actors, including governments and corporations, seek to influence content on the Internet and restrict the free flow of information. Finally, Simon (2014) provides a detailed look at the global struggle for press freedom by analyzing specific cases of censorship and repression of freedom of expression in different parts of the world, highlighting the challenges and implications of these practices for human rights and democracy.

1.4. Censorship mechanisms

The implementation of censorship on the Internet and social networks involves the use of various methods and technologies designed to control and restrict the flow of information online. Morozov (2011) examines how authoritarian regimes use these technologies to perpetuate their control over information and suppress online dissent. The author highlights how governments can employ tools such as firewalls and content filtering to block access to websites and social networking platforms that they deem subversive or dangerous to their regime. On the other hand, MacKinnon (2012) addresses the global struggle for Internet freedom and how censorship technologies affect users' online rights. The author analyzes how technology companies can collaborate with authoritarian governments to implement censorship and digital surveillance policies that compromise users' privacy and freedom of speech.

Deibert (2013) delves deeper into the issue of digital surveillance and privacy by examining how intelligence agencies and governments use digital surveillance technologies, such as communications interception and online tracking, to monitor and control Internet activities and suppress political dissent. York (2012) provides a detailed analysis of how governments can limit Internet freedom by exploring different strategies used by governments to block access to online content and restrict freedom of expression, including blocking IP addresses and using cybersecurity laws to justify censorship. Finally, Kenyon (2018) examines a specific case of censorship how that of the government of Bahrain using content filtering and digital surveillance technologies to restrict freedom of expression online and persecute political dissidents, highlighting the challenges and implications of these practices for human rights and democracy in the digital age.

1.5. Resistance and circumvention

The circumvebtion of censorship on the Internet and social networks has led to the development of various strategies by users to ensure access to information and freedom of expression. Zuckerman (2013) explores how people use technology to connect across physical boundaries and overcome the barriers imposed by online censorship. The author highlights how virtual private networks (VPNs) and other anonymity tools allow users to bypass censorship and access blocked content. On the other hand, Dingledine et al. (2011) discuss in their research on Tor how this

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anonymity network provides users with an additional layer of online privacy and security by routing traffic through a series of encrypted nodes. This technology has been instrumental in allowing users to evade censorship and government surveillance in restrictive environments.

Villeneuve (2008) examines how anonymity tools, such as Tor, have been used by activists and dissidents to protect themselves from online censorship and surveillance. The author highlights the importance of these technologies in protecting privacy and freedom of expression in hostile environments. Dingledine et al. (2004) provide a detailed overview of how Tor works in their paper "Tor: The Second-Generation Onion Router." The authors explain how this decentralized network allows users to surf the Internet anonymously and circumvent censorship by distributing traffic across multiple encrypted nodes. In addition, Poitras (2014) documents in her film Citizenfour how whistleblower Edward Snowden revealed the extent of government surveillance online and the crucial role of anonymity tools, such as Tor, in protecting privacy and freedom on the Internet. The film highlights the importance of these technologies in the fight against censorship and online surveillance.

2. OBJECTIVES

2.1. General objective

To analyze Internet censorship practices in various countries, with the purpose of understanding global trends in online censorship and its effects on freedom of expression and access to information around the world.

2.2. Specific objectives

1. To investigate cases of censorship and blocking of social networks in different countries, including China, Iran, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and others, identifying the specific dates and circumstances of each event.
2. To analyze government policies supporting online censorship in the selected countries, with emphasis on the measures used to block or restrict access to Western social networks.
3. To examine the socio-political and cultural impact of Internet censorship in each country studied, considering the repercussions for civil society, human rights and the democratization of information.

3. METHODOLOGY

In order to conduct comprehensive research on Internet censorship and blocking, a robust and detailed methodology was implemented that began with an in-depth analysis of the existing academic literature on the topic. It sought to understand the overall landscape of Internet censorship, identifying countries where these practices were prevalent and examining how the media addressed these issues in different contexts.

This first step established a solid knowledge base on Internet censorship and the various strategies employed to restrict access to information and limit freedom of

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expression online. Global and regional trends in censorship enforcement were identified, as well as specific areas of interest and concern.

Subsequently, a comprehensive search of academic databases, such as Scopus and Web of Science, was conducted to collect relevant research and case studies on Internet censorship. Specific search terms related to censorship in particular countries and on specific social networking platforms were used to ensure the inclusion of relevant and up-to-date data.

In addition to the academic literature review, a thorough search was conducted in specialized search engines for news and opinion articles related to Internet censorship. Reports from international organizations and human rights advocacy groups were analyzed to obtain a more complete perspective of the censorship situation in different countries and regions.

To carry out this research, we started from the data provided in the reports published by Neutral and Statista on the blocking of social networks by governments (Gonzalo, 2022; Mena, 2022). These reports allowed us to narrow down the countries in which to conduct our research and provided us with an initial starting point by providing detailed information on these and the social networks that have experienced censorship, as well as the parameters used to analyze it, including recidivism, total outages and data filtering. Using this information as a basis, it was possible to narrow down the countries and social network platforms examined in our research.

This approach not only allowed the author to identify the countries and social networks most affected by censorship, but also to better understand the nature and extent of the restrictions imposed, including the frequency of censorship, the extent of total outages, and the effectiveness of data filtering.

To complement these data, research was conducted in major European media outlets, such as newspapers, magazines and news websites, to cross-check published information and broaden the scope of the research. This provided a broader and more diverse view of Internet censorship, from both an academic and journalistic perspective.

Ultimately, this rigorous and multifaceted methodology ensured accurate and relevant data on Internet censorship, as well as a deeper understanding of its social, political and cultural implications. It was inspired by the approach used by Zeynep Tufekci when researching on the interaction between movements and social networks globally (Tufekci, 2017), ensuring the quality and relevance of the data collected for this study.

4. RESULTS

Internet censorship and blocking represent a significant challenge to freedom of speech in the digital age. On platforms such as Twitter, there have been documented cases of both overt censorship and covert limitations that restrict access to information and the expression of ideas. These practices are not limited to a specific country or region, but spread around the world, generating debates about the limits of online freedom and the role of technology companies in moderating content. Through concrete examples, such as the blocking in China, Turkey and Venezuela, and the

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restrictions on political parties in Spain, it can be better understood the challenges and implications of Internet censorship today.

4.1. Blocking in People's Republic of China

Analyses can never be complete as long as there is blocking of Chinese websites and vice versa. It is difficult to perform a comprehensive analysis with objective data of all websites due to the restrictions imposed by the Chinese government through the Great Firewall, a software developed by the Ministry of Public Security of China (Ministry of Public Security), which inspects and blocks those sites that it considers harmful according to its parameters for the Chinese population. In China, social networks are developed without the presence of platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and other Western social networks. Despite this, in the world's second largest economy, Chinese consumers travel a similar digital journey to the rest of the world's population, but they do so through government-controlled social media platforms. China has the world's largest user database in a single country and has the most active social media environment. According to research conducted in 2012 (Chiu et al., 2012), Chinese users spent more than 40% of their time online using a variety of more advanced technological and social tools than those offered by Western companies.

Table 1

Sites under blocking status in China.

| SITES UNDER BLOCKING STATUS IN CHINA	
SOCIAL NETWORKS	**APPS**
Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Reddit, Pinterest, Tumblr, Snapchat, Picassa, Wordpress.com, Blogspot, Flickr, SoundCloud, Google+, Google Hangouts, Hootsuite	Google Play, Whatsapp, Viper, Telegram, Line, Periscope, Kakao Talk, Discord
SEARCH ENGINES	**VÍDEO SHARING**
Google, Ask.com, Duck Duck Go, Yahoo!	YouTube, Vimeo, Daily Motion, Twitch, Nico Vídeo
MEDIA	**STREAMING PLATFORMS**
The New York Times, Financial Times, The Wall Street Journal, The Economist, Bloomberg, Reuters, The Independent, Le Monde, El País, LÈquipe, Google News, Wikipedia y Wikileaks	Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hulu, Twitch, BBC iPlayer, Spotify, SoundCloud y Pandora radio
WORKING TOOLS	
Google Drive, Google Docs, Gmail, Google Calendar, Dropbox, ShutterStock, Slideshare, Slack, iStockPhotos, WayBackMachine, Scribd, Xing y Android.	

Source: Furuo-Fu, 2018; Monroy, 2024.

The only way to access these sites in China is through a VPN to hide the IP address and thus circumvent government firewalls and be able to access the websites or applications reflected in Table 1. However, in China there is an entirely different alternative universe of social networks, applications and media, all of which are targeted exclusively at the Chinese population and have very similar technical characteristics to the applications used in the rest of the world. According to Xisi-Dai (2018), alternatives to Facebook in China include Qzone, with over 712 million users, and PengYouWan, with 259 million users. In terms of alternatives to Twitter, Tencent Weibo, with 507 million users, and Weibo Sina, with 500 million users, stand out. To replace YouTube, platforms such as Youku and TuDouWan are used in China (Monroy,

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2024). The alternative to WhatsApp at the time was Weixin, known in the West as WeChat (Monroy, 2024), while the alternative to the professional network LinkedIn was UshiWan, which had over 400 million users.

Figure 1

Favorite social networks in China grouped by the type of business/functions of each platform.
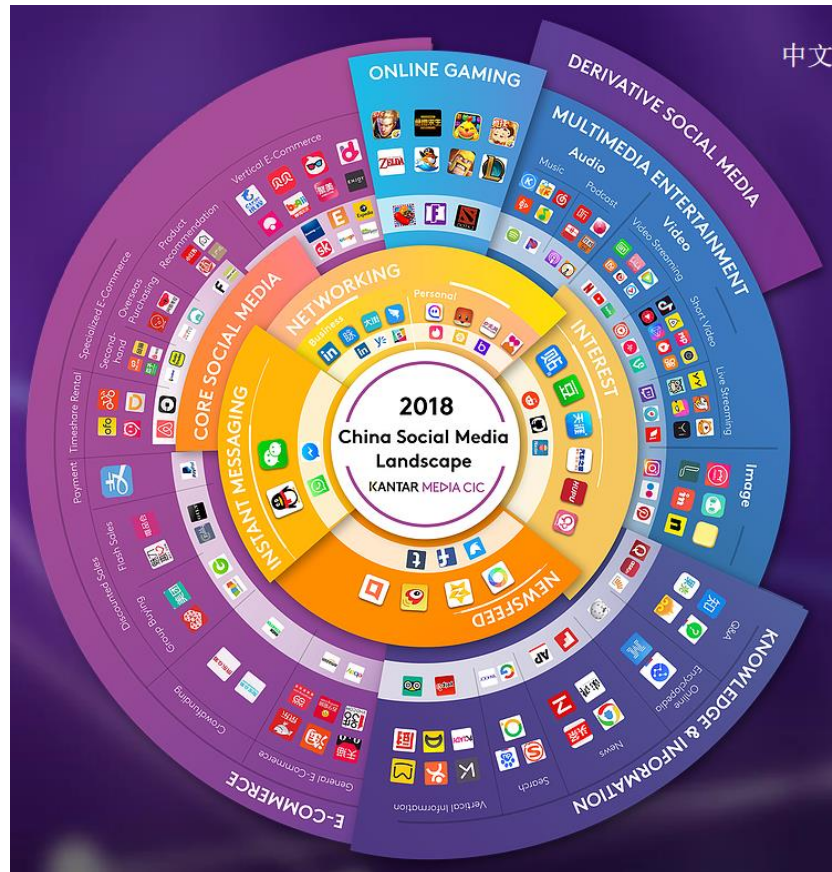
Source: Figure retrieved from (Kantar Media CIC, 2018).

Figure 1 presents the social networks in China grouped by the functions of each platform, while Figure 2 shows the relationships between the most popular social networks in the West and their counterparts in China, organized by the business or main functions of each (Kantar Media CIC, 2018). It is observed that most of the successful platforms in China are developed by a small number of prominent technology companies, such as Tencent, Baidu, ByteDance, Sina, and Alibaba (Villamuera, 2023).

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Figure 2

Infographic of Chinese social networks equivalent to Western ones.

Source: Crampton, 2010.

Table 2 details the Western social networks blocked in China, which have been replaced by similar platforms created and controlled by the Chinese government. These alternatives are only accessible within the country, indicating a double layer of censorship on these social networks.

Table 2

Equivalence of Western and Chinese social networks.

Equivalence of Western and Chinese social networks.				
Whatsapp		Wechat	1,000 millions	(Harwit, 2017; Lien y Cao, 2014; Xu et al., 2015)
Facebook	2,271 millions	Renren and Qzone	771 millions	(Qiu et al., 2013; Saxena, 2019)
YouTube		Youku		(Li et al., 2016; Tech In Asia, 2019)
Twitter	500	Weibo Sina	500	(Chernavina, 2017; Gao et al., 2012; Sullivan, 2014)

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

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4.2. Censorship and blocking in the most prominent countries

4.2.1. Censorship and regulation of social networks in Russia

The Russian government has enacted a number of laws for the purpose of regulating and censoring online content, including social networks. These laws, introduced since 2012, encompass the Law on the Protection of Children's Information on the Internet, the Law on the Protection of Personal Data and the Law on Bloggers, among others. Such legislations give the Russian government broad authority to monitor and censor online content, including that of social networks. In 2019, a law was passed that empowers the government to designate individuals and organizations as foreign agents if they receive funding from abroad and are involved in political activities, which has been used to coerce independent media and civil society organizations, generating self-censorship and the closure of various online platforms (Sahuquillo, 2019).

Platforms such as LinkedIn have been blocked for not complying with local regulations on user data storage. In April 2018, the Russian government blocked the popular messaging app Telegram after the company refused to provide access to its encrypted messages to the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) (Roth, 2018). This blocking was part of a broader effort to control online communications and prevent the disclosure of information deemed damaging to the state (BBC, 2018).

The Russian government has used its influence over social media and other online platforms to censor political content that it perceives as subversive or harmful to the state. This has resulted in the blocking or deletion of accounts and posts on social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, as well as the imposition of fines and other penalties on users who share information deemed illegal or defamatory (Cuesta, 2022).

As it can be observed throughout this decade, Russia has tried to control social networks, and as an extreme measure, Russia has developed its own Internet called RuNET that has the possibility of functioning by itself without being connected to the rest of the segments of the global network, and undoubtedly this provides total control of the content of the same and a possible total disconnection from the generalist social networks of the West (Soto and Bonilla, 2023).

The Guardian, BBC News, The Independent and El País have provided extensive coverage of the situation of social networks in Russia, highlighting the cases of censorship and blocking that have occurred since their implementation.

4.2.2. Censorship and blocking of social networks in Iran

Censorship and blocking of social networks in Iran is common practice, particularly during periods of political unrest and popular demonstrations. One of the most notorious episodes occurred during the 2009 post-election protests, known as the Green Revolution, when the government blocked access to platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to prevent the organization and dissemination of information about the protests (BBC, 2019).

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In addition to political demonstrations, Iranian authorities have employed Internet censorship as a strategy to stifle dissent and control the public narrative. Social networks and messaging apps, such as Telegram, have been targeted for temporary or permanent blocking in response to content deemed subversive or critical of the regime. To carry out this censorship, the government uses a combination of online traffic filtering and monitoring technologies, as well as collaboration with Internet service providers to block specific websites and applications.

The impact of this censorship has extended beyond the political, also affecting civil society and freedom of expression in general. Many Iranian citizens have resorted to circumvention tools, such as VPN and proxy services, to get around the restrictions and access blocked content. This situation has been widely documented by international human rights organizations and media outlets, raising concerns about violations of digital rights and freedom of speech in Iran (Águila, 2023).

4.2.3. Censorship in Saudi Arabia

Censorship and blocking in Saudi Arabia have been a common practice for many years, with the government exercising strict control over access to the Internet and social networks. One of the most prominent moments occurred in 2010, when the Saudi government blocked access to platforms such as Facebook and Twitter in an attempt to stifle dissent and prevent possible Arab Spring-inspired protests in other countries in the region (Europa Press, 2011).

Since then, Saudi Arabia has continued to implement measures to restrict access to certain websites and social media platforms. In 2013, the government introduced a law that required all social media users to register with their national identification number, allowing the government to track and monitor citizens' online activities. Subsequently, it eased censorship over the Internet, although it began to monitor WhatsApp, Skype, and Viber applications (Kippel, 2017).

In addition, the Saudi government has used filtering and blocking technologies to restrict access to content deemed inappropriate or critical of the regime. This includes websites and platforms that address sensitive topics such as human rights, religion, and politics. Likewise, Saudi authorities have blocked messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Telegram during times of political unrest or internal crises (Blanco, 2017).

Currently, several famous people, film directors, actors and musicians have been demonstrating for several months under the hashtag #stopcensura to denounce censorship in this country and nearby countries such as Kuwait and the Emirates (Junquera, 2023).

4.2.4. Censorship in Vietnam

One of the most prominent moments of censorship in Vietnam occurred in 2009, when the government implemented a series of regulations to control online content. These regulations gave the government broad powers to monitor and censor content on the Internet, and were used to block access to websites and social networks critical of the government (El Mundo, 2009).

In Vietnam, online censorship and blocking of websites and social networks are common practices and are backed by a number of government laws and regulations. Over the years, the Vietnamese government has implemented measures to control and restrict access to online information, particularly that which it considers critical or damaging to the regime. In 2021, it appointed a military officer as head of the Ministry of Propaganda to create Force 47, what they call the cybertroops, which control opinions and information on social networks (Kumar, 2021).

4.2.5. Internet blocking in North Korea

In North Korea, access to the Internet is highly restricted and controlled by the government. The country has a closed intranet called Kwangmyong, which is separate from the Internet and is only accessible to a limited number of citizens and government authorities. Public Internet access is available only to a small elite group, such as senior government officials, scientists, and some foreign professionals (Colombo, 2023).

Access to foreign websites is blocked and access is only allowed to a limited selection of government-controlled websites. Citizens do not have access to popular social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube, and online content is highly censored to remove any criticism of the regime or information deemed damaging to the government.

A reverse example is what happened in 2022, when a cyber-attack left North Korea without Internet access, and all traffic to and from North Korea was blocked at various times, leaving the government and various companies that need Internet to operate, such as the airline Air Koryo, unable to function (Agencias Seúl, 2022).

4.2.6. Censorship in the United Arab Emirates

In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), social media censorship and Internet monitoring are common practices carried out by the government to regulate the flow of information and protect public morals and cultural values in the country. Although the UAE is known for its modernity and economic development, it maintains strict policies regarding freedom of expression online and the dissemination of content deemed inappropriate or critical of the government.

In terms of specific dates, censorship policies in the UAE have been implemented gradually over time, with additional measures taken in response to specific events or changes in the political situation. For example, during the Arab Spring in 2011, the UAE intensified its online censorship efforts to prevent the spread of protests and similar movements in the country (Soengas-Pérez, 2013).

4.2.7. Censorship in Belarus

In Belarus, Internet censorship and blocking of online platforms are common practices used by the government to restrict access to information and control the public narrative.

One of the most prominent measures occurred during the 2020 post-election protests, following the disputed presidential election in which Alexander Lukashenko was re-elected amid allegations of electoral fraud. In response to the mass protests following

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the elections, the Belarusian government blocked access to several online platforms, including social networks such as Telegram and independent media websites. This blocking was aimed at preventing the organization and dissemination of information about the protests and suppressing dissent (Chodownik, 2024).

4.3. A short overview of censorship and blocking on YouTube

YouTube's history is marked by episodes of censorship and blocking in several countries, demonstrating that the idea of censorship in Internet media is still relevant in the digital age. Throughout its trajectory, YouTube has been blocked on more than 20 occasions in different places, including Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh, China, Pakistan, Thailand and Turkey (CNN, 2009; Hunter, 2008). One of the most notable cases was in China in 2008, when the government blocked access to YouTube following unrest in Tibet, a restriction that persists to this day (Hunter, 2008).

In 2009, YouTube was blocked in China after the publication of a video showing the brutal repression of Dalai Lama supporters by Chinese police, marking one of the most significant and prolonged blockings (Helft, 2009). In Turkey, there have been several YouTube blocks, one of the most prominent being in 2009 due to videos mocking Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish nation (Rosen, 2008). In 2014, Turkey blocked YouTube again after the publication of a video revealing high-level security conversations of Prime Minister Erdogan, despite court rulings ordering the block to be lifted (Akgül and Kırlıdoğ, 2015; Butler, 2014; Crampton, 2007; Di-Florio et al., 2014).

In addition to these blocks, Western countries such as Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States have faced problems with YouTube for copyright violations (Rosen, 2008). The platform warns about copyright and prohibits the publication of content that violates these rights, as well as pornographic, illegal, violent or hateful content (Bañuelos, 2009).

In summary, censorship and blocking on YouTube are the result of various concerns, from copyright protection to national security. However, YouTube remains a crucial space for freedom of speech and news dissemination, providing users with a platform for sharing information and exercising democracy in an increasingly digitized environment.

The platform itself has also censored at various times channels, users and various practices in published videos, although perhaps the most significant was practiced in 2019, when the platform deleted more than 17,000 channels due to new anti-hate policies, as these channels and videos violated the anti-hate regulations imposed by the platform (Fernández, 2019).

4.4. Freedom of speech versus censorship and blocking on Twitter

Censorship on Twitter is a widely known phenomenon affecting various countries, such as Iran, Turkey, China and Egypt, as well as unique cases in Russia, South Korea and the Wikileaks account. Twitter allows governments to request censorship of information, and also discloses statistics on censorship in each country through the Chilling Effects website (Tanash et al., 2015).

The government of Turkey leads in number of information censorship requests on Twitter, and this phenomenon intensified after several Twitter access cuts in response to corruption cases (Akgül and Kırlıdoğ, 2015; Tanash et al., 2015). In Iran, Twitter user accounts have been blocked since 2009, while in North Korea, Internet censorship is total and the use of Twitter can be punishable by death. In Eritrea, access to Twitter is practically impossible due to the large number of restrictions, and in other countries such as Syria, United Arab Emirates, Libya and Afghanistan, access to social networks has been selectively blocked at different times (Infobae, 2014).

Internet access in Cuba is severely limited, and especially there is no coverage for Twitter, as the Cuban government does not recognize access to technology as a fundamental right (Aldous, 2015). In China, following unrest in Xinjiang, the government blocked access to Twitter throughout the country except in Shanghai. In addition, Twitter and Facebook are blocked in China and are subject to active censorship by the government, which filters content, IP addresses, and search terms (Bamman et al., 2012).

During the Egyptian revolution in 2011, the government blocked Twitter through Vodafone Egypt to prevent the dissemination of information about the Tahrir Square protests (Howard and Hussain, 2011; Murphhy, 2011). Also noteworthy is the alleged censorship of Wikileaks Twitter accounts in 2010, during the leak of U.S. diplomatic documents. Although Twitter denied having modified trends to favor or harm Wikileaks, the accusations persisted (Bell, 2010; Eugenia, 2010). These types of situations have been repeated over time, with the most recent incident occurring in December 2018 (Figure 3), when there was an alleged cyberattack that blocked Wikileaks' access to Twitter, preventing access to the platform for more than 24 hours following a distributed denial of service (DDoS) attack.

Figure 3

Tweet about the cyberattack on Wikileaks accounts on Twitter.

Source: Screenshot of (Wikileaks [@wikileaks], 2018).

A significant blocking occurred in January 2019, when the Venezuelan government, under the leadership of Nicolas Maduro, faced an uprising by a group of dissident

military. In response, the government implemented a blocking of access to Twitter and other social networks through the country's main telecommunications service provider, CANTV. This action was denounced and confirmed by the civil organization Netblocks, which specializes in monitoring online censorship, as evidenced in the screenshot of its Twitter account in Figure 4 (Netblocks, 2019).

Figure 4

Confirmation tweet about the cyberattack on Wikileaks accounts on Twitter.

Source: Screenshot of (NetBlocks [@netblocks], n.d.).

On Twitter, in addition to the obvious cases of censorship, there are also limitations that can be interpreted as covert forms of censorship, especially in specific contexts. This problem is recurrent in many countries, although in Spain the first case of dispute with Twitter for limitation of use or censorship was recorded in January 2019. In that case, the company Twitter generated controversy by restricting the use of the account of the political party VOX on January 22, 2019, preventing it from issuing messages for 12 hours until a tweet was deleted (Figure 70), arguing possible "incitement to hatred" (Huffington Post, 2020; Pérez-Colomé, 2020). Twitter hid the specific tweet for the community and issued a statement stating: "We are an unbiased company and do not engage in political bias or prejudice of any kind. Twitter Rules are applied fairly and equitably to all users, regardless of their background or political affiliation. The platform remained blocked from issuing further tweets until the disputed tweet was removed or the dispute associated with the tweet was resolved.

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Figure 5

VOX tweet that initiated the blocking of the Twitter account.

Source: Huffington Post, 2020.

In 2023, after the purchase of the platform by Elon Musk, the network itself, now called X, imposed a series of limitations and blocks on access to the social network for those users who consult the network without being logged in, and a number of views and publications for accounts depending on whether or not they are verified on the social network (Europa Press, 2023).

4.5. Blocking threats to TikTok

TikTok has faced blocking threats in several countries due to concerns about the security of user data and inappropriate content. In 2020, the administration of former U.S. President Donald Trump announced plans to ban TikTok in the country citing national security concerns. However, this ban was the subject of legal disputes and was not implemented (Gimón, 2020). Subsequently, the United States has passed a bill to ban TikTok in the country citing internal security concerns, although the company announced that it will file a legal battle to prevent censorship in the country (Público, 2024).

In addition, in other countries such as India, TikTok was temporarily banned in 2020 due to concerns about inappropriate content and the security of user data. However, these bans may change depending on government policies and negotiations with TikTok's owner company, ByteDance.

The company that owns TikTok denies that it gives user data to the Chinese government, but many countries, led by the United States, indicate that the platform may breach user data and expose information, which is why countries such as the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Denmark, Belgium and Canada are giving the first orders to block TikTok in those countries (Euronews, 2023).

5. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

Comprehensive research on Internet censorship practices in various countries has highlighted the critical relevance of this issue in today's global landscape. By meticulously examining specific cases of censorship and social network blocking in nations such as People's China, North Korea, Iran, Russia, Saudi Arabia and others, it

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has been identified recurring patterns and disturbing trends. These analyses have provided a deeper understanding of how these online censorship practices are carried out, including the precise dates and circumstances of each event.

In addition, there has been an in-depth study of the government policies that support these practices, with a particular focus on the measures used to block or restrict access to Western social networks. This research has provided a better understanding of the mechanisms that governments use to control the flow of information online and limit the freedom of speech of their citizens.

This research corroborates the findings highlighted by Funk et al. (2023), who identified critical points related to the repression of censorship and blockades, and their impact on the decrease of global Internet freedom, as well as on the increase of attacks on freedom of expression. These phenomena are not only limited to widely known countries such as China and North Korea but are also becoming more evident globally. Moreover, our study reveals a progressive increase in the number of countries resorting to some form of censorship over time, as illustrated by the paradigmatic case of TikTok.

It is imperative to conduct a thorough investigation of the extraordinary case of TikTok to understand the severity of access cuts to this platform in certain countries, as well as the possible consequences that this will entail. These repercussions will not only affect access to information and freedom of expression on the network but could also have a significant impact on other social networks. Government intrusion into a specific social network raises questions about the integrity and future of the digital ecosystem as a whole.

At the same time, for each country studied, the sociopolitical and cultural impact of Internet censorship has been assessed. This assessment has been essential to understanding the implications for civil society, human rights and the democratization of information. Such censorship practices undermine democracy by restricting the free exchange of ideas and citizen participation in matters of public interest, thus perpetuating an environment where political dissent is repressed, and the status quo is maintained.

What remains to be seen is the importance of promoting and protecting digital rights as an integral part of universal human rights, such as freedom of speech and access to information. These practices, carried out by governments around the world, aim to control the public narrative, restrict political dissent, and maintain the status quo. As such, there is a need for free and unrestricted access to the Internet as a fundamental means to foster democratic debate, citizen participation, and social and economic development.

It is essential that the international community take concrete steps to hold governments accountable for violating these rights and to ensure accountability in cases of abuse of power and repression online. Ultimately, free and open access to online information is fundamental to the effective exercise of democracy and respect for human rights in the modern world.

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