The Repression of Dissent: An Analysis of Internet Shutdowns as a Tool of Authoritarianism

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the similarities between censorship in Nazi Germany and internet blackouts highlighting the latter as a modern-day tool of repression. In Nazi Germany, the government used censorship to keep its power and control the flow of information. The same can be said for internet blackouts, where governments use them to control the flow of information and restrict access to information that may challenge their rule. The similarities between censorship in Nazi Germany and internet blackouts suggest that internet blackouts are indeed a tool of fascism. Repressing dissent by shutting down the internet is an example of authoritarian power and a violation of fundamental human rights like freedom of speech and access to information. The findings of this study demonstrate that internet shutdowns are a violation of fundamental human rights and have the potential to be used as a tool of authoritarian power. The paper concludes by emphasizing the need for governments to balance security and stability with the protection of individual rights and freedoms, particularly in the digital age, where access to information and communication is a crucial aspect of daily life.

KEYWORDS

Censorship, internet blackouts, repression, control of information, authoritarian power, freedom of speech, access to information, surveillance, surveillance state, government control, dissent suppression, human rights.

INTRODUCTION

Surveillance and information blackouts are separate concepts with unique societal ramifications. Surveillance involves monitoring individuals or groups, often collecting and analyzing their electronic

communications and (online) activities.This can include electronic surveillance through technologies like closed-circuit television (CCTV), interception of electronic information transmissions, and classic intelligence-collection techniques like human intelligence and postal interception (Bamford, 2001). The purpose of surveillance is to gather information, often for national security or law enforcement purposes. A shutdown, on the other hand, is meant to limit access to information and communication tools. This is usually done to control the flow of information or stop protests. While both internet shutdowns and surveillance can have severe implications for human rights and individual freedom, it is essential to understand the different ways they are used and their distinct impacts.

In recent years, internet shutdowns, also called internet blackouts, have been used frequently by governments to stop the flow of information online (Deibert, 2016). Internet shutdowns happen when the government tells or orders service providers to shut down their services in a particular area. This makes it impossible to access the internet in that area (Freedom House, 2021). In contrast to selective bans, which limit access to certain information or services, internet shutdowns shut down the whole internet, making it impossible to access any information or service (Kshetri, 2019). Repressing disagreement is also crucial in authoritarian governments because it gives the impression of unity and stops people from fighting against official policy. However, unfortunately, it also helps stop people from speaking out against the regime or questioning its policies. The result is a society in which the opposition is successfully crushed, and the government has absolute power to rule.

Governments are increasingly using internet shutdowns to censor and control, as evidenced by how they regulate the flow of information online (Kshetri, 2019). Even though surveillance and information blackouts are two different ideas, they raise important questions about the balance between security and privacy and freedom of speech and expression.

This paper will try to figure out if shutting down the internet is a tool of fascism by doing a theoretical analysis based on relevant literature and theories from political science, communication studies, and sociology. The study shows that shutting down the internet fits with the paradigm of authoritarianism theory and gives governments a way to keep control and silence dissent. The research adds to the knowledge of the government's use of power and control in the digital era. Also, it shows how important it is to protect human rights and let information flow freely, especially when the internet is shut down.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative method was used, using secondary data sources and a semiotic analysis of the talk about shutting down the internet. First, as part of the research, a thorough literature review was done, and information about times when the internet was down was collected. Then, using semiotic analysis, the data were looked at to see what words and symbols the government used to explain and defend shutting down the internet.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to several experts and researchers, states are progressively utilising the Internet to suppress dissent, regulate information flow, and restrict information access. These shutdowns are manifestations of state-led surveillance and control, which have complex and multifaceted relationships with speech and expression freedom. By determining the flow of information and limiting citizens' access to communication networks, internet shutdowns effectively restrict individuals' freedom of expression and communication. As a result, there are concerns about the impact of these shutdowns on human rights and the ability of citizens to exercise their right to access information as an increasing number of governments worldwide implement them. Moreover, such measures are regarded as instruments of state power used for surveillance and control, significantly impacting the freedom of speech, expression, and individuals' ability to communicate and access information freely. Consequently, the increasing use of internet shutdowns to suppress dissent and activism has become a worrisome trend, highlighting the need to safeguard information flow and individual rights in the digital age.

COMPARISON OF CENSORSHIP IN FASCIST GERMANY AND INTERNET BLACKOUT IN INDIA

SIMILARITIES:

Control over the flow of information: Both Nazi Germany and the Indian government sought to control and limit access to information that may be critical of the government or challenge its authority. Ian Kershaw, a historian, says that the Nazi government in Germany used censorship and propaganda to keep its power and control the flow of information (Kershaw, 2000).

Suppression of dissent: Both regimes tried to shut down voices and ideas that did not agree with the ruling regime and could threaten it. Timothy S. Brown, a political scientist, says that putting down dissent is a common trait of authoritarian regimes like fascist Germany (Brown, 2005).

Monopoly over the media: In both cases, the government controlled the media and tried to keep its hold on spreading information. A historian, Robert Gellately, says that the Nazis used the media to spread their ideas and control German society (Gellately, 2001). In Arendt's view, the state's monopoly on violence is central to its power and authority. The ability to control the flow of information and communication, as well as the means of production and distribution of goods, is another crucial aspect of state power. (Arendt, 1958).

DIFFERENCES:

Differences in governments: Historically, fascist Germany was a totalitarian regime with a single-party dictatorship. Conversely, India is a democratic country with many political parties and a free press. Arend Lijphart, a political scientist, says that India's democratic system lets information flow freely and protects individual rights, such as the right to free speech (Lijphart, 1999).

Methods of censorship: Propaganda, censorship of the press, and violence against political dissidents were some of the more extreme and brutal ways of censorship in Nazi Germany. In India, internet blackouts and media censorship are standard methods of suppressing dissent. Legal scholar Prabir Purkayastha says that blocking access to the internet in India goes against the right to free speech and information (Purkayastha, 2019).

Motivations for censorship: In fascist Germany, censorship was mainly done to keep the regime in power. In India, internet blackouts are done for various reasons, primarily to repress public protests and prevent people from organizing. The government explained it as keeping the public safe, protecting national security, and stopping the spread of false information.

Technological advancements: Since the time of Nazi Germany, technological advancements have significantly impacted government's ability to censor information. The widespread availability of the internet and social media has made it much more challenging for governments to control the flow of information. In contrast, in Nazi Germany, censorship was much easier to implement as there were fewer means of disseminating information.

Duration of censorship: The duration in Nazi Germany was much longer than the recent internet blackouts in India. Nazi censorship lasted for the duration of the Nazi regime, which lasted from 1933 to 1945. In contrast, internet blackouts in India have been limited, lasting only a few days, weeks, or few months in some cases.

DISCUSSION

A blackout on the internet represents authoritarian authority and the repression of dissent, as it restricts the flow of information and access to information that may challenge the governing government. This conforms to the fascist idea that the state controls all parts of society, including the media. The repression of dissent via internet blackouts has been denounced as a breach of core human rights such as freedom of expression and access to information. Scholars such as Amartya Sen have examined this, arguing that freedom of expression is crucial for democracy and the growth of individual liberties (Sen, 1999).

In Foucault's view, surveillance is one of the critical mechanisms of power. He argues that modern societies are characterized by a 'panoptic' form of control, in which individuals are constantly monitored and observed, leading to a form of self-regulation." (Foucault, 1977). In a Foucauldian analysis, internet shutdowns can be seen as a form of state-led surveillance, as they restrict access to information and communication networks and limit the flow of information. This can make it hard for people to talk to each other and get information, which limits their freedom of speech and expression. In the context of Foucault's theory, internet shutdowns can be seen as a means of maintaining social control and order by restricting the flow of information and limiting the ability of citizens to engage in independent thought and action.

In an article title "The Five Stages of Fascism", Paxton says that, Fascism is a political ideology that seeks to create a homogeneous, tightly-organized society, usually under a single-party dictatorship, that is led by a charismatic leader who embodies the values and will of the people." "The state is seen as the highest expression of the national community, and its policies are directed towards creating a sense of national unity, often through aggressive nationalism, social mobilization, and the suppression of opposition. (Paxton, 2004). Internet shutdowns align with the characteristics of fascism outlined by Paxton in this book. They create a homogeneous society, control the flow of information, suppress dissent, and impose the government's will. This form of aggressive nationalism violates fundamental human rights and undermines democratic values. The need to balance security with individual rights is crucial in the digital age, where access to information is essential.

CASE STUDY

The shutdowns of the internet in Jammu and Kashmir and the surveillance by the Nazis in Nazi Germany show that state surveillance can be used to control and oppress people. As a result, civil liberties were taken away, and free speech was limited. This shows how important it is to protect citizens' rights and ensure governments do not abuse their power.

Since August 5, 2019, when the Indian government took away the region's special status under Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, internet blackouts in the Indian-controlled part of Jammu and Kashmir have been a big problem (Human Rights Watch, 2019). In India, internet shutdowns have significantly impacted protests and activism (Human Rights Watch, 2019). During times of unrest, like the nationwide protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in 2019, the farmers' protests in 2020, and the revocation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir, the Indian government has shut down the internet in different parts of the country (Internet Shutdown Tracker India, 2019; Human Rights Watch, 2020).

During the CAA protests, the Indian government implemented internet shutdowns in several states to stop the spread of misinformation and to control the flow of information about the protests (Internet Shutdown Tracker India, 2019). The shutdowns made it difficult for protesters to coordinate and organize and for journalists to report on the events (Human Rights Watch, 2019). The internet shutdowns also affected businesses and daily life (Internet Shutdown Tracker India, 2019).

The internet shutdowns during the farmers' protests had similar effects (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Internet Shutdown Tracker India (2020) says that the shutdowns made it hard for protesters to organize and talk to each other and for journalists to report on what was happening. Additionally, the shutdowns harmed local businesses, as well as the ability of people to access essential services and information (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

The internet shutdowns in India have been criticized by human rights organizations, journalists, and activists as an infringement on the right to freedom of expression and access to information

(Human Rights Watch, 2019, 2020). People have also said that internet shutdowns do not do what they are supposed to and have harmful economic and social effects (Internet Shutdown Tracker India, 2019, 2020).

The internet shutdowns in India have significantly affected protests and activism, making it harder for people to say what they think and join demonstrations (Human Rights Watch, 2019). (Internet Shutdown Tracker India, 2019). The internet shutdowns in Jammu and Kashmir hurt the freedom of speech and the area's economy, making things complicated for the people living there (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

The semiotic analysis of the language used by government officials to justify the internet blackouts has revealed the use of terms such as "security," "national interest," and "stability." These words show that the blackout is necessary to keep order and protect the greater good. For example, a study by Dhar and Dhar (2020) found that Indian government officials often cited "security" as a reason for internet blackouts, citing worries about terrorism, spreading false information, or law and order issues. In the same way, the phrase "national interest" was used to imply that the blackout was needed to keep the country's integrity and unity. (Dhar, 2020). Another study by Singh and Bhatia (2021) investigated the use of language by government officials in India during internet blackouts and found that the term "stability" was often used to suggest that the blackout was necessary to maintain public order and prevent civil unrest. (Bhatia, 2021). These findings suggest that the use of language and terms like "security," "national interest," and "stability" is a way for the Indian government to justify its actions and present internet blackouts as necessary and just measures rather than violations of human rights and freedom of expression.

CONCLUSION

The study of the relationship between internet shutdowns and authoritarianism is crucial in understanding the effects of government control over information and communication. The findings of this study support the notion that authoritarian regimes restrict access to the internet to stifle free speech and control the flow of information. The literature review showed that many political science, communication studies, and sociology experts have looked into the link between shutting down the internet and surveillance and control. They have found that these shutdowns make it harder for people to speak their minds and significantly affect human rights.

The semiotic analysis of the talk about shutting down the internet showed that the government often used terms like "security," "national interest," and "stability" to justify the blackout. This language could be a way for the government to justify its actions and make it seem like the blackout is for the greater good.

In the end, the study suggests that authoritarian governments shut down the internet to control the flow of information and limit people's access to communication networks. The study shows how

important it is to protect human rights and freedom of speech, especially in the digital age, when people use the internet more and more to talk and share information. Both citizens and governments must understand what happens when the internet goes down and work to keep information flowing freely and easily.

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