Case Study 1: Politics and Technology at Conflict

I. SOPA

Designed by Republican House Judiciary Chairman Lamar Smith, the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) is a proposed piece of legislation that would prevent access to illegal rogue websites. Supporters, including the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) and the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA), expect this bill to reduce online piracy by forcing Internet service providers (ISPs) to block users from suspect URLs and IP addresses. According to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, these criminal sites endanger over 19 million American jobs (Elliot 2011). Unfortunate for opponents, SOPA-supporting Time Warner and other entertainment organizations strongly contribute to presidential campaigns, including $48.7 million in 2008 and over $1 million to the Obama administration in 2011-2012. The bill’s rejection could drop fiscal donations significantly in the future. Ultimately, the effectiveness of these lobbying efforts could determine the results and revisions of SOPA.

The main issue against this law surrounds the idea of censorship. That is, blocking such information violates the First Amendment right for free speech. Furthermore, SOPA contradicts the foundation of the Internet, particularly the freedom to communicate. For these reasons, many web giants, such as Google, Wikipedia, and Mozilla, and other prominent figures in the online world oppose the proposed legislation.
In order to “remove” rogue sites, the attorney general must use a court order requiring ISPs to redirect users to government-controlled servers. This could give the government too much power, allowing them to hijack DNS and censor search results. Many would question what else they could do and how far they would go. Even YouTube or Wikipedia, which hosts user content under the protection of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act’s (DMCA) safe harbor provision, could shut down.

In our discussion, the class focused on Twitter’s new censorship policy that would accommodate to the varying laws in different countries. As an attempt to be more transparent, they inform users that they have removed a post, while still allowing them to reach it by changing their country of origin settings. Some believe that this policy, with the possibility of circumvention, has no purpose except to make that country’s government happy. On the other hand, they question whether or not it would truly satisfy the government.

II. Arab Spring

Arab Spring is the combination of social media and revolution over in the Middle East. The articles provide both sides of the argument saying that social media did and did not facilitate the revolutions. In our discussion we first mentioned how would you react to the government shutting down the Internet and cellular devices. The reason this was relevant is during the revolution in Egypt the Government contacted all ISPs and cell phone companies commanding them to “pull the plug”. In general, the discussion was that it did not seem fair or even a logical way to approach the uprising. At the point in which the Internet was taken down, the people have probably already done enough damage to the government’s image. It was also noted that it was
not a lasting effect. The total damage done was minimal because there was no intention of
continuing to keep the Internet down. We also concluded that it was more likely a power
demonstration or fear tactic implemented to remind the people the strength of the government in
question.

We continued to ask questions about politics and its interaction with social media. This
brought up the conversation of Twitter specifically. They recently had announced that they were
going to more transparently censor information. Before this change, tweets about illegal material
or unwanted material would seem to vanish. Instead, Twitter’s new policy is to openly censor
material and place grey boxes over censor material. Several interesting and relevant points
flowed from this part of the discussion. The major idea that was brought up and liked was that
this made users more aware of the censorship occurring. This allowed for people to not be
completely ignorant with how material is being provided to them and allows them the ability to
try and further their own understanding. The other nice kickback from this change is this allows
governments to set up censorship polices directly with Twitter. Their policy indicates to these
foreign governments that they are willing to censor material so that the social media can be used
in countries with more strict laws. Not only does this come of as a good business move to spread
their consumer base but also provides Twitter the ability to set up different standards. Before
governments or organizations with political or economic strength could influence Twitter
worldwide as the tweet would vanish with no trace.

The last part of the Twitter discussion revolved around the idea addressed by the articles
that the United States government asked the company to suspend their maintenance schedule to
allow the social media to continue allowing for Twitter use during Arab Spring. Here we
addressed the issues of government and Internet. Are the two really compatible? We concluded
that the nature of the Internet somewhat prevents an international governing body to regulate, as too many interests would be represented and too many laws to handle for an efficient body to function.

We also discussed an idea of whether or not we could have all packets be encrypted such that a government would have a master lock and could monitor their borders to ensure illegal or copyrighted material was not being distributed. But this idea seemed feasible but at the same time fit under the natural avoidance of regulation on the Internet.

The discussion continued to develop back towards politics and technology when we addressed what would happen if the United States felt they were under attack. Would the US government ever pull the entire Internet down? Ultimately probably not but as noted in class if the government felt it was the only way to protect the people most likely the Internet could disappear.

Concluding remarks revolved around the few ideas what are the effects of social media on such events do they foster long lasting effects or cause it to be forgotten as quickly as a Twitter or Facebook feed develops. How much spin was placed on the social media aspect of Arab Spring? And does talking about the social media aspect undermine the actual activism in place. As we go forward and continue to talk about technology and politics. It becomes ever more important to develop an understanding of cyberspace and how naturally different and opposed to politics it is. It would be a good idea to bring up more current events revolving around these conflicts and continue to use them to facilitate discussion of this nature.