**Cyber-policing and Pornistan**

“This page is blocked due to restrictions enforced by the Pakistan Telecommunications Authority (PTA).” Many of us are likely to have encountered the above message at some point in the last two months during the course of our *scholarly and curious* browsing sessions. It is a result of the authority’s decision to ban thousands of websites with pornographic content; reportedly triggered by a hacker who managed to bypass security and posted a message on the PTA and Supreme Court’s sites to implement the ban or face further online attacks. One can’t help but scoff at the sheer naivety of the move – if people can hack into government websites, how hard could it possibly be to work around the ban for the naughty geeks? Proxy FTW!

The effectiveness of the ban has been brought into question in the media since day one; there being no dearth of online alternatives, strategies to bypass filters, and of course the good old Hall Road. The deeper concern is how it brings to light, yet again, the double standards and utter lack of priorities shown by the authorities when it comes to protecting basic freedoms in this country. The recent furor over the proposed legislation in the Congress in the form of SOPA and PIPA, have cast the entire debate on Internet freedom and access to information in a different context. Amongst many others, one of the biggest drawbacks of governments regulating Internet content – be that in Pakistan or the U.S. – is how easy it is to selectively implement these restrictions in order to suppress political dissent in the name of moral policing or protection of intellectual property. And one does not have to look towards the Middle-East or China for examples. It’s already home. For instance, sitting here in Lahore I am not allowed to access an online English newspaper from Balochistan ( thebalochhal.com) because “this site is restricted” for obvious reasons. On the other hand, access to infinite amounts of unabashed hate content against the Ahmadis, Shias and other religious minorities is only a click away. Are voices exposing human rights abuses, or a few nude images really that dangerous as opposed to Jihadi sites giving lesson plans on how to deal with the *infidels*?

In either case, blanket bans and curtailing the freedom of internet users is only a superficial remedy at most, not a solution addressing the root causes of the problem. Pornography is indeed one of the most exploitative and disrespectful industries, even in places where it’s legal. But just like banning prostitution has not changed much in our society, blocking a few thousand websites out of a million would not help. It’s only when we change our mindsets through education, that we’ll realize our ways around frustration and indulge in more productive activities that do not objectify or victimize anyone.

*Mehr Un Nisa.*