Introduction to the
Regional Overviews

Every country wishes to share in the prospective benefits of the Internet. However, there are no countries that are completely comfortable with the newfound freedoms of expression and access to information the Internet brings. As a result, there are few countries left in the world today that have not debated, planned, or implemented Internet filtering. In the following eight regional overviews, we provide broad summaries that exhibit the ways in which the countries within each region are grappling with the implications of Internet freedom and the challenges of regulating online content.

Three of the eight regional overviews—Asia, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)—synthesize the findings of the technical tests and the background research carried out in these regions. These regional overviews present the results of the forty country studies in a greater context.

The other five regional overviews—United States/Canada, Europe, Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and Australia/New Zealand—are written to extend the coverage of the study beyond the forty countries in which we were able to test in the first year of this global filtering study. These overviews are based solely on background research and secondary sources; the OpenNet Initiative (ONI) did not carry out technical filtering tests in these regions with the exception of two countries—Ethiopia and Zimbabwe—in sub-Saharan Africa and one country—Venezuela—in Latin America. Although these overviews fall short of a truly comprehensive global view of Internet filtering, we believe that they cover the major issues and trends as of spring 2007.

In general, the regional overviews are structured to cover the targets of and approaches to Internet content regulation, though the individual composition of the eight overviews varies in accordance with the quantity, focus, and strategies of regulation and filtering employed by the countries within a given region. As ONI continues to investigate and document Internet filtering in future years, we expect to expand our regional coverage to include more countries.

The overviews for Asia, MENA, and CIS exhibit considerable variation in filtering practices between and within those regions. This variation is seen not only in the depth, breadth, and foci of filtering, but also in the legal, technical, and administrative tools used to enact filtering. For example, the overview of Asia presents a region with a range of filtering targets and strategies as wide and diverse as its political and cultural landscape. The CIS overview displays a more narrow range of activity, reflecting perhaps the common history of the region. The MENA report evinces a region with extensive social filtering regimes and a growing penchant for targeting political speech.

By contrast, the general picture that emerges from Europe, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand is one of more narrowly focused targeting of online content and a more diverse mix of strategies for restricting access to that content. Filtering plays an important part in these regions and countries, though it tends to be voluntary and focused on a much narrower set of issues—primarily child pornography and, in a few cases, hate speech. The primary content regulation strategies in these countries tend to rely more heavily on taking down domestically hosted Web sites and in removing Web sites from search results than on

the technical filtering of foreign-hosted Web sites. This is not surprising given the large proportion of total Internet content hosted on local servers in these regions. The targets of content restrictions vary by country. Within this set, Australia is the most aggressive toward combating obscene content, while the United States goes to the greatest effort to remove Web sites that are suspected of breaching copyright law. Germany and France are the most vigorous in addressing online hate speech.

Latin America generally shares the same complement of targets and strategies as documented in Europe, the United States, Canada, and Australia. However, the legal and administrative means for restricting access to content are not as advanced in Latin America as they are in these other countries and, therefore, the policy and practice of Internet blocking and content restrictions have not been applied as widely. As the legal structures and technical tools are further developed in the next several years, we may see a marked change in content regulation in Latin America.

Finally, sub-Saharan Africa has implemented the lowest level of regulatory restrictions on content of any region to date. One country, Ethiopia, has a systematic filtering regime, while Uganda has one reported incidence of filtering. In Africa the obstacles to viewing and posting content online are based on infrastructure and economics—few people have access to the Internet. This region is another in which we expect to see increased content regulation activity in the future, particularly as Internet access expands.

In the regional overviews that follow, ONI presents information on the current ways that regions approach Internet filtering and content restrictions. These summaries in turn provide a context for the forty specific country summaries addressed by ONI in this first report.