Harvard Library Resource Access for Users in Countries with Internet Controls

- Question: For Harvard users in countries that have internet controls over access to sensitive content, will connecting through Harvard – over the Harvard VPN or using a library link to the resource -- help the user bypass blocking and get to library resource content that might otherwise be blocked?
- Answer: Sometimes.

More Details
- Library proxy (library links)
  - How it works:
  - Pros:
  - Cons:
- Harvard VPN
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  - Pros:
  - Cons:
- Content Blocking

Question: For Harvard users in countries that have internet controls over access to sensitive content, will connecting through Harvard – over the Harvard VPN or using a library link to the resource -- help the user bypass blocking and get to library resource content that might otherwise be blocked?

Answer: Sometimes.

Unfortunately there is no simple answer because different countries use different methods to screen internet content and control access, and the technologies are constantly evolving. Accessing through Harvard is not likely to be 100% effective at ensuring access to blocked resources, but users will probably be able to get to some content through Harvard that would be blocked as a direct connection.

The Harvard Internet Monitor Project (from the Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society) has an Access Check tool that lets you check website access from over 50 countries, many of which are known to utilize internet controls: [https://accesscheck.thenetmonitor.org/](https://accesscheck.thenetmonitor.org/)

More Details

Here are some of the technical issues involved with the two methods Harvard affiliates use to access library resources through HarvardKey:

Library proxy (library links)

How it works:

The library proxy detects the user is trying to access a website that has licensed Harvard access, confirms the user is authorized and fetches the content from the resource vendor, and then forwards the content on to the user.

Pros:

For internet controls that block a particular resource by domain or IP address, using through the library link may allow access since the resource is delivered from the Harvard proxy server rather than the resource website directly.

Cons:

The library proxy can only be used for websites/resources that the library has set up for licensed access by authorized Harvard users. If you try to use the library proxy with a website that is not a restricted library resource, the proxy will “drop out” and you will be sent directly to the resource website (which may be blocked). Also, when a website is delivered through the proxy, sometimes helper files (CSS, scripts, logo and banner images, etc.) are delivered directly (not through the proxy). If these are blocked, it can make the website difficult/impossible to use, even if the main page gets through.

Harvard VPN

How it works:

When the user logs in to Harvard VPN, their device is assigned a Harvard IP address, and all internet traffic is routed through Harvard until the VPN session ends.

Pros:
For internet controls that block by location, domain, or IP address, as long as they do not also block Harvard, using the VPN should allow access through since it will seem to come from Harvard rather than the original location. VPN also provides Harvard-routed access to non-web internet content, like FTP, SSH, networked applications, etc.

**Cons:**

Some countries block all VPN access, so the user would not be able to create a VPN connection in the first place. (See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/VPN_blocking)

**Content Blocking**

Finally, if internet content is being censored based on actual content (keywords, file types, etc.) as opposed to metadata about where it came from, then Harvard access will not prevent it from being blocked or surveilled. (See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internet_censorship_and_surveillance_by_country)