

Media Oppression Hits Cyberspace

New regulations mean crackdowns on online journalism

Not long ago, independent journalists and publishers in countries with repressive regimes headed for Cyberspace, where they hoped to publish free from the long tentacles and sharp eyes of their governments. The Internet held out hope for a respite from battling government censors and fighting for licenses that were often denied. This bloom of e-publications has not escaped the notice of the governments they were meant to circumvent, however, and now the governments are fighting back. Press freedom groups report new regulations aimed at curbing Internet publishing and increasing crackdowns on online journalism.

“The Internet is not an instant freedom machine like many used to think,” says Andrew Stroehlein, a journalist who has written extensively on the topic for “Online Journalism Review,” a publication of the University of Southern California’s Annenberg School of Communication. “In most of the countries we are talking about, Internet access is minimal, either because of regime decree, or, more often, simply by economic exclusion.”

Forty-five countries censor the World Wide Web, according to a 1999 report by Paris-based *Reporters Sans Frontieres*. “Twenty of these countries may be described as real enemies of this

new means of communication,” says the report. These include Azerbaijan, Belarus, Burma, China, Cuba, Iran, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Libya, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Syria, Tajikistan, Tunisia, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Vietnam.

For many governments, shutting down the Internet altogether is not an option. They want to take full advantage of the Internet’s connection to the global economy. Instead,



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they opt for control of Cyberspace, either by owning all the country's Internet service providers (ISPs)—the companies that provide Internet access and other related services such as website development and hosting—or by allowing ownership of ISPs to regime-friendly businesses only.

In addition, governments can control online access to information through “firewalls,” filters that control information that goes back and forth on the Internet. They exert further control by using electronic surveillance and by requiring users to register with the government before they can go online. That way, governments can track who's online and what they've been talking about.

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Restricted Access

In many of the countries now cracking down on journalists' use of Cyberspace, people can't afford computers, so they must rely on Internet cafés if they want to surf the Internet. Some governments routinely monitor Internet cafés to ensure Internet surfers aren't accessing illegal Websites. Other regimes have solved the problem of controlling access to the World Wide Web by owning and running the cafés themselves.

In June 2002, the Chinese government began a national campaign to monitor Internet cafés. Since then, authorities have permanently closed 3,000 Cybercafés and temporarily closed 12,000 others. The government has also banned the opening of any new Internet cafés.

In Tunisia, the government has closed several Internet cafés that accessed prohibited sites. It now plans to open its own Internet access centres—known as Publinets—to better control the flow of Web information. Some of the tightest controls on Internet usage are in North Korea, Burma and Iraq, where the exorbitant cost of computers automatically limits the number of Internet users. Only those that can afford computers and whom the government considers “trusted” enjoy Internet access.

“The Internet is the last refuge for people who have been denied access to print, radio and broadcast,” says Karen Widess, who covers Central Asia as senior programme coordinator for the U.S.-based National Endowment for Democracy. In Kazakhstan, for example, the Internet was the only space left for independent publishing after the government issued increasingly tighter controls on publishing and broadcasting licenses.

Creative Defiance

In Central Asia, where most countries apply vaguely worded laws on defamation and national security to the Internet, Widess says, journalists and users have found ways to circumvent the censors. “There's enough anonymity and proxy servers for news to flow freely between computers,” she says. In addition, articles are increasingly published on the Internet either anonymously or using pseudonyms.

Web shops—where journalists and others produce Internet material—are also popping up all over Central Asia in secret backrooms. “It's done in secret because the government does not allow unauthorized publications,” says Widess. However, because Central Asia remains a poor area, information generated in Cyberspace reaches very few. To get around this, some Internet users download and distribute online information in print format. In Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan this practice is illegal and, says Widess, several people have been arrested and imprisoned in Turkmenistan as a result.

A tool that has been helpful for journalists and dissidents working in repressive regimes is e-mail, says Stroehlein, who also trains journalists in Afghanistan and 21 other countries for the London-based Institute of War and Peace Reporting. “It allows dissidents and activists to get information out of the country to journalists and others outside in real time,” he says

E-mail “with forbidden or delicate information ...allows the recipients, if caught receiving it, to claim they are spam victims rather than subscriber-dissidents,” he added.

But even e-mail is not safe from government censorship. "If they can read your messages, they can then put pressure on you and your family to stop through a wide range of means," says Stroehlein. "Technical blocks are not necessary for the regime. A knock on the door at 4 a.m. is an effective low-tech solution."

China Syndrome

Human rights groups have dubbed those who break Internet media laws "cyber-dissidents." The penalties for journalists and others who challenge the laws range from threats to imprisonment to torture.

In China, where there are an estimated 46 million Internet users, the government has is holding some 35 cyber-dissidents, more than in any other country. So far, 16 cyber-dissidents have received prison sentences. Several cyber-dissidents, like Qi Yanchen, are journalists and writers who published articles and views the government considered subversive or a threat to national security.

Yanchen, editor in chief of the online magazine "Consultations," began serving a four-year sentence in September 1999 for subversion and circulation of anti-governmental information on the Internet. He published excerpts of his book on China's economic status online.

New regulations took effect in November 2002 which, if violated, could result in a death sentence for those who publish state secrets on the Internet. To date, no one has received such a sentence.

Stiff Sanctions Elsewhere

China may be the most difficult place for an online reporter, but other countries have also cracked down on Internet freedom. For example:

In January, police in Malaysia raided the offices of Malaysiakini.com, an independent news website that had criticised the government. Police seized computers and partially blocked access to the site. Malaysiakini.com contributor Hishamuddin Rais has been held since April 2001 under Malaysia's internal security act. He is accused of plotting to overthrow the government and is serving a two-year sentence.

In December 2002, the Vietnamese government sentenced journalist Nguyen Khac Toan to 12 years in prison, the heaviest ever handed down to an individual for Internet activities, according to *Reporters San Frontieres*. Nguyen was found guilty of spying for e-mailing material from an Internet café in Vietnam to Vietnamese human rights groups abroad

that the government considers "reactionary." There are three other Cyber-dissidents being held in Vietnam.

In August 2002, Kazakhstani journalist Sergei Duvanov, an online commentator, was beaten unconscious by three unknown assailants. They told him, "You know what this is for. Next time, we'll cripple you." The assault appears to be connected to Duvanov's work. In the past, he has openly criticised President Nursultan Nazarbaev online on <<http://www.kub.kz>>.

In July 2002, three businessmen in the Republic of Maldives were sentenced to life in prison for writing for the Internet publication "Sandhaanu," which is critical of the government.

In Tunisia, Zouhair Yahyaoui, founder of the satirical website "TUNeZINE," was arrested in June 2002 for criticizing President Ben Ali. Currently serving a two-year sentence, Yahyaoui has allegedly been tortured and forced to reveal the access code to his site.

"The press is not free in Tunisia and the Web is the principal window of access to information for Tunisians, even if censorship is increasingly severe and sophisticated," says human rights activist Sihem Bensedrine, who is also editor-in-chief of "Kalima," one of only a handful of independent online journals in Tunisia. Bensedrine founded the site in 2000 after the Tunisian government refused to grant her a newspaper license. Both "Kalima" and "TUNeZINE" are hosted online in France to avoid Tunisian government censorship.

The U.S. Congress is currently considering "The Global Internet Freedom Act," a bill introduced in October 2002, to counter Internet censorship by authoritarian regimes around the world. If passed, the bill will allocate up to US\$100 million over two years to establish and operate a federal Office of Global Internet Freedom. In the meantime, through Voice of America and Radio Free Asia, the United States has committed US\$1 million for technology to counter China's practice of restricting access to the Internet.

"Authoritarian regimes are by their very nature paranoid, and so they worry about anything they can't control 100 percent," says Stroehlein. "In a funny way, then, these regimes fell for the 'Internet equals freedom' propaganda of the mid-1990s."

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