

Internet produces conflict between commerce and censorship

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A 96-page report was issued in June by Human Rights Watch (HRW) entitled *The Internet in the Mideast and North Africa: Free Expression and Censorship*. The HRW report stated:

"Governments have adopted various means to restrict the flow of information online. Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and the United Arab Emirates impose censorship via proxy servers, devices that are interposed between the end-user and the Internet in order to filter and block specified content. In many countries, including Jordan, taxation and telecommunications policies keep Internet accounts quite costly and thus beyond the means of many—whether or not this is the objective of these policies.

"Tunisia has enacted the region's most detailed Internet-specific legislation, which is in large part designed to ensure that online speech does not escape the government's tough controls on critical speech in other media. In the majority of countries where Internet-specific laws have not been enacted, legal or de facto constraints on freedom of speech and of the press have a chilling effect on what is expressed online, especially in public forums like open bulletin boards and 'chat-rooms' (online discussions where participants communicate in real time)."

HRW further noted that "in a region where many governments routinely tap the phones of dissidents, Internet users in many countries, including Bahrain and Tunisia, suspect that the right to privacy of correspondence is being violated by government surveillance of e-mail. One Bahraini spent more than a year in jail on suspicion of e-mailing 'political' information to dissidents abroad."

The report drew specific attention to Iraq as one of three countries in the region that do not provide Internet access at all. The others are Libya and Syria. An article

on *Wired News* first posted in December last year gave Iraq "least connected nation status". Citing groups in the United States that oppose both the ongoing sanctions and the air strikes of last December, the article made clear that the reasons for lack of access had at least as much to do with the actions of the imperialist powers as with those of the authoritarian regime of Saddam Hussein.

Ali Abunimah of the Arab-American Action Network in Chicago said: "Iraq has been subject to the most stringent sanctions ever imposed on a country in human history. Almost nothing is permitted into the country. No new cars, radios, computers, schoolbooks, pencils, writing paper, eyeglasses, shampoo, soap, [or] industrial machinery has been allowed into the country. That's the short answer of why Iraq has no Internet infrastructure."

Rania Masri, coordinator of the Iraq Action Coalition, said: "Even sending a computer disk to Iraq is a violation of US law. You can't send anything without prior permission of the Department of Treasury."

A later report by the French media organisation Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF) focuses on the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus, including Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kirghizia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. It also lists Belarus, Burma, China, Cuba, Iran, Iraq, Libya, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, and Vietnam. It notes that 20 nations all but bar the Internet and 43 others seriously restrict access.

Both Reporters Sans Frontières and the HRW indicate there is a sign of a change in most countries. The reasons for this are not to be found in a more humane approach on the part of authoritarian regimes, but the importance of the Internet within the global economic system.

China provides the best example of the contradiction between the need to develop a global communication infrastructure and the desire to maintain tight controls on the flow of information. Hardly a week goes by without one report or another of the closing down of web sites, the prosecution of journalists or other measures to suppress the flow of information. The RSF report gives the following summary of the present situation and the attempts of the Chinese Stalinist regime to control Internet usage:

"Although Internet use is spreading rapidly, the government is trying to keep up pressure on users. They are closely monitored and are supposed to register with the authorities. In January 1999 a computer technician, Lin Hai, was sentenced to two years in prison by a Shanghai court for giving the email addresses of 30,000 Chinese subscribers to a dissident site that publishes an online magazine from the United States. Meanwhile officials fearing disturbances as the tenth anniversary of the Tiananmen massacre (4 June 1999) drew near ordered the closure of 300 cyber cafés in Shanghai, on the pretext that they did not have the necessary authorisation.

"In order to prevent the Chinese from finding information on the web, the authorities have blocked access to some sites. This happened to the BBC in October 1998. Zhang Weiguo, editor of the *New Century Net* (www.ncn.org) site, in Chinese, launched in the United States in 1996, estimates that it takes two months on average for the Chinese authorities to track down the relay server of a site and block access to it. The sites then change their address. Some censored pages are distributed by email, like underground newspapers that are photocopied and passed around secretly."

The *Financial Times* of London, in its August 2 issue, noted that despite government concerns over how to control the flow of information, China is being driven towards the global network. Charles Zhang, president of the Chinese Internet portal Sohu.com explained: "The fear of creating information flows is counterbalanced by the desire to build a strong economy and a strong country."

The financial rewards are very great, as the *Financial Times'* example of China.com—China's 39th most frequented gateway—reveals. The paper reported that China.com, "a loss-making company which foresees

future red ink, tripled in price when it listed in New York last month and closed its first day of trading with a market capitalisation of \$1.4 billion. "Wall Street has seized on China and the Internet as a golden combination of the world's largest emerging market and the biggest technological revolution in global business," the paper commented.

The *Financial Times* went on to warn of dangers for the Stalinist regime. "China's communist leadership is taking an uncharacteristic gamble in fostering an industry that enables information exchange, social organisation and the expression of dissent, all beyond the established parameters of the party's control. In fact, Beijing may be planting the seeds of a social revolution."



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