

Rallying For Democracy

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More governments are censoring the Internet

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In a report released today to coincide with its World Day Against Cyber Censorship, the RSF said that in the face of an increasingly Orwellian approach to e-liberty citizens were mobilising themselves, using tools like USB flashdrives to spread and share news. But that is almost the only ray of light in the damning report.

This ability to share news and information, they said, was incredibly important, and harked back to the days of the old dissidents of the Soviet bloc. "The new media, and particularly social networks, have given populations' collaborative tools with which they can change the social order. Young people have taken them by storm. Facebook has become the rallying point for activists prevented from demonstrating in the streets. One simple video on Youtube - Neda in Iran or the Saffron march of the monks in Burma - can help to expose government abuses to the entire world", said the group in a statement. One simple USB flashdrive can be all it takes to disseminate news - as in Cuba, where they have become the local 'samizdats'."

The RSF has drawn up a list of the worst offenders, and we have shelved any holiday plans in those countries that we might have had. The list of shame includes: Saudi Arabia, Burma, China, North Korea, Cuba, Egypt, Iran, Uzbekistan, Syria, Tunisia, Turkmenistan, and Vietnam.

Singling out Vietnam and China, whose Internet censoring reputations we are already well aware of, the RSF added, "As a barrier to trade, Web censorship should be included on the agenda of the World Trade Organisation. Several of latter's members, including China and Vietnam, should to be required to open their Internet networks before being invited to join the global village of international commerce."

As well as having a total Internet blackout, for example in North Korea, Burma and Turkmenistan, governments are also choosing to implement stringent censorship measures, blocking things like Twitter, the short messaging service, and severely depriving their citizens of the many benefits of being on the net and technologically aware. And the number of countries choosing to do that may be a lot higher than you expect.

"In 2009, some sixty countries experienced a form of Web censorship, which is twice as many as in 2008. The World Wide Web is being progressively devoured by the implementation of national Intranets whose content is "approved" by the authorities," reads the report. "It does not matter to those governments if more and more Internet users are going to become victims of a digital segregation. Web 2.0 is colliding with Control 2.0."

Where the Internet is locked down, and dissidence is actively discouraged, the threat of punishment is often followed by the real thing, and in fact, the RSF said that there were over one hundred bloggers currently in detention for expressing their views.

"For the first time since the creation of the Internet, a record number of close to 120 bloggers, Internet users and cyberdissidents are behind bars for having expressed themselves freely online. The world's largest netizen prison is in China, which is far out ahead of other countries with 72 detainees, followed by Vietnam and then by Iran, which have all launched waves of brutal attacks on websites in recent months."

Governments closer to home are not immune to the allure of controlling their citizens access either. The RSF said that Western democracies were slipping Internet rules into force "in the name of the fight against child pornography or the theft of intellectual property." It added that it had seen this most notably in "Australia, France, Italy and Great Britain."

Maybe it is time we relocated.

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If we did, we would not have to go too far. For example, the Finnish government protects its citizens with Order no. 732/2009, which states that Internet access is a fundamental right, while Iceland is reckoned by the RSF to be turning itself into a "cyber-paradise for bloggers and citizen journalists."