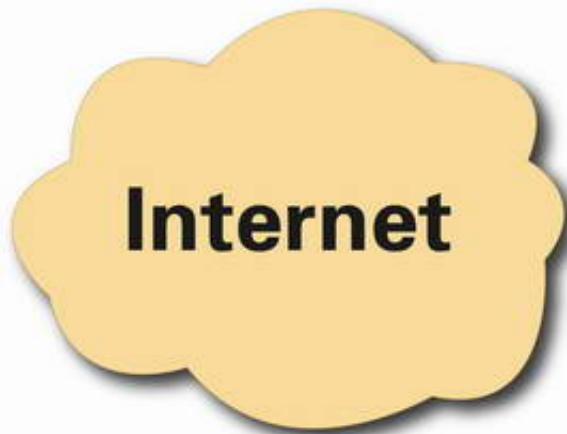# Outside View: Internet as apple of discord

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The lower house of the Russian parliament (State Duma) and human-rights activists have clashed in an irreconcilable battle over the social role of Ru.net, the Russian segment of the World Wide Web.

Some MPs regard it as a kind of avian flu. The Net is hazardous because of a multitude of extremist sites spreading the ideas of xenophobia and religious and ethnic intolerance, they argue. Therefore, the Russian Net needs supervision, if not censorship.

Human-rights activists are firmly against this, seeing the proposed measures as the government's infringement on the right to exchange opinions in cyberspace.

Debates were ignited by the Jan. 11 tragedy, when a 20-year-old unemployed man stabbed eight people, some of them foreigners, in the Moscow Synagogue. He admitted during the interrogation to the influence of anti-Semitic sites and said his hobby was playing violent computer games. Several hours before attacking people, he played the notorious Postal video game, where a mad postman shoots and knifes everyone without distinction.

That admission encouraged Pavel Krasheninnikov, chairman of the State Duma Committee for Civil and Criminal law, to formulate the idea of an immediate war against extremism on the Net. His committee decided to improve the current legislation on extremism so as to introduce harsher punishment for the use of the Net to spread racial and religious intolerance. Krasheninnikov suggested punishment of up to five years in prison.

He is almost sure that the "bad" sites bear the responsibility for putting the knife into the young man's hand and driving him to the synagogue. In his explanations to the draft law, Krasheninnikov emphasizes the direct cause and result connection between the attack and the xenophobic, inciting information in the Internet, which he described as "a crime factor."

He is right, but only partly. Any user of a Russian-language search engine (such as Yandex) is offered thousands of references to racist, anti-Semitic and chauvinist sites, which are awe-inspiring not only in the degree of hatred they preach but also in their businesslike approach. They teach you to hate people of a different skin color or religion and provide detailed instructions on how to find an extremist organization and become a member, where to test your rifle, and which books to read for an ideological substantiation of your personal crusade against "aliens" and "infidels."

The influence of these gigabytes of hatred on young people has been growing alongside a rapid development of the Russian Net. Russia is quickly rising on the list of world e-readiness compiled by IBM jointly with The Economist. By late 2004 the number of Internet users in Russia reached 17.6 million and continued growing at a pace that surprised experts worldwide. This year the Russian government plans to connect to the Internet at least 10,000 schools (including disabled children who study at home) within the Electronic Russia program.

But the broader the access to the Net, the higher the risk of catching the madness virus that propelled that young man to attack people in the Moscow synagogue.

This seems like a forceful argument in favor of the draft law on Internet censorship. But who will inspect the Net for law-abiding and malignant information, and how can the good be separated from the bad? The noble aspiration of Pavel Krasheninnikov and like-minded people will be most certainly cut short by technical problems.

But the main problem lies elsewhere, Lyudmila Alekseyeva, a veteran of the Russian human-rights movement and head of the Moscow Helsinki Group, said openly. "The Internet is the last remaining vehicle for a free exchange of opinions," she said. "A suppression of the freedom of speech leads to riots. If everyone is forced to clamp down, including in the Internet, this will provoke an explosion."

Ella Pamfilova, head of the presidential Council for Assistance to Civil Society Institutions and Human Rights, protests against the new law, though in a somewhat milder form. She said that the Russian Net had become something of a giant trash bin, where everything is thrown without distinction, from child pornography to extremist propaganda. However, any prohibitions in cyberspace are fraught with the suppression of the freedom of speech while not helping greatly the

struggle against extremism.

Instead of Internet censorship, human-rights activists call for a more vigorous use of restraining measures permitted by the 2002 Law on Combating Extremism. It gave the prosecutors and police a useful tool for persecuting skinheads and other xenophobic groups if they take up knives and steel rods. The Russian police computer databank contains a list of 457 leaders and active members of extremist youth groups who are being watched by police. The Ministry of the Press has closed down 12 racist newspapers, bringing a whiff of fresh air to the moral atmosphere in society.

This difficult recent experience shows that there are no simple measures against xenophobia and intolerance.

(Vladimir Simonov is a political commentator for RIA Novosti. The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and may not necessarily represent the opinions of the RIA Novosti news agency's editorial board. This article is reprinted by permission of RIA Novosti.)

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