Software Circumvents Internet Censorship

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With the Dec. 1 release of psiphon software, developed by University of Toronto's Citizen Lab, people around the world will have access to a free tool enabling them to circumvent Internet censorship.

"We've made this user-friendly. Anyone can install it and use it," said Professor Ronald Deibert, director of the Citizen Lab, at U of T. "We wanted to create an easy to use, efficient and secure means to allow citizens to exercise their basic human rights by accessing information now currently blocked by their governments."

Psiphon is a downloadable program (available at psiphon.civisec.org/) that essentially lets someone turn a home computer into a server. Once psiphon is installed, the operator of the host computer sends a unique web address to friends or family members living in one of the 40 countries worldwide where Internet use is censored. Those in the censored country can then connect to the "server" and use it as a "host computer" to surf the Net and gain access to websites censored or blocked in their own country.

"Their connection is encrypted, so no one can eavesdrop on it," Deibert said. "It's an encrypted communication link between two computers. So authorities wouldn't be able to spot what websites are being visited by the user at risk."

Deibert said psiphon links a technological innovation with relationships that exist between people. "Psiphon works on social networks of trust. We anticipate it will be deployed by thousands of citizens worldwide,

given our connections with local human rights and advocacy organizations," he said.

Psiphon was developed as part of the OpenNet Initiative project, which monitors and reports on worldwide patterns of Internet censorship and surveillance. OpenNet is a partnership between the Citizen Lab, based in U of T's Munk Centre for International Studies, and similar centres at Harvard Law School, the University of Cambridge and the University of Oxford.

"There's been an alarming increase in Internet censorship and surveillance practices worldwide, most of it in secret without any public accountability or transparency," Deibert said. "Psiphon is meant to address that problem and restore the original promise of the Internet as a forum for free expression and access to information."

Source: University of Toronto

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