

The Unleveling of Play: Internet Surveillance & Governmental Intrusion

November 28 2007, by Mary Anne Simpson

It is estimated that around 25 countries place restrictions on content for citizens utilizing the Internet. Citizens Lab has published a guide for world-wide users to by-pass censors. Additionally, the Lab introduces Psiphon a software program that allows approved members to access the Psiphon network of servers.

Citizens Lab of the University of Toronto has published a 31 page primer for all Internet users concerned about world wide web neutrality and equal access for all. A glaring example of the best laid plans going awry is illustrated by the recent case of Wang Xianong and Shi Tao now serving a 10 year prison term in China. Particularly offensive is that an American icon, Yahoo handed over the page views to the Chinese thought police that sealed their fate. The Citizens Lab guide book, found [here](#) might have saved the gestapo like events from occurring.

This is one notorious example, but weekly new incidences of censorship, blocking and surveillance of Internet users surface. This is not about surveillance and extracting information about illegal activity. This is solely aimed at filtering news, research and communications of citizens of various states and countries.

The leading search engines based in the United States freely admit that a condition precedent to doing business on a world-wide basis involves "respecting" the restrictions placed on access to information by certain countries. The USA companies rationalize that some restricted access to their information data base is better than no access at all.

The Citizens Lab and other prestigious university based Internet Communication and Technology Schools view access not as a political or social instrument. Equal access and net neutrality is a fundamental right to all citizens of the world.

Charting out the lengths and breadth of Internet Neutrality Waters is more difficult than marking off neutral waters on a maritime map governed by the Law of the Sea. The navigable sea has been with mankind centuries instead of the infantile decades of the Internet. Still, after all these centuries there are disagreements on the boundaries of countries to the sea. Is it any wonder, disagreements occur in this unchartered air wave and satellite signal path.

Citizens Lab Director, Ronald Deibert recently released the soft ware program Psiphon that will enable aid groups and others to tear down the wall of Internet censorship imposed by certain countries. The Psiphon program has been named by Esquire Magazine as one of the "Six Ideas That Will Change the World." In practice, Psiphon allows advocates, groups and individuals to apply for passwords and Web links. After the user signs in utilizing the passwords and links an automatic patch connects the user to the Psiphon network of servers. The effect is nearly complete anonymity for the user. To the outside world all that can be seen is an unfamiliar IP address that could be anything from an Amazon purchase to WebMD.

According to Ronald Deibert, the possibility of a censor signing up for the Psiphon service in order to discover the IP address is a concern Citizen Lab has taken into account. In the event an address is blocked, Psiphon sets up another address in a different region. According to the Esquire Magazine story, the process can go on indefinitely until the censor get exhausted or the firewall comes down.

According to estimates, there are about 25 countries that limit, restrict or

ban certain web sites from users. The obvious countries like China, Korea, Iran, Saudi Arabia and recently Burma have significant restrictions on content. However, countries where there are few restrictions often may block content that is mistakenly tagged pornography. In the US, the Children's Internet Protection Act may inadvertently block non-pornographic web sites when viewed at public library computers.

The handbook by Citizen Lab, mentioned above entitled, Everyone's Guide to By-Passing Internet Censorship for Citizens Worldwide does not purport to be 100 percent risk free in practice. In fact, the authors caution that in some countries utilizing the tips contained in the guide may put both the user and provider at risk.

In some countries the utilization of the circumvention techniques may on their face be considered illegal. The key is to know the limitations and local regulations of your situs.

On the Net: Psiphon -- psiphon.civisec.org/

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