Canadian software helps Iranian dissidents connect

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Candles are lit at a rally in support of Iranian election protesters organized by Amnesty International in New York City. Software developed by a Canadian lab to circumvent online censorship has been downloaded by more than 18,000 Iranians in the last 10 days, says its developer Rafal Rohozinski.

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A thirst for online freedom in Iran, as well as in China, Myanmar and other authoritarian hotspots, has led to a sudden proliferation of all technologies designed to overcome curbs on news and social networking Internet sites.

"This speaks to the hunger for access to information when it's being denied," Rohozinski told AFP.

Iranians angered by the results of the country's presidential election that returned hardline incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to power have been using social and media sites such as Facebook, Flickr and Twitter to communicate and organize.

They have also been posting videos of violent post-election protests and clashes to video-sharing sites such as YouTube.

But more and more, Tehran has fought back by blocking access to news and social networking Internet sites.

Psiphon overcomes this by punching thousands of tiny holes in computer firewalls and opening new pathways in order to access blocked content.

If a user wishes to view a blocked BBC News website, for example, Psiphon enables them to link to a proxy to view the content. If censors shut down this access, a new access window opens up, and so on.

It is "human rights software," said Rohozinski, who also recently helped uncover a shadowy cyber-espionage network based mostly in China that had infiltrated government and private computers around the world.

The network, known as GhostNet, infected 1,295 computers in 103 countries and penetrated systems containing sensitive information in top political, economic and media offices, researchers at Toronto's Citizen Lab said in March.

The idea for Psiphon emerged out of a project launched by Toronto, Cambridge, Harvard and Oxford universities to track Internet censorship.

"We found an exponentially rising curve of countries seeking to control content on the Internet," Rohozinski explained.

"Authoritarian states are increasingly taking note of the Internet as a communication medium and a mode of organizing opposition, and therefore they're going out of their way to try to control it," he said.

"The trend was worrisome and so we started on a way to counter these efforts."

Iran's controls are not as pervasive as China's, he noted, but Tehran is clearly stepping up its online censorship.

Of late, world leaders have expressed growing concern over Iran's brutal crackdown on dissidents. Canada has been among the most vocal, outright rejecting Iran's call to "stay out" of its internal politics.

Last week, Canada's charge d'affaires was reportedly berated by Tehran over what Iranian authorities believed was Ottawa's support for Rohozinski's "efforts to spread insurrection in Iran" with his software.

Rohozinski denied any direct government ties, but his first clients include the BBC and the US Broadcasting Board of Governors responsible for Voice of America.

On Thursday, US Senators vowed to help Iran's opposition defeat restrictions on news and the social networking Internet sites, as well as boost funding for US-backed radio news broadcasts into Iran.

"We want the Iranian people to be able to stay one step ahead of the Iranian regime, getting access to information and safely exercising freedom of speech and freedom of assembly online," said Independent Senator Joe Lieberman.

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