

Guatemalan fears a tweet will make him a jailbird

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Guatemalan Twitter user Jean Anleu poses for a picture in Guatemala City, Wednesday, June 24, 2009. Anleu was so fed up with corruption in his country that he decided to vent on the Internet, sending a 96-character message on the social networking site Twitter. (AP Photo/Moises Castillo)

(AP) -- Jean Anleu was so fed up with corruption in his country that he decided to vent on the Internet, sending a 96-character message on the social-networking site Twitter.

That message has now earned him a potential five-year prison sentence and the unfortunate distinction of becoming one of the first people in the world to be arrested for a tweet.

Writing under his Internet alias "jeanfer," Anleu urged depositors to pull their money from Guatemala's rural development bank, whose management has been challenged in a political scandal: "First concrete action should be take cash out of Banrural and bankrupt the bank of the corrupt."

These words illegally undermined public trust in

Guatemala's banking system, according to prosecutor Genaro Pacheco. Authorities proved Anleu sent the message by searching his Guatemala City home, and then put him in prison with kidnapers, extortionists and other dangerous criminals for a day and a half before letting him out on bail.

Anleu's lawyer, Jose Toledo, believes the government wants to make an example of him.

"Clearly, the message was: Watch out, any of you guys that want to post messages, this can happen to you. ... It was a dissuasive measure," Toledo said.

Guatemala, whose democracy is still emerging from a genocidal civil war, isn't the only government concerned about the potential of lightning-fast tweets to spread stinging words.

More recently, Iran has shown its determination to clamp down on huge protests over its disputed presidential election, banning firsthand reporting by international journalists and blocking access inside the country to Web sites such as Twitter and Facebook as well as many sites linked to the political opposition. Text messaging has been blacked out and cell phone service in Tehran is frequently down.

More than 2,000 people have been arrested in Iran, many of them for Internet activity, estimates Hadi Ghaemi, director of the New York-based International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran.

"I can't say I know of a specific case of tweeting," said Ghaemi, noting that Iran's government has not yet filed charges. "Evidence may be a tweet or something but we're just not going to know until these trials are under way."

Twitter co-founder Biz Stone declined to comment on the Anleu case or say whether he knows of

other arrests involving tweeting.

China and Vietnam are two other countries that already "worry a lot about text messaging and its potential to spread rumors and gather crowds. Now they have another venue to watch - another place where people can communicate quickly, in ways that a government might fear," said Jonathan Zittrain, co-founder of Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet & Society.

For Anleu - a geeky computer enthusiast whose passions include playing chess and reading Czech author Franz Kafka - life has taken on some disturbing parallels to Kafka's "The Trial," whose protagonist struggles to defend himself against the power of the state.

"I fear I'm being watched and scrutinized in everything I say and do," said Anleu, who walks around with an iPhone to constantly tweet and a BlackBerry loaded with e-books. "The fear makes me want to avoid saying what I think, even about the most mundane topics, and saying where I am, where I'm going - like you would normally do on Twitter."

Pacheco said prosecutors plan to charge Anleu in July under a 2008 law that provides for five years in prison and a \$6,200 fine for spreading false information that undermines the public's trust in a financial institution.

But if the government hoped to silence criticism, it appears to have had the opposite effect. As news of Anleu's arrest spread through the [Twitter](#) community, thousands of others started "re-tweeting" his message, bringing Guatemala's government still more unwanted publicity.

About half of his \$6,200 bail was donated by Twitterers, who sent money via PayPal from 19 countries. The other 50 percent was lent to him by one of the companies he works for as a business technology consultant.

And Anleu's social network has grown to more than 1,600 followers, up from about 175 who before his arrest mostly shared tweets about "computers and other geeky stuff," he says.

Some call this phenomenon the "Streisand effect," a term coined by Techdirt Inc. chief executive Mike Masnick on his popular technology blog after the actress Barbra Streisand sued in 2003 to remove satellite photos of her estate in Malibu, Calif. The case just drove more attention to the photos and made them more widely accessible.

The Internet has become a potent organizing tool for opponents of Guatemala's president, Alvaro Colom. In a videotaped message from a lawyer, Colom was accused of helping drug cartels launder money through Banrural. The lawyer, Rodrigo Rosenberg, said in the message that if he was killed, it would be because Colom ordered it. Rosenberg was shot dead by unknown assailants days after making the video.

DVDs of the tape were distributed at his funeral, and Colom opponents quickly put the video up on YouTube. Many Guatemalans - including Anleu - responded with outrage on social networks, encouraging huge protest marches.

Colom, the first leftist president since a CIA-orchestrated coup overthrew Jacobo Arbenz in 1954, said the accusations are part of an elaborate plot to destabilize the country. His foreign minister suggested the entire scandal might be staged by organized crime groups who might have forced Rosenberg to tape the message under threats.

The upheaval since then is arguably the first truly online phenomenon in this country where Internet is still far beyond the reach of the majority of the population. And because most poorer Guatemalans who support Colom have little chance of logging on, Colom's supporters are vastly outnumbered. The Facebook group "Guatemalans united ask for the resignation of Alvaro Colom" has 41,000 members, about a third of Facebook's reported Guatemalan population, while "Solidarity with Alvaro Colom" has fewer than 150 this week.

Anleu, however, is trying to keep his tweets more restrained and less political.

His lawyer hopes this will all blow over and the trial, set for November, will never happen.

"The prosecutors will eventually see their mistake, that they got the wrong person, someone innocent," Toledo said.

Even so, Anleu's legal bills will run close to \$10,000 by year's end - a tough blow for a man who volunteers in his spare time to bring open-source software and training to schools in poor neighborhoods.

"When this is over, I want to travel, I want to see the world ... sit in a cafe in Budapest or Prague," that Kafka might have frequented a century ago, Anleu said. First, he said, "comes paying all these bills."

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