Pakistan's 'cyberwar' for control of the web

September 12 2013, by Guillaume Lavallee

Pakistani computer users browse YouTube at an office in Quetta on December 29, 2012. In a dingy Internet cafe, Abdullah gets round the censors with one click and logs onto YouTube, officially banned for a year and at the heart of Pakistan's cyberwar for control of the web.

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On September 17, 2012 Islamabad blocked access to the popular video-

[sharing website](#) after it aired a trailer for a low-budget American film deemed offensive to Islam and the Prophet Mohammed.

Pakistan summoned the most senior US diplomat in the country to protest against the "Innocence of Muslims", demanding that the film be removed and action taken against its producers.

A year later, the film is barely mentioned but YouTube, whose parent company is US multinational Google Inc, is still banned in Pakistan, as it is in China and Iran.

Pakistan is no stranger to censorship. Foreign television programmes deemed offensive are blocked. Films shown at cinemas are stripped of scenes considered too daring.

But the YouTube ban is in name only.

Internet users like Abdullah Raheem, a university student in Pakistan's cultural capital Lahore, can easily access the site through a simple proxy or Virtual Private Network (VPN).

"Most people who go to school or university know how to access YouTube, but not the rest of the population," says Abdullah.

Only 10 percent of Pakistan's estimated 180 million people have access to the Internet, one of the lowest rates in the world.

"This ban has no impact," says Abdullah, who still feels bad about logging onto YouTube. "As a Muslim, I'm ashamed... because the 'Innocence of Muslims' defiled Islam."

Pakistan blocked the site only after Google was unable to block access to the film because it has no antenna in the country.

Although Google's executive chairman Eric Schmidt defended hosting the film, the company did have the technology to block access to it in countries such as Egypt, India and Saudi Arabia.

Pakistani student Abdullah Raheem browsing YouTube at a internet cafe in Lahore on September 9, 2013. In a dingy Internet cafe, Abdullah gets round the censors with one click and logs onto YouTube, officially banned for a year and at the heart of Pakistan's cyberwar for control of the web.

But the Pakistani government didn't stop there. It then ordered that websites be monitored for "anti-Islam content".

The Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto, which specialises in Internet censorship, says Pakistan has used Canadian company Netsweeper to filter websites relating to human rights, sensitive religious topics and independent media.

The researchers say that pornographic content and political websites from Baluchistan, Pakistan's southwestern province gripped by separatist insurgency, are among those blocked.

Shortly after Pakistan's former military ruler Pervez Musharraf was arrested in April, Pakistan shut down access to a satirical song posted on YouTube's rival Vimeo that poked fun at the army.

But the song "Dhinak Dhinak" performed by the Beygairat Brigade, which is Urdu for Shameless Brigade, quickly went viral as Pakistani Internet users went through proxy VPNs to watch it.

"It is still creating waves. So I think they helped our popularity by banning that song," said the Brigade's lead singer Ali Aftab Saeed, 29.

Saeed believes that the authorities are bent on a wider campaign of Internet censorship, not just restricting access to items considered blasphemous in the conservative Muslim nation.

"We thought that they would try to ban just the link to that particular video ('Innocence of Muslims') but they instead banned the whole website (YouTube) and then they extended it to satire and people who discuss the role of military groups.

"So yes, it is a worrying situation," he told AFP.

Shahzad Ahmad, director of Internet rights campaign group, Bytes For All, also says that online censorship serves a wider political agenda than just shutting down blasphemous content.
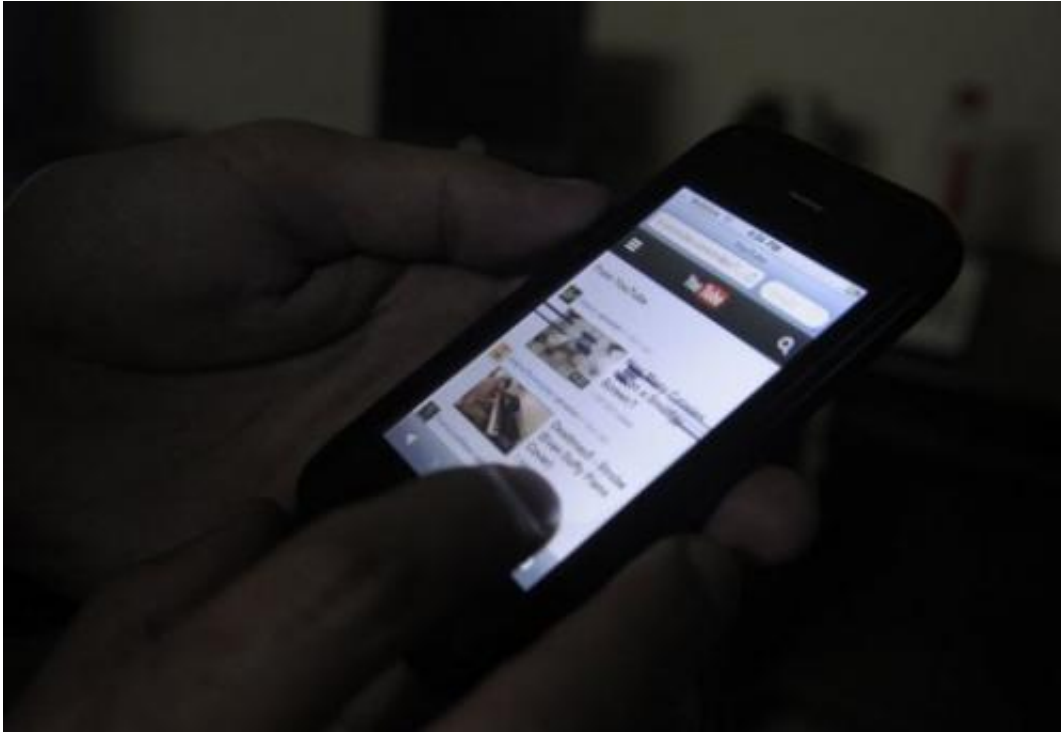
A Pakistani cell phone user browses YouTube on his mobile phone in Quetta on December 29, 2012. In a dingy Internet cafe, Abdullah gets round the censors with one click and logs onto YouTube, officially banned for a year and at the heart of Pakistan's cyberwar for control of the web.

"The government is trying to curtail, limit and curb citizen freedom of expression," Ahmad told AFP.

He says citizens are waging a "cyberwar" against Pakistani institutions who are blocking and filtering the Internet.

"There is a very clear defiance from users, particularly from the youth on government filtering," he told AFP.

Bytes For All has gone to court in Lahore, demanding an end to "illegal and illegitimate" censorship of the Internet.

The fight is vital to stop the government developing tools of censorship that threaten "the security and private live" of individuals, says Farieha Aziz, a member of the Bolo Bhi advocacy group that is closely following the case, which encompasses the YouTube ban.

Software surveillance FinFisher, developed by British company Gamma and able to access content on personal computers, has been detected recently on Pakistani servers.

Although it is unclear whether it has been deployed by Pakistan's own intelligence agencies or foreigners, the NSA scandal in the United States has heightened suspicions.

In Pakistan, the cyberwar has only just begun.

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