

French internet censorship rose sharply in 2016

24 January 2017, by Raphael Satter



Octave Klabo, the founder of French internet hosting firm OVH, speaks to a journalist at a cybersecurity conference in Lille, northern France, Tuesday Jan. 24, 2017. French authorities say they've ordered the blockage or removal of more than 2,700 websites in 2016, a move Klabo thinks will do little to stifle online extremism. (AP Photo/Raphael Satter)

French authorities ordered the blockage or removal of more than 2,700 websites in 2016, Interior Minister Bruno Le Roux said Tuesday, a spike in censorship that some critics in the tech industry fear will do little to snuff out extremist content online.

Le Roux told a cybersecurity conference in the northern French city of Lille that his government has requested blocks for 834 websites and that 1,929 more be pulled from search engines' results as part of the fight against "child pornographic and terrorist content."

"To face an extremely serious terror threat, we've given ourselves unprecedented means to reinforce the efficacy of our actions," he said, also pointing to reinforced online policing units and new forensic laboratories for analyzing digital evidence.

Le Roux didn't provide a breakdown or other details but the website censorship numbers represent a sharp increase over the figures tracked by France's online privacy watchdog, known by its French acronym CNIL. In April, CNIL reported that 312 sites were blocked and 855 de-listing requests were made in France between March 11, 2015, and Feb. 29, 2016.

French authorities can block sites without a judge's order under a 2011 law that was brought into effect in after jihadist attacks killed 17 people at a satirical magazine and a kosher supermarket in January 2015. The first blockage was reported two months later.

Some in the audience were skeptical that yanking search results or blocking sites in France would work at all.

Octave Klabo, who founded OVH, one of Europe's top internet hosting providers, said the expanding censorship regime amounted to political posturing given the global nature of the internet.

"I understand it, but it's useless," Klabo told The Associated Press after Le Roux's speech. "I come from tech. I know how it works."

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