

Urgent Action

In Focus

An insight into the stories behind UAs

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Freedom of expression – a necessity for the UA network, but a right denied to others



Chinese journalist Shi Tao, currently imprisoned after Yahoo! revealed his email account details to the authorities. © ICPC

As Amnesty International launches irrepressible.info, a campaign against internet repression, we look at how the web gives us unprecedented access to information – and how some governments and companies are colluding to repress free speech.

Communication has always been at the heart of the Amnesty International's

work. For many years, Amnesty International's frontline weapons in the fight against human rights abuses were the pen and paper: indeed, the first Urgent Action, on Professor Luiz Rossi from Brazil, was typed out and then posted to the research team's contacts, who were urged to send appeals by letter and telegram. Later, the advent of telex speeded up the process of sending out appeals, but the growth in popularity of

the internet has completely changed the way the AI movement works. At the IS, most UA drafts are put together from information received by email and gleaned from the internet, which give us access to information and testimonies from people we might never have been able to reach. When the UA team emails out an edited appeal, it reaches UA coordinators within seconds, and the widespread use of email allows many of our global network of participants to receive appeals and take action within hours. Marilyn McKim of AI Canada (Anglophone) recently told us that she sent out UA 194/06 (a US death penalty UA on Virginia) at 3.30pm on 14 July, and within the next 43 minutes, a Canadian UA participant had received it, sent an appeal against the imminent execution to the Governor of Virginia, received a response from the Governor's office and forwarded this response back to Marilyn! The WARN (Worldwide Accelerated Response Network) uses email to alert participants about imminent life-threatening situations. Though it is impossible to quantify, it is probable that lives have been saved and human rights violations averted through Amnesty International's use of email and web technology.

Free speech threatens repressive governments

Five or six years ago, internet applications such as blogs were beginning to be used by human rights defenders, enabling them to communicate their messages around the world. They were able to reach a wider audience than ever before, and gather information from diaspora communities. This began to have an impact in countries with poor records on human rights and freedom of speech, including China and Iran.

Alas, it was not long before governments realised what was happening and turned their attention to monitor and censor information exchanged through the net. In countries where the authorities keep a very strong hold on all forms of

traditional media, they did not intend to tolerate a new and free media outlet.

Governments first started imprisoning the people they could identify as authors of politically sensitive messages and arrest them. Internet users were imprisoned or had their freedom of movement restricted in Tunisia, Israel, Viet Nam, Cuba and China. However, the Internet is a big and often anonymous space and these governments needed help to find the people they wanted to stop speaking out. They found an ally in companies who had previously put themselves forward as champions of free speech and freedom of information.

Google, Microsoft, Yahoo! – Repression in China

Internet companies have colluded with the authorities to spy on those who use the web in certain countries, to restrict search engines and block access to websites. In China, for example, where internet repression is apparently more advanced than in any other country, Yahoo! have supplied email users' private data to the authorities, helping to facilitate cases of wrongful imprisonment. Microsoft and Google have both complied with government demands to actively censor Chinese users of their services.

China has developed one of the world's most sophisticated censorship regimes, aided by technology from some of the largest global IT companies. Last year, Microsoft launched a portal in China that blocks use of words such as 'freedom' in blog text. This year, Google launched a self-censoring Chinese search engine. Filters block websites featuring such words or phrases as 'human rights', 'democracy' or 'Taiwan independence'. People can't access www.amnesty.org. The authorities are expanding the use of internet police, who monitor the web.

Last year, it emerged that Yahoo! revealed email account details of the journalist Shi Tao to the Chinese authorities, a move that contributed to his imprisonment. Using his Yahoo!

account, Shi Tao sent an email summarizing the content of a Chinese Central Propaganda Department communiqué orally transmitted to editorial staff at the newspaper where he worked. The email was sent to the editor of a Chinese pro-democracy website based in USA.

On the basis of this email, Chinese authorities accused Shi Tao of "illegally providing state secrets to foreign entities". He was sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment on 27 April 2005. According to the court transcript, Yahoo! Holdings (Hong Kong), the U.S.-based internet company, provided account-holder information that was used as evidence against him.

Amnesty International considers Shi Tao a prisoner of conscience, imprisoned for peacefully exercising his right to freedom of expression. Currently imprisoned in Chishan prison, Hunan province, Shi Tao is reportedly being forced to work under harsh conditions. Shi Tao's family has also been harassed by the authorities. (For further information see http://www.amnesty.org.uk/actions_details.asp?ActionID=114)

"Cyber-dissidents" around the world

The Chinese model of internet censorship is already being copied by others. Iran, for example, recently announced that it would be able to monitor every citizen's web use. Amnesty International has highlighted the cases of imprisoned "cyber-dissidents" in Viet Nam who remain behind bars simply for using the Internet and email to express ideas about human rights and democracy. These include Nguyen Vu Binh, a journalist and writer, and Dr Pham Hong Son, a businessman and qualified doctor, who were among a number of people arrested in a 2002 crackdown on dissidents. They were both charged with "spying" after peacefully calling for human rights and democratic change over the Internet. Nguyen Vu Binh is serving a prison sentence of seven years and Dr Pham Hong Son one of five years.

For further information on Nguyen Vi Binh, see:
<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/EN.GASA410192005?open&of=ENG-VNM>
For further information on Dr Pham Hong Son, see:
<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/EN.GASA410182005?open&of=ENG-VNM>

The UA network has been mobilised on behalf of a number of similar "cyber-dissidents" around the world. One of these was former Syrian prisoner of conscience 'Abdel Rahman al-Shaghouri, who spent two and a half years in detention in connection with articles which he distributed by e-mail mainly from the *Akhbar al-Sharq* internet site (www.thisissyria.net). The Syrian authorities have been quoted as saying that material on the site is "detrimental to the reputation and security of the nation" and "full of ideas and views opposed to the system of government in Syria". He was released on 31 August 2005, on completion of his prison sentence, handed down after an unfair trial, at which he was found guilty of "disseminating false information" (see UA 185/03, MDE 24/020/2003, 24 June 2003, and follow-ups).

Others remain in detention for exercising their right to freedom of expression via the internet. Another Syrian, Habib Salih, remains in 'Adra prison in the capital, Damascus. He had been released in September 2004 but was re-arrested on 29 May 2005, apparently because of highly critical open letters addressed to the ruling *Ba'ath* party, which were published on Arabic-language internet sites including the Syrian leftist, pro-democracy discussion forum www.rezgar.com and the Damascus Center for Theoretical and Civil Rights Studies website, www.dctcrs.org. His wife, Wafa al-Zoghbi, and daughter Deema said that this is Habib Salih's sixth time in prison. He is unable, they said, to stop speaking the truth, even if it means he spends the rest of his life behind bars

(see UA 156/05, MDE 24/039/2005, 7 June 2005).

In Tunisia, which hosted a UN meeting in November 2005 on global access to information and communication technologies, lawyer and human rights defender Mohammed Abbou remains in detention after publishing articles on the internet criticising the Tunisian government and denouncing the country's practice of torture. His sentence was confirmed on appeal in June 2005, and he is currently imprisoned in El-Kef, approximately 200 kilometres from his family home in Tunis, making family visits difficult.

The Tunisian authorities have also operated systematic censorship of the internet since it began to be used as a new medium of communication in and about Tunisia. Websites carrying information critical of the government, including international news sites, were rendered inaccessible to Internet users within Tunisia. Those within Tunisia who tried to access such websites received a standard error message, suggesting that the server had broken down, the network was malfunctioning or the website did not exist. The production, provision, sharing and storing of information on the Internet are subject to the Press Code and a ministerial Decree of 1997. In practice, these measures are backed up by other punitive measures to deter use of the Internet for political dialogue that is critical of the government.

The irrepressible.info campaign

Companies argue that such human rights abuses are not their fault: they must abide by local laws. But this argument doesn't get them off the hook. Firms have a responsibility to uphold human rights and avoid helping those who abuse them. The UN Norms for Business guidance, while not legally binding, are a

benchmark for companies' human rights performance. They say firms are responsible for ensuring their activities do not contribute to, or benefit from, abuses. It would be hard to argue that selling the technology used to monitor private emails or censor internet access is in keeping with these principles.

Amnesty International is highlighting the responsibility of governments and companies to respect free speech. Visitors to the campaign website, <http://irrepressible.info>, are asked to join the tens of thousands who have already signed a pledge calling on governments to stop the unwarranted restriction of online freedom of expression and on companies to stop helping them do it. The online pledges will be collected and presented to a key UN meeting on the future of the internet in November 2006.

Irrepressible.info is also using internet censorship to defeat itself. Amnesty International is asking people to display a badge on their own websites or emails. Each badge contains a fragment of web content that somebody somewhere has tried to suppress, so every time a campaign supporter sends an email or has a new hit on their website, the message of the campaign spreads further, and a blow is struck for freedom of speech.

The more people who join this campaign, the more it will become clear to companies and governments that respect for human rights and freedom of expression is something that thousands of people are willing to shout about.

To sign the irrepressible.info campaign pledge, visit:

<http://irrepressible.info/pledge>

To add irrepressible content to your own website or emails, visit:

<http://irrepressible.info/addcontent>