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The internet and human rights

Amnesty International started 45 years ago with a letter to a newspaper. Today, it would probably have been an e-mail. It is hard to overestimate the effect the internet has had on the world of communication. Never before have people had such access to information around the world. Equally, never before have individuals had access to such a large international audience.

Communication has always been at the heart of the Amnesty International's work and it is for that reason that the internet is so important to us. The advancement in popularity of online communication in the past ten years has changed the way we work completely. Through our website, we can communicate directly to the public, we can distribute our material instantly to media organisations around the world and we can communicate to NGOs all over the world that can -- thanks to the 'net -- give us timely warnings about human rights violations taking place in their countries. We now have access to information and testimonies from people we might never have been able to reach.

The development of internet applications such as blogs provides an outlet for human rights defenders to speak their messages to the world. Five or six years ago, this was beginning to have an impact in countries with poor records on human rights and freedom of speech, including China and Iran. Activists found that, suddenly, they could tell the world about the human rights abuses in their country at the click of a mouse.

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.

In November 2002, Amnesty International reported that foreign companies, including Websense and Sun Microsystems, Cisco Systems, Nortel Networks and Microsoft, had provided technology to the Chinese authorities to help them censor the Internet. Far from denying this, the companies argued that they had no control over how their equipment was used. A Cisco Systems spokesperson said that "[I]f the government of China wants to monitor the internet, that's their business. We are basically politically neutral."

Unfortunately for them, it's not that simple. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights calls on "every individual and every organ of society" to play its part in respecting and protecting human rights for all. Companies have a duty to ensure they do not help governments in violating human rights. Things haven't improved since 2002 and more internet companies have compromised their principles in order to gain lucrative areas of the market. 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. And it emerged last year that Yahoo! revealed email account details of the journalist Shi Tao to the Chinese authorities, a move that contributed to his prosecution and sentencing to 10 years in prison. Further cases of Yahoo!'s co-operation with the Chinese authorities have since emerged.

It has also emerged that, in 2004, Microsoft released confidential information about nuclear whistleblower Mordechai Vanunu's internet use to the Israeli authorities, without his knowledge or consent. This information was initially used to prosecute Vanunu for being in contact with foreign media. Although the judge in the case has since agreed not to use the information provided by Microsoft in the case, the information may still be used to further harass Vanunu.

China's influence, as well as its technical solutions, is spreading to other countries, including Zimbabwe, Cuba and Belarus. However, pressure on these countries, and the companies that assist them, is also spreading.

Thousands of people have signed the "freedom of expression and information" pledge on <http://irrepressible.info/>, Amnesty International's campaign website. In the US, a congressional bill that would impose strict new obligations on American technology companies doing business with "internet-restricting countries" like China is making its way through the US political apparatus. Media and campaign organisations around the world have made clear their criticism of the actions of these companies.

Although human rights norms for business are in development, there are not, as yet, any international binding laws defining the responsibilities of multi-national corporations in relation to human rights. As a result, it is for the time being in the court of public opinion that companies such as Yahoo!, Microsoft and Google can be held to account. Their business depends on widespread public use of their services; their share-price is ever vulnerable to negative publicity. The more people who join this campaign, the more it will become clear to these companies that helping to abuse human rights is not just ethically wrong, but risks making them complicit in human rights violations and could prove to be bad for business.

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