

Government reveals plans to censor the Internet

Implications of an Information Dark Age

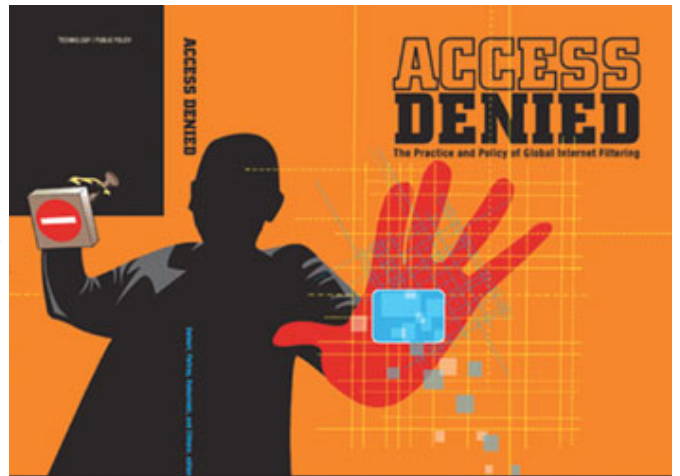
Kumar David



WRITES

The Chinese tried it, at first it didn't work; any smart kid at a terminal will crack the walls and surf the world through a proxy server. More important, ways can always be found to upload content, which is what the government is really afraid of; governments are more afraid of what you reveal about them, than what you find out about them or the outside world. Information censorship paid dividends in China only when it was backed up by brute force; police squads swooping on nerds who cracked the system, beating-up cyber protesters and dragging dissidents to prison. After that you need to supplement brutality with draconian legislation; otherwise the guys will walk away free and do it again. If we too go the way of a Lanka Information Dark Age (LIDA) the authorities will have to back it up with generalised political repression; LIDA cannot work otherwise.

We are entering election season. Every opposition party must festoon on its masthead that it (a) repudiates Internet censorship and will repeal all LIDA rules and regulations introduced by this government, (b) that it will uphold freedom of information and will enact meaningful freedom of information regulations styled on Western (not Stalinist) practices, (c) that there will be zero political censorship, and (d) essential censorship (outlawing child pornography for example) will be enacted only upon the recommendations of a council of eminent civilians including women, certainly not on the prescriptions of state functionaries. The problem is this, the government will get draconian measures ready but will not reveal them till after the elections - why give the opposition another handle to beat it with - then will come the LIDA communication straight-jacket and legislation to smother dissent.



What's in the works?

A headline in the front page of a Sunday newspaper declares "Chinese here for cyber censorship", confirming a news story first broken in Lakbimanews, and the report quotes the new TRC Director General Anusha Pelpita as saying "he did not rule out the possibility of imposing sanctions and censorship". The report adds, "In addition action will be taken to impose controls on the Google search engine". State sponsored banana vendors in the most revolting banana republics are not quite so barefaced about their plans for thought control. This is a frightened regime, truth and transparency give it diarrhoea; this country has never before been threatened with despotic thought control replicating Chinese or any other Stalinism as the norm; no not ever before. The worst is that once this rotten lot start it, the next government and the ones thereafter, UNP, SF or whoever, will never roll it back; they too will exploit these despotic powers to the full, till one day the people throw out the whole putrid system.

An article bearing dateline 15 February in the World Socialist Website (wsws.com) titled Sri Lankan government prepares new Internet restrictions says "In a further violation of basic democratic rights, Sri Lankan authorities are preparing new measures to censor Internet sites critical of the government. Reports of the plan emerged on several

web sites last night, amid a widening crackdown on the political opposition, including the arrest last Monday of opposition presidential candidate, General Sarath Fonseka”.

Dealing with specific issues the report went on that “Under regulations to be drafted by the Telecommunication Authority (TRC), it will be compulsory for all news websites to register with the authority to obtain Internet Protocol (IP) addresses. The National Express Internet Service Advisory Service, which handles IP addresses, will also be involved in implementing the rules, a TRC official told the newspaper. Restrictions will also be imposed on the Google search engine”.

We can decry all this as the antithesis of democracy, detrimental to business, and injurious to scholarship and academia, but the authorities will take no notice, they will not be moved one jot. The only language the regime understands is the language of power. If powerful mass and political forces are galvanised against LIDA, it can be pushed back, otherwise the regime will do as it wills.

There need be no doubt in our minds that the purpose of LIDA is political. Already numerous websites are blocked; I am aware of TamilNet, TamilCanadian, lankanewsweb, nidahasa and lankaenews, but this is an incomplete list. Now that the war is over there is no military motive. The purpose now is different; it is to block exposure of corruption, abuse of power at the top, revelations of the antics of the royal dynasty, and to hide state atrocities. An information blanket supplements restrictions on press freedom such as sealing papers, arresting editors and abducting journalists. These are tools to hold down the swell of anti-government feeling - don't be misled by Rajapaksa's large presidential vote.

The Chinese model

The New York Times of 15 February, referring to the ham-fisted cutting off of Internet facilities in Xinjiang Province after July 2009 ethnic disturbance, calls it “China's Self-Defeating Censorship”. “The province remains without email, instant messaging and blogs . . . since July, 32 Internet activists have been held in jails”. This is not Timbuktu though it is in China's far west. The population is the same as Sri Lanka but the land area is 25 times larger, it is barren and a large part desert while we are lush and green. However the province contains mineral resources and is caught up in China's exploding economic boom; its provincial GDP is about 50% larger than Sri Lanka's national GDP.

The economic woes of Xinjiang cannot all be attributed to the Internet clamp down, but it is a factor. One must consider the decline in the Xinjiang economy relative to the decline in the Chinese economy as a whole as a result of the Global Capitalist Crisis. The numbers are: Xinjiang's export-import trade volume fell by 39% while across China it fell by 21% in 2009; China's GDP growth declined to 8.7% in 2009 while it declined to 8% in the Province. Now this is not all due to Internet disconnection, obviously the larger factor was the fall from the ethnic riots.

The New York Times is more likely than not to be a tendentious reporter on China, but the article does make a broad-brush statement that I believe is correct.

“In Xinjiang, Internet censorship has inconvenienced people, hurt the economy and increasingly dented the government's standing. Although controls in Xinjiang are far more draconian than in the rest of China, the province can be viewed as a microcosm of China itself. In the long-term, China's censorship regime will only work to destabilize the country and discredit the government”.

So what will our government say to all this? We will exploit the fruits of office for as long as we can squeeze out what juices we can, and then push off! You suckers can stew for all we care! Such is the nature of ideologically primitive regimes in third world states.

Column 04

[<< Back](#)