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Internet Filtering in Burma (Myanmar) in 2006-2007

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OVERVIEW

Myanmar's authoritarian military junta is slowly expanding access to the Internet while maintaining one of the world's most restrictive systems of control. Despite the fact that less than 1 percent of Myanmar access the Internet, the government has targeted online independent media and dissent with the same commitment it has demonstrated to stifling traditional media and voices for reform.

BACKGROUND

Myanmar's abysmal human rights record worsened in 2006,¹ prompting increased pressure from the United States, the EU, and ASEAN for reform. In September the U.N. Security Council approved the U.S. government's proposal to put Myanmar formally on the Council's agenda.² Leaders from the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) claim neocolonialists are infiltrating media technology on pretexts of protecting human rights and countering drug trafficking.³ Other sensitive issues included political and constitutional reform, separatist movements, religious and ethnic minorities, forced and child labor, access by humanitarian organizations, and the country's first disclosed outbreak of bird flu. The government suppressed reports on a wide range of additional issues, from rising cement and fuel prices to restrictions on private banks,⁴ and jailed two journalists who photographed the new, remote capital at Pyinmana.⁵

INTERNET IN MYANMAR

The reported number of Internet users in 2005 ranged from 78,000 to nearly 300,000, at the upper limit representing approximately 0.56 percent of Myanmar's population.⁶ Myanmar remains one of thirty countries with less than 1 percent Internet penetration.⁷ Most users access the Internet in cybercafés (starting at USD0.30 per hour, down from USD0.75 in 2004 and USD0.95–1.50 in 2003),⁸ which are said to be present in five cities but planned to reach 324 townships within three years.⁹ Connection speeds are slow, however, as broadband is available primarily to government and businesses and used mostly for Internet telephony via Voice-over Internet Protocol (VoIP), though the government pledged to bring ADSL to every township by the end of 2006.¹⁰ There are only two Internet service providers (ISPs) allowed in Myanmar: state-owned telecom Myanmar Posts and Telecom (MPT), which is the only source of new Internet services,¹¹ and Myanmar Teleport (MMT, formerly Bagan Cybertech), which is reportedly the infrastructure arm of Myanmar's Internet system and responsible for blocking content. In September 2005 the Ahaed Co. of Myanmar and the Canadian ICT company Teleglobe reportedly signed a memorandum of understanding to establish a private ISP.¹² Reliability is also an issue: in May 2006 the entire country was disconnected for four days because of alleged damage to an undersea cable.¹³

LEGAL AND REGULATORY FRAMEWORKS

Myanmar heavily regulates online access and content via legal, regulatory, and economic constraints. As in other areas, however, the state's policies are difficult to assess because they are rarely published or explained.

Network-ready computers must be registered (for a fee) with the MPT; failure to do so can result in fines and prison sentences of seven to fifteen years.¹⁴ Sharing registered Internet connections is also punishable by revocation of access and presumably similar "legal action."¹⁵ Broad laws and regulations confer power upon the SPDC, which is also involved in all judicial appointments,¹⁶ to punish citizens harshly for any activity deemed detrimental to national interests or security. Regulations issued in 2000 subjected online content to the same kind of strict filtering that the Press Scrutiny and Registration Division carries out (despite print media being almost exclusively state owned):¹⁷ users must obtain MPT permission before creating Web pages, and they cannot post anything "detrimental" to the government or simply related to politics. The MPT can "amend and change regulations on the use of the Internet without prior notice."¹⁸

Costs indeed limit access significantly: even households that can afford a PC and long-distance connection fees outside the capital Yangon (Rangoon) and Mandalay cannot pay USD35/month¹⁹ for a broadband account. Dialup access leaves them with state-monitored e-mail (free services are blocked)²⁰ and a small collection of pre-approved sites on the country's intranet, known as the Myanmar Wide Web.²¹ As for cybercafés, promoted since 2002 by a "Public Access Centers" (PAC) program for e-mail and gaming purposes,²² the government has been urging business owners to legally register as PACs. This requires them to log user identities and Web sites visited and send the information back to the state-owned Myanmar

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Info-tech.²³ There are reports, however, that many tech-savvy users risk connecting to proxy servers abroad and thereby access the entire Web undetected.²⁴

ONI TESTING RESULTS

Testing was conducted on the two ISPs in Myanmar, Myanmar Teleport (MMT) and Myanmar Posts and Telecom (MPT). Both MMT and MPT filtered extensively and focused overwhelmingly on independent media, political reform, and human rights sites relating to Myanmar, as well as free Web-based e-mail services and circumvention tools.

Both ISPs blocked roughly the same number of circumvention tools, including Proxify, Guardster, and Anonymizer (although only MPT blocked www.anonymizer.com).

In June 2006 Gmail and Gtalk were made inaccessible and Skype was banned²⁵—a reported attempt not only to censor communications but also to preserve the government's monopoly over telephone and e-mail services as MPT's revenues dipped.²⁶ ONI testing confirmed that although no search engines (MSN, Google, and so on) were blocked, Yahoo! Mail, Gmail, Hushmail, and mail2web were blocked by both ISPs, while MPT took the precaution of blocking thirteen additional e-mail sites, including Hotmail and Fastmail. Only MPT blocked Skype.

In addition to filtering Radio Free Asia (www.rfa.org) and OhmyNews, both MMT and MPT blocked many major independent news sites reporting on Myanmar. This included English language publications such as the Irawaddy, Mizzima News, and BurmaNet News (burmanet.org), as well as sites in the national language (www.burmatoday.net). Only MPT blocked the Voice of America Web sites (<http://www.voanews.com/>) in English and Burmese, while MMT targeted regional news sites such as the Times of India and Asia Observer.

Sites containing content on human rights advocacy and democratic reform continued to be a priority for blocking. A number of nongovernmental organization (NGO) sites with different levels of involvement in Myanmar human rights issues were blocked (Open Society Institute at www.soros.org; <http://www.burmacampaign.org.uk/>). Within this group were Web sites documenting the persecution of ethnic minorities and the personal Web site of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Other continuities in blocking included coalitions for democratic change in Myanmar, such as the Web site of the coalition government of the Union of Burma (www.ncgub.net), opposition movements (www.chinforum.org), and rights groups (www.womenofburma.org).

There were significant differences in filtering between the two ISPs. Of the sites found to be blocked in Myanmar, less than a third were blocked on both ISPs. The remaining blocked sites were blocked on one ISP or the other, but not both. MMT blocked almost exclusively sites with ties to Myanmar, where the term "Burma" in the URL was one of the common threads among the filtered sites, from human rights groups (www.burmawatch.org; www.hrw.org) critical of the government to peripheral personal sites (such as a site with photographs of Myanmar). MPT filtered many more sites from the global list, blocking a large majority of the pornography Web sites tested, while MMT filtered very few such sites.

Several curious results indicated that the Myanmar government does not take an entirely systematic approach to filtering. For example, Amnesty International (www.amnesty.org) was blocked entirely on MPT, but MMT filtered only several Amnesty reports on the country. Other significant variations among the ISPs, including the inconsistent blocking of pornography and gambling sites that suggest distinct filtering methods, are unusual given both ISPs are state-run.

CONCLUSION

Although Myanmar does not deploy its filtering regime with the same sophistication and breadth as other countries with similarly repressive online environments, the paranoid grip of the SPDC is felt in the restrictions on access, the high cost of services, and the frequently brutal clampdown on information and expression in all other spheres of Burmese life. This may be why there are not many known cases of cyber-dissidents in custody, given that people have been arrested for anything from publishing subversive poetry to listening to the BBC or Radio Free Asia in public.²⁷

NOTES

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