- PDF
- Send to a friend

The Looming Destruction of the Global Communications Environment

Essay by Ron Deibert, June 10, 2008

Ask most citizens worldwide to identify the most pressing issue facing humanity as a whole and they will likely respond with global warming. However, there is another environmental catastrophe looming: the degradation of the global communications environment. The parallels between the two issues are striking: in both cases an invaluable commons is threatened with collapse unless citizens take urgent action to achieve environmental rescue. The two issues are also intimately connected: solutions to global warming necessitate an unfettered worldwide communications network through which citizens can exchange information and ideas. To protect the planet, we need to protect the Net.

Just as evidence of threats to the global natural environment can be found in seemingly unrelated local events – deforestation here, a loss of wetlands there – so too can threats to the global communications environment. In Belarus, for example, access to opposition websites was disrupted during 2005 presidential elections, and then restored immediately afterwards with no explanation. In response to images and videos of demonstrations being uploaded to blogs and news sites, the Burmese government shut off the Internet entirely, except during the period of curfew when Internet users could be more effectively tracked. In Cambodia, the government quietly disabled the use of text messaging over cellular networks leading up to national elections. In Pakistan, inept attempts to block access to streaming videos containing imagery satirizing the Prophet Muhammed resulted in the collateral filtering for several hours of the entire Youtube service, not just for Pakistanis, but also for most of the entire Internet population around the world.

Further degradation comes from the troublesome encroachments of military and intelligence agencies into the global communications commons. Around the world, states' armed forces are developing sophisticated doctrines for cyberwar that include everything from computer network attacks to psychological operations. The U.S. Pentagon's recently launched strategic command for cyberspace, operating under the Air Force, is perhaps the most formidable, ominously talking about "fighting and winning wars" on the Internet. Although details are classified, what this may mean in practice can be fathomed by the recent distributed electronic assault on Estonia, which poisoned the country's 911, banking, and telephone systems for a period of time after that government decided to move a Soviet era statue. Evidence gathered about the assault suggests that although it was likely a spontaneous uprising of hackers sympathetic to Russian concerns, the event appears to have been at least partially "seeded" by the Russian state, whose actions spiraled out of control like a cyclone in cyberspace.

Meanwhile, states' intelligence agencies are increasingly extracting precious information flows through the installation of permanent eavesdropping equipment at key Internet chokepoints, such as Internet exchanges, Internet service providers, or at major international peering facilities. When combined with the deep packet shaping activities undertaken by ISPs to limit use of peer-to-peer networks for alleged copyright violations, these incursions eat away at the constitutive principles of the Internet's "neutral" architecture. As a consequence, once seamless global flows of information are now being damned up, distorted, and diverted into heavily filtered cesspools where surveillance saps creativity and induces a stifling climate of self-

censorship.

These and hundreds of other examples from the OpenNet Initiative's latest research are but a few pieces of evidence of what has become an alarming trend: motivated by short-term security and cultural concerns, dozens of governments and corporations are carving up, colonizing, and militarizing the once seamless Internet environment.

Like any other commons, the global communications environment is a finite public good whose maintenance as a valuable resource depends on sustained contributions of individuals worldwide. And yet citizens are having their legitimate contributions stifled by fickle governments and greedy corporations who are threatened by freedom of speech and access to information.

Fortunately, there are many ways to begin to rescue the global communications environment:

• We need to encourage the research and development of tools (like the censorship-evading software psiphon, or the anonymity network Tor) that support the Internet's distributed and open architecture.

• We need to promote the Internet's original culture of sharing, as represented by Creative Commons and the free and open source software movement, as an epistemic bulwark against the possessive and exclusionary instincts of the profiteering motive.

• We need to revise and encourage the original notion of "hacking" as a positive experimental ethic, encouraging citizens – especially youth– not to accept technologies shrink-wrapped and locked down but to open them up and explore them as media of both freedom and control.

• We need to put pressure on governments that censor and the companies who assist them, promoting laws, norms, and principles from the domestic to the international spheres that restrain their shortsighted motives and hold them accountable for their actions.

• And we need to raise global awareness that if we, citizens of the Earth, are ever to solve our many shared problems successfully, we need an unfettered worldwide communications environment with which to do so.

Ron Deibert *is associate professor of political science and director of the Citizen Lab at the* Munk Centre for International Studies*, University of Toronto. He is a co-founder and principal investigator of the* OpenNet Initiative *and psiphon projects. This essay is a modified and extended version of* an earlier essay *that appeared on* OpenDemocracy.Net

All Access Essays

Diversity and Global Inclusion

- Understanding our Knowledge Gaps: Or, Do we have an ICT4D field? And do we want one?
  by Michael Best
- Open ICT ecosystems transforming the developing world
  by Matthew Smith and Laurent Elder

- ICT Diffusion: Have we really made any progress?
  by Sabri Saidam

Open Access

- The Need for a "Knowledge Web" for Scholarship
  by Carolina Rossini
- Opening Access in a Networked Science
  by Melanie Dulong de Rosnay
- A Take on Peter Suber's "The Opening of Science and Scholarship"
  by Jean-Claude Guedon

Open Infrastructure

- Metaphors We Regulate By
  by Rikke Frank Jørgensen
- FORWARD WITH FIBER: An Infrastructure Investment Plan for the New Administration
  by Doc Searls

View all thematic areas »

Source URL:
http://publius.cc/looming_destruction_global_communications_environment#comment-0