

Western internet censorship: The beginning of the end or the end of the beginning?

From Wikileaks

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EDITORIAL (WikiLeaks)

*We're arresting you for speeding.
What's the speed limit, officer?
The speed limit is secret.*

Shortly after 9pm on Tuesday March 24, Wikileaks related buildings in Dresden and Jena, were raided by 11 plain clothes German police.

Why?

Over the last two years, Wikileaks has exposed detailed secret government censorship lists or plans for over eight countries, including Thailand, the United Arab Emirates, Australia, and Germany.

Although Wikileaks' main site has been censored by the Chinese Public Security Bureau since early 2007, last week saw the site placed onto a secret list of sites "forbidden" by the Australian Media and Communications Authority, or ACMA.



The pro-censorship governments exposed by Wikileaks can be divided into three broad categories:

1. Countries with a mandatory censorship system in place: Thailand, the UAE, and Lebanon (films).
2. Countries proposing a mandatory censorship system: Australia and Germany.
3. Countries in which the internet censorship system is an unregulated agreement between several large ISPs and the police: Norway, Denmark and Finland.

Australia and Germany are the only liberal democracies proposing a mandatory internet censorship regime.

All of the schemes operate, or are proposed to operate, through multi-million dollar national networks of censorship machines.

The machines spy on the nation as each citizen attempts to read on the internet, and compares requested pages to those listed on a secret government "blacklist".

If the page is on the blacklist, the government forcibly prevents the citizen from viewing the information by intercepting his or her internet communication and diverting it to a machine controlled by the censorship system. This machine is often configured to record the identity of the person attempting to access the forbidden information. If the page is not on the blacklist, the government grants permission for the citizen to view the page.

Although originally marketed, in all countries, as a way of combating child pornography, the blacklists

obtained by Wikileaks show that the systems have already been corrupted into censoring other content, including political content.

For instance, the secret blacklist for Thailand censors thousands of sites per year deemed to be critical of the Thai Monarchy, from academic books and YouTube to the Economist magazine and Wikileaks itself.

Similarly, the blacklist for Australia contains an anti-abortion site, fringe religions, a dentist clinic, gay sites, gambling sites, islamist sites, euthanasia activist sites, an astrologer's blog, misclassified material, and, like Thailand, Wikileaks itself. Even the Australian government's "Minister for censorship", Senator Stephen Conroy, has admitted that fully half of the sites on the secret list are unrelated to child pornography.

As newspapers and other publications migrate to an exclusive life on the internet, such totalizing censorship systems are able to instantly snatch "pages" from the laps of citizens across an entire nation, interdicting communications between publisher and reader, and the new civil discourse between readers and each other. The scale, speed and potential impact of this centralized intervention has no historical precedent.

Secret national censorship systems are dangerous and unaccountable. They are an affront to natural justice, due process and the balancing power of the fourth estate. They must be, and will be, stopped.

The Australian Government has stated it plans to increase the size of its blacklist list by 10 fold, from roughly 1,200 blocked pages to over 10,000, although the plan is now seems unlikely to pass the Australian Senate after the revelations of the last month.

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To make what has happened clear to those who understand traditional book censorship, we provide the following simple analogy:

Within the libraries and book catalogues of Germany and Australia there are books (web pages) forbidden by the state.

The government of Australia has compiled a secret list of books it forbids. About 1,200 books are on the list.

Not even authors or publishers whose books are placed on the list are told their book has been banned.

Germany plans to adopt and expand a version of the Australian scheme.

Under the plans of the German and Australian governments, every attempt to borrow a book (read a web page) will be checked against the secret "forbidden books" (forbidden web pages) list.

If a book is on the list, the attempt to borrow it is noted down in another secret list and permission is refused. If the book is not on the blacklist, permission is granted.

The list of forbidden books (the blacklist) is a forbidden book.

The lists of books forbidden in other countries are also forbidden books.

Any book that mentions the title (URL) of a forbidden book is itself a forbidden book.

An international investigative newspaper (Wikileaks) reveals key internal documents on the censorship expansion plans for Germany, Australia and other countries. For Australia this expose includes the lists of forbidden books and the presence of clearly political books on the list. The newspaper warns that Australia is acting like a "democratic backwater" and risks following the censorship path of Thailand.

The article and lists, and then the entire newspaper secretly added to the list of publications banned by Australia.

The Australian "Minister for censorship", Senator Stephen Conroy, states "Any citizen who distributes [the blacklist] is at serious risk of criminal prosecution". The Minister threatens to refer the leak to the Australian Federal Police.

That same week, the newspaper releases three more articles on censorship and updates the lists of forbidden books.

Two buildings related to the newspaper in Germany are then raided by 11 plain clothed police. The police demand the keys (passwords) to a protected room (server) containing the newspaper's printing press so they can disable it. The newspaper staff refuse to comply--both the keys and the press itself have been sent to Sweden, a country with stronger legal protections for journalists.

The German police then seize what they believe to be the newspaper's archives (a harddrive) and a typewriter (laptop) "for evidence".

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The story might end there, but 12 hours after the police raid, on Wednesday the 25th of March, the German Cabinet announced the completion of a proposed law for a nationwide, mandatory censorship system--to be pushed through before national elections in September, 2009.

For every noble human desire, in this case, the strong protective feelings most adults have towards children, opportunists such as Senator Conroy and his German equivalent, CDU Minister Ursula von der Leyen, stand ready to exploit these feelings for their own power and position.

Von der Leyen apparently hopes to raise her profile before a national election by promoting a national censorship "solution" to child pornography.

But forcibly preventing the average parent from seeing evidence of what may be an abuse against a child is not the same as stopping abuses against children. Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.

Censoring the evidence promotes abuses by driving them underground, where they are difficult to track. Such schemes divert resources and political will away from proven policing solutions which target producers and consumers.

Children depend, even more than their parents, on the quality and viability of government. An assault against those systems and ideals which keep government honest and accountable - public oversight, natural justice, and protection from state censorship - is not just an affront to Enlightenment ideals, but an assault on the long term interests of children and adults alike.

The March 24th raid is not the first time the German state has attempted to censor Wikileaks; back in December 2008, Ernst Uhlrau, former police chief and current head of the BND, Germany's equivalent to the CIA, threatened to prosecute the site unless it removed a BND dossier on corrupt officials in Kosovo and other information. The dossier was not removed. There is no evidence that the police action and the BND incident are related, but the situation, together with a recent Bundestag inquiry documenting illegal BND spying on the German press, does not paint a flattering picture of the state of German government.

Source documents

- Hausdurchsuchung bei WikiLeaks.de Domaininhaber
- Police raid home of Wikileaks.de domain owner over censorship lists
- Grundrechtliche, telekommunikations- und telemedienrechtliche Fragen im Zusammenhang mit der Sperrung kinderpornographischer Inhalte im Internet, 19 Feb 2009
- German Interior Ministry Internet Expertise re internet spying and censorship, 17 Feb 2009
- Vertragsentwurf BKA ISP, 11 Feb 2009
- Australian government secret ACMA internet censorship blacklist, 18 Mar 2009
- Australian government secret ACMA internet censorship blacklist, 11 Mar 2009
- Australian government secret ACMA internet censorship blacklist, 6 Aug 2008
- Australia secretly censors Wikileaks press release and Danish Internet censorship list, 16 Mar 2009
- Denmark: 3863 sites on censorship list, Feb 2008
- 797 domains on Finnish Internet censorship list, including censorship critic, 2008
- Norwegian secret internet censorship blacklist, 3518 domains, 18 Mar 2009
- Thailand official MICT censorship list, 20 Dec 2008
- United Arab Emirates Internet censorship plan (2006)
- Landgericht Pforzheim: Beschluss zu Hausdurchsuchung von Blogverlinkung zu Wikileaks, 23 Mar 2009
- Durchsuchungsbeschluss Blog wegen Verlinkung auf Schutzalter und anwaltliche Reaktion, 2009
- German police search warrant over study linking to Danish censorship list on Wikileaks, Feb 2009

See also

- Spiegel: Schlag gegen Internet-Aktivisten wegen angeblicher Beihilfe zum Vertrieb von Kinderpornografie (<http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/vorab/0,1518,616017,000.html>)
- My life in child porn
- A Blacklist for Websites Backfires in Australia
- There is no bigger issue than net censorship
- It certainly looks like the ACMA blacklist, eh Senator Conroy
- Dentist's website on leaked blacklist
- Banned hyperlinks could cost you 11,000 dollars a day
- Leaked Australian blacklist reveals banned sites
- Australian Government censorship of US anti-abortion site abortiontv.com, 21 Jan 2009
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