

The enemies of the internet

Belarus and Bahrain are the latest additions to the Reporters Without Borders' "Enemies of the Internet" 2012 list while France and Australia are "under surveillance".



Belarus and Bahrain are the latest additions to the Reporters Without Borders' "[Enemies of the Internet](#)" 2012 list published each year on the World Day Against Cyber Censorship. In all, 12 countries were listed, including Burma, China, Cuba, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Vietnam (see map below).

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A further 14 countries made it to the “under surveillance” list – which catalogues potential enemies. Among them was France, for its draconian copyright infringement rules and Australia, for its content-filtering system. The remaining 12 countries are Egypt, Eritrea, India, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Russia, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Tunisia, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates.

The report highlights the surge in online restrictions by both democratic and autocratic governments alike, ranging from arrests or harassment of netizens to online surveillance or blocking of websites. In democratic countries, national security, the war on terrorism, cybercrime and the protection of intellectual property were the most oft-cited justifications for curtailing internet freedom.

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Bahrain

What? The government bolstered its censorship efforts in response to the uprisings in the region. According to Arbor Networks, traffic to and from Bahrain slumped by 20%, which indicates filtering. Internet access is regularly slowed down to prevent uploading of videos and photos. YouTube and Facebook are blocked.

Netizens? Arrests of netizens and cyberdissidents “soared”.

Western technology? Nokia Siemens Networks has been accused of sharing private netizen data with the authorities. ([Watch our interview with a representative from the company here.](#))

The future? The government is spending millions on a PR campaign to show that it’s business-as-usual in the country. This includes a U-turn on its decision to cancel the Bahrain Formula 1 Grand Prix in April.

Belarus

What? The government has stepped up internet filtering and resorted to partial blocking during the “silent protests” in July 2011. (Read our case study [When doing nothing is free expression.](#)) The Belarusian website of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty was hit with a Denial of Service Attack on July 3 2011; many anti-government websites and blogs have been shut down. Belarus ISP BelTelecom has been redirecting netizens connecting to Vkontakte to sites containing malware.

Legislation? In January 2012, Law 317-3 was introduced to reinforce internet censorship. Under the legislation, ISPs and cybercafes are obliged to gather information about all internet users and conduct surveillance. The law allows the authorities to block any website deemed “extremist”.

Burma

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What? In May 2011, the use of external hard drives, USB flash drives and CDs were banned in cybercafes along with the use of internet telephony services to make international telephone calls. However, over the past few months, thousands of prisoners of conscience, among them bloggers, were released and a number of websites and internet services such as Reuters, YouTube, the BBC, Gmail and Facebook have been unblocked.

Western technology? The government's use of technology from US firm Blue Coat raises questions about internet surveillance.

China

What? The government has added keywords related to the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street Movements to its list of banned words. "Jasmine" and "Egypt" are now banned and it's impossible to search for "occupy" followed by the name of a Chinese city. In 2011, the Chinese Communist Party announced new "cultural reforms" – a euphemism for greater internet censorship. The CCP adopted a directive preventing the spread of "rumours" and further required all Wi-Fi providers to install internet tracking software. Authorities imposed online media blackouts following the uprising in Wukan to protest against farmland seizures and on the Wenzhou train crash (read and comment on our case study [here](#)).

Netizens? Scores of bloggers and netizens have been arrested. In November 2011, web service providers Baidu, Tencent and Sina Corp agreed to adopt online surveillance policies. As of March 16, all those using microblogging sites will be obliged to use their real names.

Cuba

What? Pro-government bloggers have declared war on netizens critical of the authorities by accusing them of being "cybermercenaries" in the pay of the US. Cuba's foreign minister urged social networks to free themselves of the "dictatorship of the sector's large US groups".

Iran

What? In December 2011, a list of 25 election-related internet crimes was unveiled in the lead-up to the parliamentary election. It banned calls for an election boycott and the publication of opposition logos. The same month, a 20-point directive for cybercafes was published. All owners must now install cameras and retain client data; VPNs and USB flash drives are forbidden.

Netizens? In January 2012, web developer Saeed Malekpour became the first netizen ever to be sentenced to death in Iran for "anti-government agitation" and "insulting Islam". The report estimates that 29 netizens were arrested in the 12 months leading up to March 1 2012. One blogger, Sakhi Righi, was sentenced to 20 years in prison for "publishing false information" and committing "acts against national security".

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Western technology? According to Bloomberg, Israeli computer company Allot Communications has been selling surveillance software to the Danish company RanTek to pass on to Iran.

Future? The Iranian government has signalled plans to establish a national internet on multiple occasions. However, it is not known if the country has either the technological know-how or funds to develop such an ambitious project.

North Korea

What? Over the past 12 months, the North Korean regime has used the internet to launch a propaganda war against South Korea and the US. An army of hackers has been created to destroy websites and monitor netizens. DVDs, CDs and USB flash drives containing information ranging from human rights news to US television series are smuggled into the country along its border with China.

Saudi Arabia

What? Widespread online surveillance and extensive filtering backed by repressive legislation. Sites showing demonstrations in Tunisia and Egypt have been blocked. The government has taken measures to prevent “social destabilisation,” including the donation of billions of dollars of subsidies to improve the country’s working and housing conditions. On a positive note, an online campaign helped women win the right to vote in 2015.

Netizens? Bloggers circulating news about protests in the governorate of Al-Qatif in eastern Saudi Arabia were arrested. Separately, three online journalists were arrested for reporting on the living conditions of the country’s poorest inhabitants. Blogger Hamza Kashgari was sentenced to death for “blasphemous” tweets about the Prophet Muhammad ([read and comment on our case study here](#)).

Syria

What? In June 2011, the government imposed a virtual block on the internet, which continues to slow down towards the end of the week when Friday demonstrations take place. The government’s cyber-army has since redoubled its efforts, flooding internet sites with pro-Bashir Assad messages. Twitter accounts have been created to disrupt the #Syria hashtag by directing readers to irrelevant pages. The telecommunications ministry uses “man-in-the-middle” technology to capture personal data. This includes sending fake security certificates to Facebook users.

Netizens? Bloggers and netizens have endeavoured to provide information to the outside world in the absence of foreign media, expelled following the uprising. According to Reporters Without Borders, more than in Egypt or Tunisia, “Activism and reporting have become one”. Many journalists and bloggers have been arrested, kidnapped, tortured, disappeared or killed.

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Western companies? The government's filtering system is created by Blue Coat; the company insists the technology was intended for Iraq.

Uzbekistan

What? Online censorship and surveillance has been boosted following the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa. ISPs and mobile phone operators are required to report mass mailings deemed suspicious and disconnect services on the request of the authorities. A mirror site for the Uzbek Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty was created to gather information about those visiting the site. In September 2011, the government introduced social networking site *Muloqot* (Dialogue), which many have interpreted as the first step to blocking Facebook. Along with China and Russia, Uzbekistan has signed the International Code of Conduct for Information Security, which aims to standardise internet norms and guarantee cybersecurity. The trio is petitioning the United Nations to adopt the code.

Turkmenistan

What? The government both censors the internet, known as the "Turkmenet", and restricts its growth. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Gmail are blocked. According to the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, a police officer reportedly said that anyone possessing a mobile phone or internet account with the state-owned Altyn Asyr is monitored.

Netizens? In July 2011, netizens shattered the silence surrounding a fatal explosion at an arms depot by sending videos of the incident abroad. It is believed dozens were arrested as a result.

Vietnam

What? Like many other countries on the list, the Vietnamese government boosted surveillance in response to the Arab uprisings. Filtering, though severe, has not been intensified. In general, the government has preferred to monitor users rather than block websites. Facebook is inaccessible but not permanently blocked – again, a way of monitoring those online. The government has successfully encouraged an increasing number of netizens to join go.vn, the local version of Facebook, which requires users to identify themselves. Topics considered off-limits include the disastrous environmental impact of the bauxite mining activities undertaken by China and police brutality.

Netizens? Scores of citizen journalists and bloggers have been arrested in the past 12 months. After China, Vietnam arrested the highest number of netizens during this period.

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