

Piercing Curtains

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The news as of late does not bode well for any sort of Global Information Infrastructure. While that may be the more formal term previously used for the Internet, it is hardly what we have today. Whether it is an ally of the United States, a member of the Axis of Evil, or firmly planted in the squishy middle the nation-states of this planet are creating challenges for the Internet. For sites like LISNews, this gives just cause for worrying.

The Digital Economy Bill proposed by the United Kingdom's First Secretary of State, Lord Mandelson, as most recently amended protects online communication far less than more traditional communications like newspapers and radio programs. The People's Republic of China has made it clear that Google's presence is incompatible with its laws and ideals. This is currently pushing towards a likely withdrawal by Google regardless of the economic damage done to local partners. The Islamic Republic of Iran is taking a page from the playbook of Communist China by attempting to squeeze out Google's Gmail in favor of a locally operated service that the Iranian government could monitor and control. In Australia efforts by Senator Stephen Conroy, the Minister for Broadband, Communications, and the Digital Economy, continue toward creating an Internet filter covering the entire Australian continent. Word has leaked out that a national filter was created in New Zealand by their Department of Internal Affairs but it is not certain which Internet Service Providers there are participating in its use. The Venezeulan leader Hugo Chavez has called for outright regulation of the Internet and has advocated for the suppression of free expression online.

Instead of having a global architecture for the exchange of information that might otherwise be converted into knowledge and/or wisdom, we see perhaps a divided virtual realm that looks less cohesive than the FIDONET sharing network between dial-up bulletin boards of old. It should be remembered that while the concept of the dial-up bulletin board is on the decline in the United States, FIDONET remains alive in the Russian Federation of all places. Whether or not the Internet moves in that direction is something hardly predictable at this point, though.

With the Internet experiencing such a period of storm and stress, the question does not go away relative to what action should be taken. If anything it must be remembered that major action cannot be taken in a time of crisis as it most likely takes time to implement a solution after you determine what the solution is. Preventive, prepared action is how you handle such events.

From the LISNews perspective, there is some debate in play. While the site tries to serve more than just the local North American world of librarianship, censorship efforts in the other lead nations of the RDA world leave the site vulnerable. Since LISNews is not a massive media conglomerate like News Corporation under Rupert Murdoch, getting slapped with a shut-down injunction in the United Kingdom would likely go uncontested as there simply are not financial means for the site to defend itself. Under a previous version of the Digital Economy Bill there would have been notice to LISNews of court proceedings but due to recent amendments concentrating power in Lord Mandelson's hands we would now only know if something were wrong just as in Australia and New Zealand if an astute reader noticed we suddenly dropped off the planet. Saying LISNews is vulnerable now is an understatement.

There have been at least two streams of preventive action that have been discussed. The first would be to get the LISNews Netcast Network relayed via one or more shortwave stations to blanket parts of the planet. Such would remove the need for all those other layers of the OSI networking model for people accessing that content through the Internet and replace such with simpler tools. We know stations are out there that we can hire to do this but we have to shell out cash we do not have to make such happen. Strangely enough, conveying audio content through such a primitive and antiquated form of communication would have greater protection as of late than Internet-based transmission would.

The other stream of preventive action is something that has only been hinted at so far. Efforts are presently underway at creating a one-off test issue of what is being called "The LISNews Bulletin". This small test issue is going to have a mix of content in it and is going to be distributed through fairly unique means. If we manage to successfully print these up, make sure you see Blake at Computers in Libraries 2010 to get a copy as the plan currently says that he will be the main distribution channel there for this test issue. Strangely enough, conveying textual

content through such a primitive and antiquated form of communication would have greater protection as of late than Internet-based transmission would.

The fiction of Arthur C. Clarke remains disturbing as our world today sometimes mirrors his art. In his short story simply titled “Superiority”, we hear the tale of an interplanetary war fleet defeated by the inferiority of the weapons of its opponent that also were far more reliable than the protagonist's whiz-bang inventions that never quite worked as intended. As the lights start to go out on Internet-based freedom of expression as we see the erection of virtual curtains of suppression, that story by Clarke keeps coming to mind as the simplest example of a solution to the conundrum of Internet censorship.

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