

Amnesty International



IRREPRESSIBLE INFORMATION

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'Open your newspaper any day of the week and you will find a report from somewhere in the world of someone being imprisoned, tortured or executed because his opinions or religion are unacceptable to his government.'

So began an article in this newspaper 45 years ago called *The Forgotten Prisoners*. The author, Peter Benenson, urged people to call on governments to stop this persecution. The 'appeal for amnesty' that he started went on to become Amnesty International, a movement that now has 1.8 million supporters in over 100 countries around the world and continues to stand up for freedom and justice wherever it is denied.

Much has changed in those 45 years. The Iron Curtain has been torn down and apartheid has ended; we have witnessed genocide in Rwanda and ethnic cleansing in the Balkans. And the world has moved on technologically: in 1961 people were expressing their opinions in books and newsprint; Amnesty members responded to their repression by writing letters. Now we have a new, global medium for expressing ideas, the internet; and Amnesty International is able to mobilise its supporters online, to lobby governments with emails and web-based campaigning.

Sadly what remains the same, despite advances in technology, is that people are still being imprisoned for the peaceful expression of their beliefs. Peter Benenson started Amnesty after reading about two students who were arrested in a Portuguese café for raising a toast to freedom: 45 years on, we were recently made aware of three young Vietnamese people arrested after taking part in an online chat-room about democracy. Governments still fear dissenting opinion and try to shut it down. While the internet has brought freedom of information to millions, for some it has led to imprisonment by a government that has sought to curtail this freedom.

Governments have shut down and censored websites and blogs; they have created firewalls to prevent access to information; and they have restricted and filtered search engines to keep information from their citizens. China is perhaps the clearest example, where internet censorship and the clampdown on internet dissent is most sophisticated and widespread. But Amnesty has documented internet repression in countries as diverse as Iran, Turkmenistan, Tunisia, Israel, the Maldives and Vietnam.

Companies have been complicit in these abuses. Another massive change since 1961 has been the rising power of multinational corporations – and so Amnesty is increasingly lobbying not just governments but powerful companies to respect the rights of ordinary people. The internet is big business, but in the search for profits some companies have disregarded their own principles and those on which the internet was founded: free access to information. The results of searches conducted through China-based search engines run by Yahoo!, Microsoft, Google and local companies are censored, limiting the information users can access. Microsoft pulled down the blog of one of China's most popular bloggers who had made politically sensitive comments. Yahoo! has provided information to the Chinese authorities that has led to people being imprisoned for sending emails with political content.

So 45 years on, Amnesty International is again calling on Observer readers to join forces with us and take a stand for basic human freedoms. The internet has the potential to transcend national borders and allow the free flow of ideas around the world. Of course, there is a need for limits to free expression to protect other rights – promoting violence or child pornography

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is never acceptable – but the internet still has immense power and potential. Just by logging on to my computer I can exchange views with someone in Beijing or Washington. I can read what bloggers in Baghdad think of the situation in their country. I can find a million viewpoints different to my own on any given topic. It is the greatest medium for free expression since the printing press, a meeting of technology and the social, inquisitive nature of human beings and the irrepressible force of the human voice. It is the new frontier in the battle between those who want to speak out, and those who want to stop them. We must not allow it to be suppressed.

We're asking people to show their support for internet freedom with a simple pledge:

I believe the Internet should be a force for political freedom, not repression. People have the right to seek and receive information and to express their peaceful beliefs online without fear or interference. I call on governments to stop the unwarranted restriction of freedom of expression on the Internet - and on companies to stop helping them do it.

We'll use these pledges to call on governments to release the cyber-dissidents imprisoned for sending emails and posting their views on websites. We'll take them to the UN when it meets in November to discuss the future of the internet. And we'll use them to show companies that internet users – their customers – will not stand for an internet that for some is massively restricted.

The campaign is called **irrepressible.info** and we are launching it today in The Observer. It will harness the power of the internet to mobilise people all over the world to take a stand against repression. We hope that it will spread quickly as more people sign up and tell others about it by email and on their websites.

Irrepressible.info uses internet censorship to defeat itself. We're asking people to show their support by displaying a badge on their site or their emails – a badge that contains a fragment of web content that somebody somewhere has tried to suppress. So every time you send an email or someone visits your site, you are spreading this information further – doing exactly what the censors are trying to prevent. Every time someone new sees your badge, you'll be helping to defeat censorship – and they in turn can click on it to sign the Pledge and join the campaign.

The first case we're profiling is that of Shi Tao, a Chinese journalist currently serving a 10-year sentence for 'illegally providing state secrets to foreign entities'. His crime was to use the internet to share information – in this case emailing a pro-democracy site in the US about instructions from the Chinese authorities to news outlets, warning them against covering demonstrations to mark the anniversary of the Tiananmen Square democracy protests and the killing of hundreds of protesters.

He sent that email from his Yahoo! account – something that many of us do every day as part of our daily work and social lives. One year later he was in court – and account-holder information provided by Yahoo's Chinese partner was being used as evidence to convict him. Like other companies keen for a slice of the lucrative Chinese market, Yahoo! is widely reported to have signed the Chinese authorities' *Public Pledge on Self-Discipline for the Internet Industry*, effectively agreeing to implement China's system of web censorship. While the company has been quick to condemn the punishment of people for free expression, it has supplied information to the Chinese government that has led to prosecution in such cases.

Now Shi Tao, a Prisoner of Conscience, is doing forced labour under harsh conditions in Chishan prison. His wife endured frequent harassment and interrogation by the authorities and was pressured by her work unit into divorcing Shi. His mother, father and uncle have all been placed under surveillance and have been harassed at both work and at home. Amnesty members have been calling on the Chinese authorities to end this harassment and release Shi Tao immediately. You can join us in standing up for Shi Tao: just look for a leaflet specially inserted into the newspaper today, or visit the www.irrepressible.info website.

China has developed one of the world's most sophisticated censorship regimes, aided by technology from some of the largest global IT companies. Filters block websites featuring words or phrases like 'human rights', 'democracy' or 'Taiwan independence'. People can't access our main Amnesty site. The authorities are expanding the use of internet police, whose job it is to monitor the web, with reports suggesting there may be tens of thousands of such police in operation.

Yet the focus in China has been on encouraging self-censorship. All websites, including private ones, must register with the Chinese authorities or face being shut down – with reports stating that up to a quarter of all private websites in China have been closed for this reason. Website administrators and internet cafe managers are held responsible for the web use of their patrons and are required to check ID from anyone using the internet. And in a true echo of Big Brother, cameras are being installed in many internet cafes to monitor all those entering. In Shenzhen, two cartoon police characters are displayed on all computer screens as a reminder to internet users that they are being 'watched' and should not search for banned sites or topics, a strategy also being expanded to other cities.

This self-censorship stretches right up from individual users, cowed by threats from the state, to the world's biggest IT companies. The price of their slice of the Chinese market has been great and it is users of their services that are bearing some of the cost, in the form of abuses of their rights.

Hardware companies Cisco and Sun Microsystems have reportedly cooperated closely with the Chinese authorities to build monitoring and filtering technologies. Microsoft closed down the blog of Zhao Jing, a Beijing-based researcher for the New York Times, at the request of the government. Google has been stung by criticism for ignoring its 'Don't be evil' motto and launching a new China-based search engine **Google.cn** which gives censored results on sensitive subjects like Tiananmen Square, Tibet independence or the work of organisations like our own.

Of course, companies argue that these human rights abuses aren't their fault – they are bringing the internet to China, but in doing so must abide by local laws. But this argument doesn't get them off the hook. Companies do have a responsibility to uphold human rights and to avoid colluding with human rights abusers while conducting their business. The *UN Norms for Business*, while not legally-binding, are a benchmark for companies' human rights performance. They clarify that companies are responsible for ensuring that their actions do not contribute to or benefit from human rights abuses. It would be hard to argue that selling the technology used to monitor private emails or censor internet access is in keeping with these principles. A company that sells technology or equipment knowing that it can be used for repression is in effect a partner in repression.

Microsoft has also been implicated in abuses in other countries. Amnesty is concerned by the company's cooperation with the Israeli authorities to prosecute nuclear whistle-blower Mordechai Vanunu for communicating with foreign journalists. Vanunu was imprisoned for over 18 years after he disclosed Israel's nuclear capabilities to the UK media, and only released under strict conditions – confined to Israel and forbidden from talking to foreigners. Microsoft has reportedly complied with government demands for his computer records, which could lead to him being sent back to prison.

Internet repression is not confined to China, and the Chinese model is already being copied by other repressive regimes. Filtering technology exists in numerous other countries: Iran, for example, recently announced that it would be able to monitor every citizen's web use. Amnesty is campaigning for imprisoned web users in Tunisia and Vietnam. We recently highlighted the case of Sayed Ahmad Sayed Sigarchi, an Iranian blogger who was reportedly subjected to 30 lashes in Tabriz Prison in October last year while serving a four-month sentence. He was arrested in connection with a blog he had started in 2003, and convicted of 'insulting the Leader and senior officials' and 'propaganda against the system'.

Whilst Amnesty International recognizes the right of governments to trace those using the internet to commit internationally recognised crimes, there is a real danger of there being 'two

internets'— one that is an arena for the free and peaceful exchange of ideas, and another that is a tool for political oppression. It is a danger that threatens to undermine the very principle on which the internet was founded.

But the internet is a powerful tool enabling ordinary people to take action to protect human rights. Irrepressible.info will harness this to take on the companies and governments that are repressing internet users around the world. Google, Microsoft and Yahoo! all claim to put their users first; we aim to use irrepressible.info's mass demonstration of people's belief in internet freedom to demonstrate that their users demand change.

In October 2005 Amnesty International and SilverSurfers.net launched an online appeal for a Vietnamese man imprisoned for 12 years for using the internet. Nguyen Khac Toan, a maths teacher and businessman, was imprisoned in 2002 after a trial lasting less than a day. His case was one of three 'cyber dissidents' from Vietnam profiled by Amnesty. Each of the three was imprisoned - after separate trials in 2002 and 2003 - for posting articles online about democracy, human rights and peaceful protests in Vietnam, or sending such information out of Vietnam.

The campaign involved SilverSurfers.net users from all over the UK sending email appeals directly to the Vietnamese authorities calling for the 50-year-old prisoner of conscience to be immediately released. Amnesty members all over the world also responded to a 'web action' on the Amnesty site and wrote to the Vietnamese government. In January this year Nguyen Khac Toan was released after four years in prison. He remains under house arrest, however, and Amnesty members continue to campaign for all the restrictions placed on him to be lifted.

The case of Nguyen Khac Toan shows how Peter Benenson's vision is as relevant today as it was back in 1961. People are still being imprisoned for peacefully saying what they believe. And others, outraged at this repression, are doing something about it.

Many things have changed in the last 45 years – from a toast in a Portuguese café to a chat-room accessed in Vietnam - but some things haven't changed. States are still trying to clamp down on dissent. There are still those who try to repress the human voice. But we are clear in our belief that the power of people to speak out and resist has not changed either. Amnesty International started with one article, in one newspaper, written by one person. 45 years later we are a powerful global movement of more than 1.8 million ordinary people who refuse to be silenced.

It has never been more important to stand up for human rights. You can join our movement and add your voice to the thousands of other Amnesty members. If you believe in freedom of expression, and in the power of the internet, we ask you to sign our pledge and support irrepressible.info.

As Peter concluded in his Observer article:

'...governments are prepared to follow only where public opinion leads. Pressure of opinion...brought about the emancipation of the slaves. It is now for man to insist upon the same freedom for his mind as he has won for his body.'

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