

New York Times, August 30, 2001

U.S. May Help Chinese Evade Net Censorship

By JENNIFER 8. LEE

The United States government agencies that once tried to breach the Iron Curtain with radio broadcasts are taking the information war to the Internet, hoping to finance an American-based computer network designed to thwart attempts by the Chinese government to censor the World Wide Web for users in China.

Government officials and private architects of the plan say the program would be financed by the International Broadcasting Bureau, parent agency of the Voice of America, which has been presenting the American view abroad — mostly by radio — for decades. It would mark a significant expansion of the long-running information war between China and the United States.

The agency is in advanced discussions with Safeweb, a small company based in Emeryville, Calif., which has received financing from the venture capital arm of the Central Intelligence Agency, In-Q-Tel. The discussions were confirmed by parties on both sides.

Safeweb currently runs its own worldwide network of about 100 privacy servers — computers that help disguise what Web sites a user is seeking to view — which are popular with users in China. The privacy servers have been a continuing target for the Chinese government, which has blocked most of them in recent weeks.

The bureau would provide money for new computers to run Safeweb software specifically tailored for the Chinese audience and intended to be more resistant to blocking by the government. It would also cover some of the costs of network bandwidth to carry the the Internet traffic, but would not act as host for the computers itself.

The plan would initially pay for around a dozen computers, with an option to grow to a larger number after the new federal fiscal year begins on Oct. 1. The project would be financed from a

Congressional allocation of \$5 million last year intended to improve broadcasting to China, including both Internet and radio. Of that \$5 million, \$800,000 was approved for "Internet and multimedia enhancement," some of which is scheduled for use on this project.

"We recognized that we have an obligation to reach out to our audience in ways that are effective, that includes the Internet," said Tish King, a spokeswoman for the International Broadcasting Bureau.

To that end, Voice of America also started VOANews.com to make news available worldwide on the Internet. Currently, audio broadcasts in over 53 languages are streamed live and archived on the site. Text is archived in almost all the languages.

Voice of America has been developing an Internet strategy to reach an audience in China with a daily newsletter in Chinese that is e-mailed to 180,000 people and a Chinese-language news Web site.

In addition to a Chinese-language Web site, Radio Free Asia also maintains Web sites aimed at ethnic minority groups in China like Tibetans and Uighurs, who are concentrated in the northwest region of Xinjiang.

But the Chinese government has sporadically jammed the radio broadcasts from Voice of America since 1989 and from Radio Free Asia since 1997, a year after it began, specifically those in Mandarin and Tibetan. The government has also blocked the Chinese-language Web sites of Voice of America since 1997 and Radio Free Asia almost since it began in 1998.

For Chinese leaders, the Internet is a doubled-edged sword, a rapidly evolving medium that brings economic opportunity but remains beyond complete control.

Internet use in China is growing dramatically, seeping from urban universities and businesses to homes and affordable Internet cafes

all over the country. The Chinese government estimates there were over 26 million Internet users in July, compared to only 9 million at the end of 1999.

Periodically, the government tries new ways to tighten control, including police raids. Since April the government has waged a campaign to shut down thousands of unlicensed Internet cafes, and the government has publicized the arrests of over a dozen "Internet dissidents" over the last three years.

The government maintains an elaborate set of rules that requires Internet service providers to electronically filter content that may be pornographic, anti-government, violent, unhealthy or superstitious.

Among sites that are blocked for the vast majority of users are those of The Washington Post (news/quote), Amnesty International and various sites identifying with the Falun Gong spiritual movement, which the Chinese government has accused of being a cult. However, users can access other news sites including ABCnews.com, the British Broadcasting Corporation and USA Today.

Until early this month, the site for The New York Times (news/quote) on the Web was blocked. The blocking was lifted after an interview with President Jiang Zemin by top editors at The Times in which President Jiang was specifically questioned about the blocking of the site.

Chinese Web users have nevertheless found methods to get around the censorship. In a recent study by researchers at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, more than a quarter of Internet users admitted to occasionally using Internet proxy computers, which work similarly to those of Safeweb, while 10 percent admitted to frequent use. That was much higher than was expected, said Guo Liang, one of the researchers.

Among the most popular masquerade services is Safeweb, an 18-month-old company. The technology, dubbed Triangle Boy (after a character in an episode of the sitcom "Seinfeld"), can fool an

electronic filter into thinking Web content is coming from a benign computer server instead of a blocked site like Human Rights Watch.

But the service has become a target for the Chinese government, which has engaged in a cat-and-mouse game with Safeweb, blacklisting the Triangle Boy servers themselves.

"They are becoming increasingly aggressive," said Stephen Hsu, chief executive of Safeweb. "We get these frantic emails from users saying they are totally cut off now."

In addition, Safeweb says, the Chinese government is now blocking e-mail sent to users who request Triangle Boy e-mail addresses. As a response, Safeweb is encouraging users to sign up for free Web-based e-mail accounts at non-Chinese services like Hotmail and Yahoo (news/quote).

Part of the proposal being financed by the International Broadcasting Bureau would have the Triangle Boy servers change their Internet addresses on a regular basis — perhaps as frequently as every few hours — to make them more difficult for the Chinese government to find and block.

Despite government efforts to rein in the Internet, it is playing an emerging political role in China. The study by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, one of the most rigorous Internet studies in China to date, found that 67.5 percent of adult users believe the Internet gives people more opportunity to criticize government policies. And more than 74 percent agree the Internet allows people to "express their political views" and to learn about politics.

"We want to force the Chinese government to accept the pro-democracy consequences of the Internet," said Dr. Hsu. "Up until now the Chinese government has been amazingly successful at having their cake and eating it too."

<http://www.nytimes.com/2001/08/30/technology/30VOIC.html?ex=1000180945&ei=1&en=810>

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