

Roadblocks on the Super-Information Highway

Joe Black

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In the last issue of Workers Solidarity we mentioned the anarchist electronic library Spunk Press. Some of our readers may have seen it mentioned since in the Sunday Times (British) as part of a complicated conspiracy theory which attempted to link it to everything from drug making to school riots to bank-robbing to “outlawed loyalist paramilitary groups”!!

The same weekend a computer bulletin board was raided in Italy and the administrators of it charged with “association with intent to subvert the democratic order”. This is a charge which carries a penalty for those convicted of 7 to 15 years imprisonment. More recently articles in the US media and a paper published by the Rand institute have warned of the danger of the internet making Mexico ungovernable through ‘netwar’. Essentially this refers to the posting of EZLN communiqués and the organisation of anti-repression demonstrations through mailing lists.

Anarchists are aware that capitalism will not allow ‘freedom of information’ in any real sense. The mass media is all state owned or owned by wealthy corporations. Its primary role is not to tell us about the world we live in but rather to “manufacture consent” (defining the limits of ‘legitimate’ debate). As long as access to the internet was confined to a narrow layer of academics and students, freedom of expression was permitted. But now that it starts to become a mass medium of communication the state is seeking to impose limits on this expression.

In order to do so, it is trying to label those it wishes to silence as ‘terrorists’. That is the purpose of all the events listed above. A month after the Italian raids the material seized was returned. In a press release Luc Pac, one of those charged, pointed out “The complete restitution of the material seized suggests that nothing useful was found amongst it that might confirm the charges laid out in the authorities’ original warrants. In any case, the three magistrates who ordered the raids have been unable to find the time to meet with us over the past 23 days; similarly, the Carabinieri (Police) who actually returned the seized goods refused to answer any questions concerning the enquiry or its future course. ”

Effector on-line, a publication of the Electronic Frontier Foundation [the EFF is a ‘highly respected’ lobbying body supported by many parts of the computer industry] describes the attacks on Spunk Press as “replete with errors and remarkably biased...Additionally it makes many wild and highly unrealistic accusations of global anarchist conspiracy. No relevant evidence or

sources are cited.” Many of those involved with Spunk Press suspect that the ultimate ‘source’ of this article is MI5, desperately seeking a justification for their funding now that the Cold War is over.

What is being attacked is the threat of effective opposition to state repression. The attacks on the mailing lists carrying EZLN communiqués prompted a debate on the internet as to whether it was really that effective or was just a lot of “alienated bourgeois professors” talking to each other. The lists played a key part in not only getting out the information but also organising opposition to the January invasion by the Mexican army within hours of it happening. Demonstrations and occupations have been reported on it from Italy, France, USA, Canada and Ireland along with other countries.

These lists gave activists not only detailed first hand accounts of torture being used by the Mexican state but also exposed the reasons for the invasion in the form of a memo from Chase Bank saying that if the government wanted to continue receiving loans it would have to eliminate the Zapatista’s. The liberal mainstream media may be willing to cover events in the third world from the point of view of “look what the nasty tin pot dictator is doing”. It is generally unwilling to expose the involvement of western companies and governments as the puppet masters behind this repression. Eyewitness accounts circulated on mailing lists have also revealed the use of US ‘War on Drugs’ helicopters by the Mexican army in strafing civilian targets.

Although the importance of the Chiapas related mailing lists should not be over estimated they have served as a conduit through which the truth about what is really going on in Mexico can flow. Normally it takes months or years for these stories to emerge, now it is taking days or hours. At the time of writing it has become obvious that the Mexican army is pursuing a policy of causing food shortages in Chiapas. Although they have now left many of the villages they occupied they destroyed all or most of the foodstuffs before leaving. Reports such as this from Santa Elana are typical “As in Ibarra, they returned to find their corn, beans and coffee (constituting a six-month food supply) scattered and eaten by animals, and their houses ransacked.”

It is this sort of information that the state wants to censor from the internet. The censorship will be camouflaged by a mist of lies, hidden behind buzz words like pornography, drugs and terrorism. The last two months have seen the first shots in this battle and have seen some liberals falling into line in this new state offensive. According to the Sunday Times, Chris Smith, Labour’s Heritage spokesman, said the findings of their article showed the need for international agreements to ban groups preaching violence from the information super-highway.

The states job will not be easy however. The current structure of the internet makes effectively censoring it a very difficult prospect. And the crude attempts to set activists up for persecution has already met a heated response as thousands have e-mailed protest letters to some of the publications involved. One magazine was forced to publish a double page of letters protesting its original article. Many of these letters came from workers within the computer industry, protesting against the attempt to victimise fellow workers. A key factor in keeping the information freely flowing will be how far workers using and maintaining the net go along with or oppose this censorship.

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