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Asia - Thailand

Geolocated censorship

Dictators can thank Twitter for its new censorship policy

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"Twitter Revolutions" – the term is widely used and has been applied to the Arab spring, not only on the virtual "walls" of Facebook but also on the real walls of Middle East capitals where messages of support and thanks to the social networking website have appeared.

But could it already be becoming obsolete? Could Twitter lose the fund of sympathy it has built up among human rights activists in recent months?

Such a turn of events is no longer improbable, as indicated by the outraged reaction of some Internet users and dissidents throughout the world to the site's [announcement](#) that it was introducing [country-specific censorship](#) in order to satisfy local laws in countries where it hopes to develop its business.

Cooperation with Internet censors

The first reaction by Chinese dissident **Ai Weiwei** was to [threaten to stop tweeting](#) if Twitter began censoring content. The noted Egyptian blogger **Wael Abbas** [said on Al Jazeera television](#):

"I know that some of the people working for Twitter were activists ... If we look at countries like Egypt, like Syria, like Yemen, of course all our tweets are breaking the law. And that's what activists do, they break the law because they want to make changes to these unjust laws. They have the right to do that, and if you prevent them from this right then you are attacking human rights itself."

In a [letter](#) to Twitter's executive chairman, Jack Dorsey on 27 January, Reporters Without Borders criticised the site's action as potential cooperation with Internet censors and urged the company to reverse its decision.

Far be it from us to turn Twitter into the new public enemy of the Internet. Its famous bluebird logo has up to now been in credit so far as freedom of expression is concerned. The social networking site made public requests from the U.S. Department of Justice for access to the personal details of WikiLeaks staff or their relatives and friends who have Twitter accounts.

It also developed the Speak2Tweet application to allow Egyptians to continue tweeting despite being deprived of Internet access at the height of the demonstrations in Cairo's Tahrir Square.

Internet enemies do exist

We have not chosen the wrong target. Internet enemies do exist. The Chinese, Iranian, Syrian and Vietnamese government, to name just a few, control and censor the Web.

Cyber dissidents who courageously take a stand against them online are tracked down in the real world. It is no coincidence that [the Thai government was the first to welcome Twitter's decision](#). It has itself [blocked tens of thousands of Web pages](#), in particular on the grounds of *lèse-majesté*, a charge used as a weapon against government critics.

It is only to be expected that the same government will ask Twitter to withdraw messages about, for example, who will succeed the country's ailing monarch. Such a move would be in line with [article 112 of the Thai criminal code](#), which provides for a prison sentence of between three and 15 years for anyone who "defames, insults or threatens the King, Queen, the Heir-apparent or the Regent".

Tomorrow, the Bahraini authorities could well ask Twitter to remove messages about the demonstrations in Manama and the ruthless suppression carried out by the government. Vietnamese might no longer be able to use Twitter Vietnam to expose the environmental damage caused by bauxite mining. Will the accounts of cyber dissidents in Syria be deactivated at the request of President Bashar al-Assad's government?

A spiral of censorship

A Twitter representative has made a promise that all requests will be dealt with on a case-by-case basis and the question of freedom of expression will be taken into account in any decision to withhold content.

Twitter has also suggested that in future it will be able to censor tweets in only one country, and leave them accessible elsewhere in the world. The company has undertaken to show transparency by publishing removal requests on the [Chilling Effects website](#). That is hardly enough.

We fear that Twitter may be drawn into an uncontrollable spiral of censorship imposed by increasingly repressive legislation. This fear is well-founded bearing in mind Twitter's argument that implies the interpretation of freedom of expression could vary from country to country.

This is unacceptable — worse still, it is dangerous. It destroys the notion of an Internet that is free and interconnected, to the benefit of a structure based on national networks regulated by local laws and restrictions that are as disparate as they are arbitrary. According to this logic, it would follow that a French Internet would not look the same as those of our European or American neighbours.

The new policy was announced after Dorsey, the founder of Twitter, visited China and expressed the hope that Twitter would one day be permitted there. It should be noted that this is a country whose speciality is [recruiting private companies as part of its efforts to beef up censorship of the Web](#) and is not likely to be content with the removal of the odd tweet.

It would like the social network to join the self-censorship pact already signed by other Internet giants such as Yahoo or, at one time, Google which has since decided to close down its local site google.cn. If Twitter hopes to stay in China, it will be forced to set up a system of post-publication censorship based on banned topics or keywords.

What added value could Twitter provide in that case, as compared with micro-blogging sites such as Sina Weibo, which have proved to be highly successful but are forced to cooperate with the authorities? Can one imagine there would some day be a sanitised version of Twitter, cleansed of all references to Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo?

Twitter's brand image

It is vital that Twitter's management reassess the repercussions of the new strategy on freedom of information and also on the company's future development. The commercial benefits achieved in new markets must not be the only criterion taken into account.

At stake is Twitter's brand image among users, which depends to a large extent on the position it takes in matters of freedom of expression.

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