

## 'Net ninjas' take on web censorship

**A small group of 'net commandos' at the University of Toronto are looking to help people get around government controls on the internet, as technology correspondent Clark Boyd reports.**

Ron Deibert's computer screensaver is a two-word message. It spins in those rare moments when the political science professor's machine is idle. It reads "Hack Off".

It is a fitting sentiment, given Prof Deibert's loyalty to the original idea of hacking.

"Traditionally, the term was associated with someone who is interested in opening up their technology, understanding how it works, not accepting something shrink-wrapped," he said.

"And to me, that's not just a hobby or something that geeks do, that's actually a skill that is fundamental to a liberal, democratic society.

"Citizens can't just accept technology at face value. They need to open the lid, so to speak, understand how it works, beneath the surface," he explained.

Prof Deibert's belief that computer science can aid civic activism led him to establish the Citizen Lab in 2001.

"What I wanted to do was create a hothouse environment, where I could bring together researchers, students, in different disciplines - computer science, political science - in one setting where they could feed off each other, complement each other's specialties.

"I like to think of this area as 'hacktivism', the combination of hacking in the traditional sense of the term, and social and political activism."

### **Code ninjas**

Prof Deibert wanted to create an internet commando unit that could employ its technical skills toward activist ends.

**From China to Saudi Arabia to Iran to Cuba to Uzbekistan,  
it's a trend we're seeing grow worldwide**  
Nart Villeneuve, Citizen Lab

He secured non-profit funding, as well as a commitment from the University of Toronto and then scoured the political science department for student recruits.

He found Nart Villeneuve, a hacker with a degree in Peace and Conflict Studies.

Working out of the lab's basement bunker on the University of Toronto's campus, Mr Villeneuve explained how the work of the Citizen's Lab centres on a project called the OpenNet Initiative.

"We're attempting to technically confirm reports that we get in various countries that the reason why they can't access certain websites is because the government or the internet service provider is deliberately blocking access to those websites, as opposed to it being some network error or some other reason," he said.

Simply put, the Citizen Lab is trying to find out which websites a particular government or internet provider might be blocking, and how they are blocking it.

"From China to Saudi Arabia to Iran to Cuba to Uzbekistan, it's a trend we're seeing grow worldwide,"

said Mr Villeneuve.

"We've been studying internet filtering in Iran for the last six months, and they've actually shifted to a superior system of blocking.

"And this system is similar to systems being deployed in other Middle Eastern countries such as Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Syria."

### **Cultural controls**

The Citizen Lab employs all manner of hardware, software and code-writing skills to essentially tap into computer networks around the world, and expose their inner workings.

Michelle Levesque, a computer science student who works for The Citizen Lab, says they also have to tap into human networks and knowledge to get their job done.

"If you have a website that's being blocked, and it's all in Persian, you've no idea why it's being blocked," she said. "It could be some political website, or a gay rights website," she said.

"So you need to get people in who can read these other languages and let you know what the content is, who can give us pointers to the kinds of things that might be blocked, so that we know what to check."

The Citizen Lab also actively develops circumvention technologies designed to help citizens in say, Saudi Arabia, get around government imposed blocks that restrict internet content.

"Saudi Arabia says explicitly that they censor the internet to preserve their Islamic culture and heritage, which is a pretty valid claim to make," explained the lab's Graeme Bunton.

"For us to start looking at ways to circumvent that is a difficult challenge for us. We do think that information should be free, but we do need to find a balance for respect for sovereign states to preserve their own culture."

But Citizen Lab Director Ron Deibert says that nothing the group does is illegal, at least in North America.

"We probe networks, using methods I like to say that hackers, criminals and spies use all the time use all the time," he said.

"I think it's irresponsible for someone in my position as an academic not to use those tools to push the frontier of what's going on, in spite of the controversy that it raises with some law enforcement people.

"Some authoritarian regimes obviously don't like what we're doing. But we feel we're working in support of broader principles of human rights, so don't mind the controversy. Sometimes it helps."

*Clark Boyd is technology correspondent for The World, a BBC World Service and WGBH-Boston co-production*

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