

Illusory Freedoms

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Region: [USA](#)
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On April 19 Google disabled the accounts of Press TV, an Iranian news service. Google denied Press TV access to all its services, including the video streaming platform YouTube and the e-mail service Gmail. The company's move took place without prior notice or subsequent explanation. Iran is a founding member of the United Nations and a country that has not attacked another one for over three centuries. But it resists American hegemony and is therefore a target of military threats from the United States, which has surrounded Iran by dozens of its bases.

Google's action reminded me the swift cancellation by Visa and Mastercard of the accounts collecting donations for Wikileaks in 2011. Its founder Assange had brought upon himself the ire of American officials upset about the revelations of their country's misbehaviour in foreign wars. Similarly, five years later, the National Westminster Bank denied services to the British branch of RT, Russia Today, the TV channel funded by the Russian Federation.

There must be other instances of ready compliance of corporations with the wishes of Western governments in the absence of court injunctions. This readiness brings to light an obvious but often neglected fact, namely that seemingly neutral and transnational services we use every day belong to Western corporations. For example, Expedia, Booking and Airbnb would not allow reservations in the Crimea but welcome customers to reserve lodgings in the territories occupied by Israel since 1967 against the will of its Palestinian population. Some occupied territories are apparently more occupied and deserving of sanctions than others.

Western sanctions are effective because they exploit globalization and the ensuing dependence on Western services, which are assumed to be politically neutral. After all, they belong to the private sector, not to the government. This is a naïve belief in view of the close relations between corporations and governments. The revolving door practice ensures regular interchange between the corridors of political power and the corporate boardrooms. It has also been remarked that governments act as trade unions for the capitalists. The interests of the two are often indistinguishable.

Western governments have long been concerned about cyberwars, hacking attacks and other forms of invisible subversion. Now, their concern has broadened to include "cognitive security". NATO has established an office in Riga, Stratcom, on the border of Russia, to engage in psychological and information activities in order "to promote NATO's military aims". Among other functions, Stratcom signals "pro-Russia " sources to internal security agencies in NATO countries, who, in turn, may pay visits to such identified authors to make sure they are in check, as it happened to a colleague of mine in Montreal who had published articles in English on a website in Russia.

None of this is new to me personally. I grew up in Brezhnev's Soviet Union, where foreign broadcasts in Russian were jammed and dissidents daring to publish abroad were harassed. When emigrating from my native Leningrad in 1973, I would have never believed that such practices would be continued by governments priding themselves for being democratic.

The Internet has brought us seemingly unlimited access to sources of information around the world. Whether we use it or not is another matter. In Winter 2014 I was teaching a course of the history of the 20th century Russia. Even though the course was not compulsory, there were 160 students in the classroom, full capacity. Someone asked me about the events then unfolding in Kiev. In the traditional Jewish manner, I answered the question with a question : « Who among you have opened Ukrainian sites in Western languages in recent days? » Two students raised their hands. The rest, albeit interested in that part of the world since they were taking my course, never bothered to use their computers and smartphones to see what is being said in the country involved.

Freedom can be restricted not only by governments and corporations, but also by our own complacency.

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