

POLICE CLAMP DOWN ON INDEPENDENT ONLINE MEDIA: FBI Seizes Server from Progressive Internet Service Provider

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In an attack on our infrastructure, our movement and the democratic Internet, the FBI seized a server yesterday from one of our cabinets in a colocation facility.

The server is owned by our sister organization, Riseup, and is managed by ECN, a progressive technology provider in Italy.

While the seizure of any equipment is pernicious and damaging, the pointlessness of this seizure suggests an inclination toward extrajudicial punishment and an attempted crackdown on the very possibility of anonymous speech online.

The FBI has told us they are investigating bomb threats targeting the facilities and people at the University of Pittsburgh. They appear to believe that one of the servers used to transmit these threats was an anonymous e-mail server operated by ECN. Anonymous remailers have no logs or traces of who used them, so the FBI will not get any useful information from the stolen machine.

Seizing this machine serves no useful purpose in tracking down or stopping the bomb threats, but it has many serious negative implications. Anonymous e-mail is an important part of the Internet. One of the benefits of Internet technology is the ability to communicate world-wide, and this communication is fundamental to the struggles of the world's people to address many of the world's ills. In a period in which our society has seen massive losses of privacy in which just about everything we do on-line can be tracked, logged, studied and used for all kinds of purposes, anonymous Internet-based communication tools provide shade from the intrusive searchlights of ubiquitous surveillance.

Insiders who reveal government and military malfeasance, corporate whistleblowers, critics within institutions, organizers who fear police repression, and others involved in liberatory struggle can and do use anonymous e-mail. Anonymous e-mail is one of the critical tools of the democracy movement unfolding worldwide, including the Middle East. Without anonymous communications, such movements would have had even greater difficulty organizing and would face greater risks and repression. Without anonymous communications, our already-constrained knowledge of what government and corporations actually do in our name and against our interests would be even more limited. Without anonymous communications, the Internet becomes little more than a caricature of its potential as a tool for building a just global society.

When authorities forcibly remove a computer from an anonymous communications network,

they weaken that network and set a precedent for attack on anonymity in general. If we lose anonymous e-mail, we effectively lose the Internet as a tool for organizing and change.

The use of anonymous communications for bomb threats is horrible. We at MF/PL have never condoned threats of violence or the use of Internet technology to harm people. Such use runs counter to our vision of the reason the Internet exists and its proper use. We are deeply saddened by the pain caused so many people by these sociopathic activities.

However, we cannot stop malicious anonymous e-mail without also destroying the ability to use anonymous e-mail for beneficial purposes. In the other hand, according to the news, the bomb threats continue to arrive at University of Pittsburgh after this outrageous seizure. There is no positive outcome to this action by the FBI.

We will defend our members' privacy and their data. We will also aggressively seek the return of the computer the FBI took and other legal remedies against those who collaborated in the violation of our rights. We remain committed to defending the use and protection of anonymous communication world-wide, and to the advancement of the Internet as a tool for liberatory change and social justice.

A press release follows:

Riseup Networks, Devin Theriot-Orr, 206-708-8740, sunbird@riseup.net May First/People Link, Jamie McClelland, 917-509-5734, jm@mayfirst.org ECN: Isole Nella Rete, inr@riseup.net

On Wednesday, April 18, at approximately 16:00 ET, U.S. Federal authorities removed a server from a colocation facility shared by Riseup Networks and May First/People Link in New York City.

The seized server was operated by the European Counter Network ("ECN"), the oldest independent internet service provider in Europe, who, among many other things, provided an anonymous remailer service, Mixmaster, that was the target of an FBI investigation into the bomb threats against the University of Pittsburgh.

"The company running the facility has confirmed that the server was removed in conjunction with a search warrant issued by the FBI," said May First/People Link director Jamie McClelland. "The server seizure is not only an attack against us, but an attack against all users of the Internet who depend on anonymous communication."

Disrupted in this seizure were academics, artists, historians, feminist groups, gay rights groups, community centers, documentation and software archives and free speech groups. The server included the mailing list "cyber rights" (the oldest discussion list in Italy to discuss this topic), a Mexican migrant solidarity group, and other groups working to support indigenous groups and workers in Latin America, the Caribbean and Africa. In total, over 300 email accounts, between 50-80 email lists, and several other websites have been taken off the Internet by this action. None are alleged to be involved in the anonymous bomb threats.

"The FBI is using a sledgehammer approach, shutting down service to hundreds of users due to the actions of one anonymous person," said Devin Theriot-Orr, a spokesperson for Riseup. "This is particularly misguided because there is unlikely to be any information on the server regarding the source of the threatening emails."

“We sympathize with the University of Pittsburgh community who have had to deal with this frightening disruption for weeks. We oppose such threatening actions. However, taking this server won’t stop these bomb threats. The only effect it has is to also disrupt e-mail and websites for thousands of unrelated people,” continues Mr. Theriot-Orr. “Furthermore, the network of anonymous remailers that exists is not harmed by taking this machine. So we cannot help but wonder why such drastic action was taken when authorities knew that the server contained no useful information that would help in their investigation.”

The FBI purportedly seized the server because it was hosting an anonymous remailer called Mixmaster. Anonymous remailers are used to send email anonymously, or pseudonymously. Like other anonymizing services such as the Tor network, these remailers are widely used to protect the identity of human rights activists who place themselves and their families in grave danger by reporting information about abuses. Remailers are also important for corporate whistle blowers, democracy activists working under repressive regimes, and others to communicate vital information that would otherwise go un-reported.

The Mixmaster software is specifically designed to make it impossible for anyone to trace the emails. The system does not record logs of connections, details of who sent messages, or how they were routed. This is because the Mixmaster network is specifically designed to resist censorship, and support privacy and anonymity. Unfortunately, some people misuse the network. However, compared to the rate of legitimate use, the abuse rate is very low. There is therefore no legitimate purpose for the FBI to seize this server because they will not be able to obtain any information about the sender. This is plainly extrajudicial punishment and an attack on free speech and anonymity on the internet and serves as a chilling effect on others providers of anonymous remailers or other anonymous services.

MayFirst/People Link (mayfirst.org) is a politically-progressive member-run and controlled organization that redefines the concept of “Internet Service Provider” in a collective and collaborative way. May First/People Link’s members are organizers and activists who elect a Leadership Committee to direct the organization. Like a coop, members pay dues, buy equipment and then share that equipment for websites, email, email lists, and other Internet purposes.

Riseup Networks (riseup.net) provides online communication tools for people and groups working on liberatory social change. Riseup creates democratic alternatives and practices self-determination by controlling our own secure means of communications.

ECN (European Counter Network - ecn.org) is the oldest independent service provider in Europe providing free email accounts, mailing lists, and websites to organizations, activists, and movements that are involved in human rights, freedom of speech and information in Italy and Europe. ECN is anti-fascist and works towards a just and equal society. Years ago, before sites like Youtube and Vimeo existed, ECN created a platform called NGV where people could upload and share independent video of human rights violations. Nowadays ECN works primarily with anti-fascist and anti-Nazi movements in all of Europe, providing space and resources to political and social centers.

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