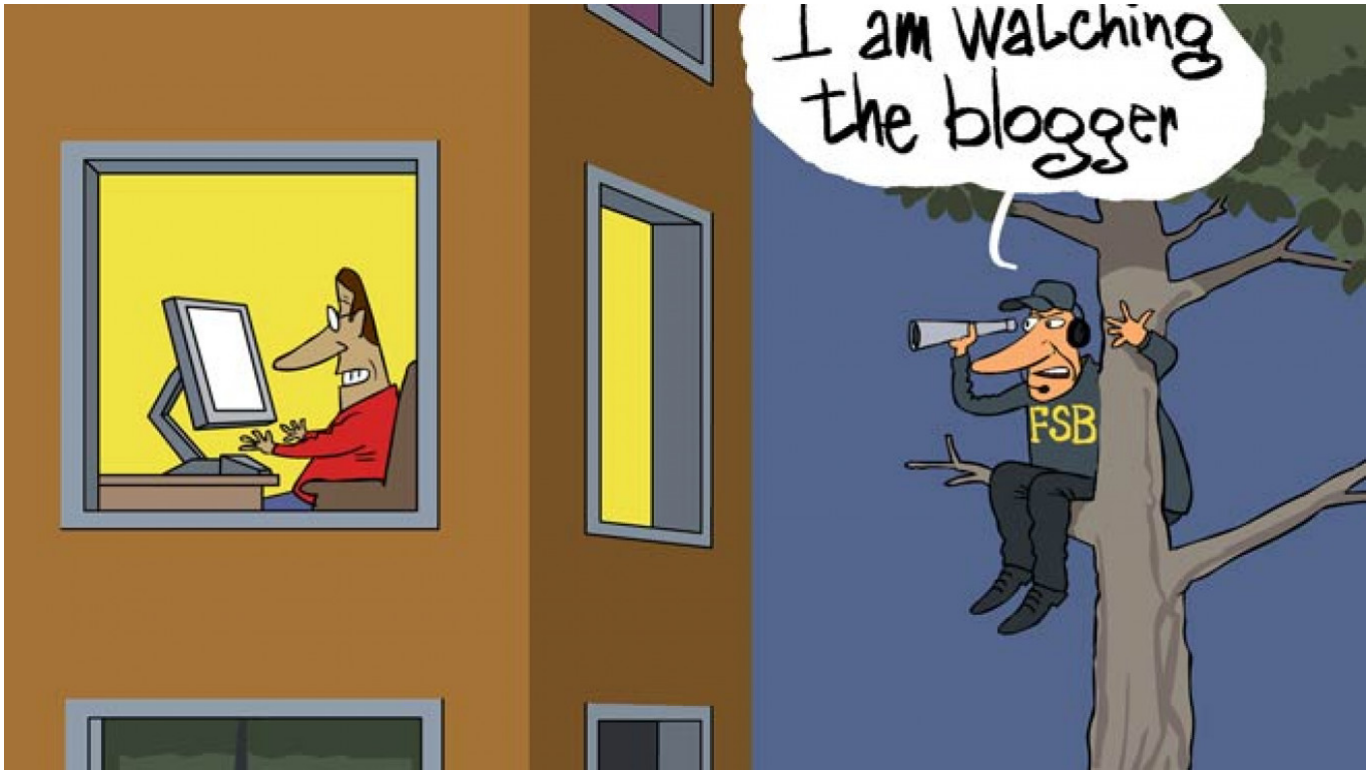
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An Internet Censorship Law Right Out of '1984'

By Victor Davidoff

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If there had been Internet when George Orwell wrote "1984," the author would certainly have invented laws like the one passed in its second reading by the State Duma last week.

The law restricts the content of all blogs, including those on social networks, but it stipulates particular conditions for bloggers whose number of "daily readers" exceeds 3,000. In the best newspeak tradition, the law does not state how the number of daily readers will be determined, and no one knows how to do it — especially on social networks where the number of visits to a page is not public.

A new bill will require Intenet
and social network providers
to give the FSB full access
to users' posts and e-mails.

But the government has an easy way around this. Internet providers and the owners of social networks will be required to provide this information to the authorities so that bloggers can be entered into a special state registry, which will contain detailed information about them, such as phone numbers and home addresses.

This law places bloggers in a Catch-22 situation. On the one hand, they have all the responsibilities of a media organization. On the other hand, the law specifically forbids them from registering as a media outlet. A journalist has the right to make official inquiries to check facts, but bloggers do not. At the same time, however, bloggers are still required to somehow "certify the factuality of the information on their blogs."

Anti-corruption bloggers like Alexei Navalny have been able to publish information about undeclared luxury properties in the U.S. and Europe owned by government officials. But that will stop, since the law prohibits publication of "information about citizens' location, domicile, personal and family lives."

That is not all that will be banned. The long list of prohibitions includes "publication of information intended to defame specific categories of citizens" based on characteristics including attitude toward religion, profession or political beliefs," as well as publication of "extremist materials."

To translate this from newspeak, you need to know how broadly "extremism" is understood by Russian courts. In 2009, the Tatarstan blogger Irek Murtazin was found guilty of "inciting hatred and hostility" toward the authorities among the population of Tatarstan. And the blogger Boris Stomakhin just received a 6 1/2 year sentence for justifying terrorism. If you think this was for a post praising Osama bin Laden, think again. It was for a post about the terrorist act that killed Emperor Alexander II in 1881, among other topics.

The real Orwellian touch is making bloggers responsible not only for the information in their posts, but also for the information in comments by other users.

The law, which will likely be passed, will instantly put Russia in first place for Internet censorship. Even China, which until recently was No. 1 in that category, will be far behind. This change at the top of the list reflects the two countries' different approaches to the Internet. The Chinese leaders have a complex relationship with the World Wide Web, but they understand that it is a key factor in the country's economic development. But Russian authorities' understanding of the Internet is very different.

Their concept was expressed in short form by the country's Big Brother-in-chief, President Vladimir Putin. At a news conference on Thursday he said: "The Internet emerged as a special operation of the CIA. And it has continued to be developed along these lines."

Responding to Putin's preference to block the transfer of information abroad, the new law introduces norms that will be catastrophic for Russia's blogosphere. They require that all e-mail providers and social network owners store information about the users, their posts and e-mail communications on servers in Russia. And these providers will be required to give FSB operatives full access to monitor traffic — that is, to eavesdrop on users.

Russian Internet companies have already stated their negative opinion of the new law. "If

there is excessive regulation of the Internet, which would require companies to apply for special licenses from state agencies to use their equipment and software, Russia will lose the Internet as a growth industry in our country," said Dmitry Grishin, the CEO of Mail.ru in an interview to Rbc.ru.

Foreign companies have not yet given official commentary, but it is already clear that they cannot meet the law's requirements. Besides the fact that building data centers in Russia is expensive and complicated, following this law would entail violating privacy laws in their home countries, which apply to their operations worldwide.

Anton Nosik, a prominent Internet analyst, thinks that the authorities will almost surely block Russians' access to Facebook and Twitter after the law comes into effect on Aug. 1. Nosik believes that this "would be the logical progression in Russian legislation on censorship, which is largely aimed at limiting uncontrolled discussions and criticism of the authorities."

If Nosik's prediction comes true, users will have to laugh at the bitter joke by popular micro-blogger Arseny Bobrovsky, aka @KermlinRussia: "The Russian Internet is 20 years old. What a shame to die so young."

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