

FBI shuts down 20 antiwar web sites: an unprecedented act of Internet censorship

By the Editorial Board
13 October 2004

The US government move to shut down nearly two dozen antiwar, anti-globalization web sites on October 7 is an unprecedented exercise of police power against political dissent on the Internet. The *World Socialist Web Site* denounces the attack on the Indymedia sites and demands a halt to all such attempts at suppressing political criticism of the US government.

The shutdown was carried out by Rackspace, a US-based web-hosting company with offices in San Antonio, Texas, and greater London, in response to an order from the FBI requiring it to turn over two of its British servers that were hosting dozens of Indymedia sites. There are conflicting accounts of the legal process, with Indymedia attributing the order to a US federal district court, while the Electronic Freedom Foundation, which is supplying legal representation to the group, describes it as a “commissioner’s order” directly from the FBI itself.

At least 20 national web sites, including those for Brazil, Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Uruguay were taken down when the hard drives for the servers were given to the FBI. Most of the sites were restored to service by the end of the weekend, but they may have lost significant digital content because of the removal of the hardware.

The seizure appeared to be politically timed. It came just one week before the start of the third session of the European Social Forum (ESF), a large gathering of antiwar and anti-globalization activists, scheduled to take place in London October 15-17. The ESF was to be broadcast live via streaming video on many of the Indymedia sites.

The FBI said the action was taken at the request of Italian and Swiss authorities, under the Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty, which provides for cooperative efforts by various national police agencies against

international terrorism, kidnapping and money laundering. According to a statement issued by the web-hosting firm, “Rackspace is acting as a good corporate citizen and is cooperating with international law enforcement authorities.”

The invocation of such a treaty against a group of left-wing web sites with no link to any form of terrorism is an outrageous smear. Indymedia was formed in 1999 to provide live on-the-spot coverage of the anti-globalization protests in Seattle. It has expanded into a worldwide network of 140 locally based sites that provide extensive coverage of political activities that are frequently blacked out by the corporate-controlled media.

According to a statement issued by the Indymedia network, the group was asked by the FBI last month to remove a story posted on one its member sites about Swiss undercover police. The story included photographs of two secret police officers who had acted as agents provocateurs during anti-globalization protests last year outside the G-8 summit meeting in Evian, France. The FBI conceded that the posting of this information did not violate any US law, and Indymedia did not take down the information.

The two policemen had engaged in violent actions in the center of Geneva, the Swiss city adjacent to Evian, where most of the anti-globalization protests took place. These provocations became the pretext for police attacks on peaceful demonstrators. The Indymedia report gave the names and addresses of the undercover cops as well as their photographs.

Indymedia said it could not be sure that the FBI action was related to the Swiss police exposure “since the order was issued to Rackspace and not to Indymedia.” Two other possible motives have been suggested: one relating to the politics of Italy, the other

relating to the US elections.

According to some Internet reports, the federal prosecutor for the Italian city of Bologna, Marina Plazzi, has begun an investigation of Indymedia for possible “support of terrorism,” claiming a link between the group and attacks on Italian soldiers in the Iraqi city of Nasiriya last November. Plazzi claims to have contacted the FBI as well as the Italian Department of Justice.

Several leaders of the neo-fascist National Alliance party have demanded the outright shutdown of Indymedia, including Alessandra Mussolini, granddaughter of the fascist dictator. National Alliance leader Gianfranco Fini is the deputy prime minister in the coalition government headed by billionaire Silvio Berlusconi, and a fervent supporter of Italian participation in the occupation of Iraq.

According to the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), which condemned the Indymedia shutdown, this action may be related to a court case heard September 30 in San Jose, California, against some Indymedia activists who helped expose security flaws in the electronic voting machines that will be used by tens of millions of voters in the November 2 US elections.

Aidan White, general secretary of the IFJ, declared, “We have witnessed an intolerable and intrusive international police operation against a network specializing in independent journalism.... The seizing of computers and the high profile nature of this incident suggest that someone wanted to stifle these independent voices in journalism.”

A representative of the US-based Electronic Freedom Foundation said, “The Constitution does not permit the government unilaterally to cut off the speech of an independent media outlet, especially without providing a reason or even allowing Indymedia the information necessary to contest the seizure.”

Reporters Without Borders, an international group defending freedom of the press, also condemned the seizure of computer equipment in an open letter to David Blunkett, the British Home Secretary. The letter declared: “This intervention is the responsibility of the British authorities because it relates to a hosting company operating on their territory. Closure of websites is a serious step, the reasons for which should definitely be made public.”

This intervention by American police to shut down antiwar web sites has been widely reported in Europe, with accounts carried in the British *Guardian* and *Independent* and by the French news agency Agence France-Presse, among others. But nothing has appeared as yet in the American mass media. This silence only underscores the role of the American corporate media as the accomplice of the Bush administration’s attacks on democratic rights, both at home and abroad.

The suggested connection between the Indymedia shutdown and the US elections is especially significant. At the September 30 court hearing in northern California, federal judge Jeremy Fogel ruled in favor of two Swarthmore College students and the Online Policy Group, an Internet service provider that hosts an Indymedia site, in their suit against Diebold Election Systems, a leading manufacturer of electronic touch-screen voting machines.

The two students had web-posted internal Diebold company memos describing flaws in the software of the voting machines that would permit vote rigging and alteration of vote totals. The Online Policy Group was a party to the suit because it served as the Internet service provider for the San Francisco Bay Area Indymedia web site, which posted a link to the memos.

Diebold had brought lawsuits against several other groups that posted the memos, but the two students, active in the Swarthmore Coalition for the Digital Commons, filed a civil suit against Diebold claiming that it had unfairly used provisions of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act.

Judge Fogel ruled that Diebold had violated provisions in the act that make it illegal to knowingly misuse copyright law to stifle free speech. He ordered the giant manufacturer to pay damages as well as court costs and lawyers’ fees.

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>