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Exiled journalists circumvent censors by text messaging

By Declan McCullagh
http://news.com.com/Exiled+journalists+circumvent+censors+by+text+messaging/2100-1028_3-6160323.html

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PARIS--Journalists writing about Zimbabwe's repressive government have found a new way to circumvent their censors: sending text messages via cell phone.

A radio station hounded out of the country by Zimbabwean strongman President Robert Mugabe has found its e-mails are monitored and shortwave broadcasts are blocked by Chinese-built jamming devices, the station manager said at a press freedom conference here on Friday.

But, said SW Radio Africa founder Gerry Jackson, the censors haven't caught on yet to text messaging. It's a challenge to compress "the complexity of Zimbabwe's news into 160 characters including spaces," Jackson said. "That's what I do every day."

Mugabe has consolidated his iron grip on power over the last 25 years by harassing journalists, threatening political opponents, and banning the sale of independent newspapers. Allegations of torture appear frequently in reports by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, and the free-speech advocacy group Reporters Without Borders has dubbed Mugabe a "predator of press freedom." Inflation is running at around 1,600 percent annually and food shortages are common.

"Internet service providers have to give the CIO, the secret police, access to e-mails if asked to do so," Jackson said, referring to the Central Intelligence Organization. "The penalty for noncompliance is two years in jail." Jackson fled the country after security forces pulled the plug on her station and now she broadcasts from outside London.

But the censorship, she said, has odd limits. "The (radio) jammers need time off and don't work weekends, and of course we do," Jackson said.

Mugabe told a United Nations Internet summit in November 2005 that "those who have supported nihilistic and disorderly freedom of expression are beginning to see the fruits" of their efforts. Last fall, Zimbabwe said mobile phones were threatening national security and need more monitoring because they are "dangerous to the state." The country also has had problems paying its bills for its Internet connection.

The two-day conference was organized by the World Press Freedom Committee and the World Association of Newspapers and was held at UNESCO's Paris headquarters.

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