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Tech firms ‘facilitating censorship’ of LGBTIQ people must be held to account

Study of six countries – from Indonesia to Russia – reveals what LGBTIQ people and rights activists face online, and what the consequences are

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Protesters in London denouncing anti-LGBT legislation in Russia | Zefrog / Alamy Stock Photo

Rights advocates should focus more of their attention on private tech and internet companies that are enabling the censorship of LGBTIQ people and communities.

This is one of the conclusions of a new report entitled No Access, released this week by the global LGBTIQ rights group OutRight Action International. It focuses on six countries: Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Russia, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

These countries have “some of the most challenging digital environments for LGBTIQ people in the world”, according to the study, which among other things documents how state authorities have blocked access to international and local LGBTIQ websites.

While some LGBTIQ people have as a result become more reliant on social media platforms such as Facebook and TikTok, the report says that threats and attacks have occurred in these spaces as well, including 'entrapment' by law enforcement.

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Homosexuality is illegal in all of the study's countries apart from Russia – though there, as in the other countries investigated, conservative legislation has been used to curtail LGBTIQ rights offline and online. Examples include bans against so-called 'gay propaganda', pornography and cross-dressing.

"Censorship challenges people's ability to find resources – to connect and be connected, and to ask for help," says Khalid Abdel-Hadi, from the pan-Arab LGBTIQ online magazine My.Kali (and one of more than a dozen experts interviewed for the report). "It also sends a message from the government that [being LGBTIQ] is still taboo, it is still wrong."

Among the other experts quoted in the report is a digital protection specialist in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, who said: "It is not easy to communicate – to find each other, to work together, to coordinate. And all of this is because of censorship."

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It is not easy to communicate – to find each other, to work together, to coordinate – because of censorship

The report's research – conducted between June 2016 and July 2020 by OutRight, the University of Toronto's Citizen Lab and the Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI) – also looked at how LGBTIQ people and activists are resisting these threats.

It notes that VPNs (virtual private networks) are widely used to bypass online censorship, especially by younger and urban populations. However, staying ahead of government censorship techniques, especially in countries such as Saudi Arabia, remains difficult.

A common survival strategy is self-censorship – which effectively prevents LGBTIQ people from organising and developing a sense of community, it warns.

The report concludes that rights advocates and international institutions should hold companies responsible for selling censorship tools to governments – or otherwise enabling censorship online. It names Google, Facebook, Instagram, BeeTalk and WeChat as examples of private companies that should be held to account for “facilitating censorship”.

LGBTIQ activists also need support to communicate safely online and to use emerging technology to bypass censorship, especially in rural areas, it says.

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