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Russia and the main switch

Regardless of what emerges after this conflict, the Internet we knew has already died.



Fred Friendly, former president of CBS News, made it clear that, before pontificating on free speech, a simple question would have to be answered: Who controls the main switch?



In the war between Russia and Ukraine the answer is quite obvious and has left the terrible feeling of what the powers of political manipulation, human stupidity and revenge can achieve when disguised as a greater cause. Of how they can even condition justice and, even more, the truth.

When I talk about the main switch, I am not referring to a metaphor. In the age of the Internet, with megacorporations owning routes and data, there is literally a device that lets information through or not, and that is used at its discretion against millions of people.

Few have noticed that the prohibitions and blockades that the big tech companies have applied to Russia have already had a testing ground: Cuba. Twitter, Facebook (now Meta), or Google as in the rest of the planet do not work here, and not by chance the most popular publications on the island appear on the first pages referenced by search engines. Algorithms designed to reduce or omit the reach of media, words and information, while Apple, Spotify, Amazon and most of the more than 450 U.S. companies that have sanctioned Russia, cannot trade with Cuba because of the laws of the U.S. blockade.

Fake news, cyberattacks and the war for knowledge and information, so expensive these days to NATO, have been common currency of the United States to crush the Caribbean island and this has happened without causing too much alarm.

The digital and informational iron curtain is not a new invention. However, it is unprecedented for providers of the so-called backbone of the Internet to disconnect their

customers in a country of 144 million people like Russia. So did Lumen and Cogent, two giants of the world's largest *backbone*. These companies make up the exclusive Free Transit Zone (TFZ), a small group of global telecommunications companies so large that they pay no one else for transit (international bandwidth).

That the switch has entered the scene shows that the Internet is not the infinitely elastic and virtual ghost that people imagine, but a physical entity that can be deformed or broken at the convenience of the interests of a group, a government or a military conglomerate like NATO. In fact, the West's intervention in the conflict has accelerated the reshaping of the Internet, from a global system to which the whole world has connected, to a fractured universe.



Experts tremble because the war in Ukraine seems to definitively establish the *splinternet*, as the fragmentation of cyberspace into disparate kingdoms intervened by autonomous political blocs is known. Or set up by any other power, such as the oligopolies of technology and e-commerce, or by countries trying to keep their distance from American control.

The ostracism that punishes Russia actually seriously threatens the architecture of the Internet, a global network of networks with distributed power that there is no way to break into a corner without destroying information routes and without congesting the highways that remain standing.

The great paradox of all this is that, having devoted so much time and effort supposedly to trying to break the Iron Curtain of the Russians and the Chinese in the name of freedom, Western policymakers and military *hawks* are isolating themselves from the world in a forced march, while dismantling the network they themselves created. It is cheaper to destroy than to build walls. The *cyberwall* metaphor for Russia falsely suggests that, once the digital barriers are removed, new ones more convenient to the Atlantic alliance will be

erected in their place and that Vladimir Putin's reaction to shielding RusNet, the national network, is crazy and clumsy. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Regardless of what emerges after this conflict, the Internet we knew has already died. Those who have the main switch in their hands should admit that they are playing with fire and that, while teaching their true authoritarian disposition, they reveal perhaps the most costly and ineffective way to exercise power.

Follow the timeline of attacks on networks during the Russia-Ukraine conflict: [Networks are the hot gun in this war, by Dominio Cuba](#) ([Originally published in La Jornada](#), Mexico)

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