

THE OPPENHEIMER REPORT

Bans on books and travel to Cuba could backfire

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Just when growing numbers of international organizations are stepping up their criticism of Cuba's decades-old ban on freedom of expression, a series of thoughtless measures in Florida are giving the Cuban dictatorship new ammunition to shift attention away from its medieval censorship practices.

Last week, the 34-country Organization of American States' Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression issued a statement demanding that Cuba eliminate its restrictions on access to the Internet. The OAS press monitor spoke out after learning about the worsening health condition of Guillermo Fariñas, an independent Cuban journalist who is on a hunger strike to demand free access to the Internet.

Indeed, Cuba is Latin America's most backward country when it comes to access to the Internet.

Compared with Cuba, other financially strapped countries like Haiti look like Information Age superpowers.

According to the 2006 World Bank's World Development Indicators, only 13 out of every 1,000 Cubans on the island have access to the Internet. By comparison, the percentage in Argentina is 133 people per 1,000 people, in Chile 267, in Costa Rica 235 and in Haiti 59.

What's even more amazing, Cuba places greater restrictions on the Internet than China.

According to the World Bank figures, in China -- excluding Hong Kong -- 73 out of every 1,000 people have access to the Internet.

The France-based group Reporters Without Borders said recently that, unlike China, which promotes widespread use of the Internet while controlling it with cyber-censors, Cuba has decided it is much simpler to keep the Internet out of reach of virtually all Cubans.

Under Cuba's decree No. 209/96, signed by Fidel Castro, Cuba's Internet policy is of a "selective character." It says that the Ministry of the Revolutionary Armed Forces and the Interior Ministry have special powers to write "specific regulations" to guarantee "the defense and security of the country."

Cuban officials claim they can't expand Internet access because the U.S. trade embargo doesn't allow them to buy software, servers and marine fiber-optic cables. U.S. officials say that's hogwash: Just like Cuba buys everything else from Spanish or other European telecommunications firms, it could buy any Internet-related equipment from them if it wanted.

In addition to blaming Internet censorship on the U.S. trade embargo, Cuban officials are having a field day with Gov. Jeb Bush's recent ban on the use of state funds for academic trips to Cuba and with the Miami-Dade County School Board's decision to ban a children's book entitled *Vamos a Cuba* from 33 schools.

Cuba's official Prensa Latina news agency has covered these stories with little-disguised glee.

And Cuban television reported on its website Monday with characteristic hyperbole that the Miami-Dade School Board's measure was comparable "to the most tragic moments of Hitler's Nazism."

When I asked OAS Freedom of Expression rapporteur Ignacio Alvarez about the restrictions in Cuba and in Florida, he said that ``it's amazing that at this time and age, the Cuban people face not only travel restrictions but also restrictions to get news from the outside world."

He added that U.S. measures such as academic travel bans or school bans on reading materials on Cuba ``only help worsen the Cuban people's isolation."

My conclusion: Restricting U.S. academic freedoms vis-a-vis Cuba is not only wrong but counterproductive.

It's true that there are obvious differences in the two countries' restrictions.

In Cuba, censorship is written into the country's laws and covers all nongovernment-sanctioned media, to the point that there are at least 75 people rotting in jail just for their writings.

In Florida, the latest measures are election-season political theater of a much more limited scope: The academic travel ban covers only state-paid travel (academics can still go to Cuba on privately funded trips) and the school board's decision affects only a few school libraries. What's more important, both measures have already been contested and will most likely be soon overturned by the courts.

And, granted, supporters of the Florida measures have a point when they say that Cuba will continue its gross violations of freedom of expression no matter what happens in the United States. But the international struggle for basic freedoms in Cuba would be much easier without such distractions.