

Fed Up with Brazil and Brazilians Google May Close or Block Orkut

Contributed by Rodolfo Espinoza
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Brazilians make up 65% of Orkut's 26.5 million subscribers. As some people know Orkut is Google's social networking service that never caught up in the US, but became a huge hit in Brazil, drawing the young crowds MySpace attracts in the United States.

Orkut has also worked as a magnet for a mob of unsavory Brazilian characters peddling child pornography, setting up phishing schemes, preaching hate and promoting a series of crimes.

Brazil has been cracking up on these activities and the communities that push them. And this has led to a showdown between Brazilian authorities demanding that Google close these communities and turn in the IPs (Internet addresses) of the offenders and Google's honchos dragging their feet in the name of freedom of expression and privacy rights.

Now, it seems that Google is seriously pondering ending all the hassle by simply pulling the plug on the whole ill-fated Orkut idea or at least blocking the site to all Brazilians in a drastic maneuver to get rid of the troublemakers.

The news that Google is considering an end to its activities in Brazil was published this Friday, August 25, by Folha de S. Paulo, a daily among the three most respected newspapers in the country, the other two being O Estado de S. Paulo and O Globo from Rio de Janeiro.

The note on the subject is signed by Sérgio Dávila, a reporter based in the United States, who says that he got his information from an unidentified source inside the Mountain View, California, Internet company.

A Brazilian authority on Internet finally joined the fray opining that Brazil needs to repress Internet crimes without putting freedom of expression in risk. He is Demi Getschko, a member of Brazil's Internet Steering Committee since 1995.

According to Getschko, the battle raging now between Google and São Paulo state Public Attorney Office raises a series of serious questions because it threatens to stifle the opening that the Internet brought to the Brazilian society.

"The Internet brought several values that are very dear to us, values that we enjoy and very much appreciate," he said. "These are values linked to freedom of expression and freedom of connecting and participating."

"You need at the same time to fight crimes that occur in the Net and to avoid that they turn into indiscriminate censorship of values contributed by the Net." He is afraid Brazil would take a China-like approach censoring what can be seen online. "This is not the Internet spirit, this is not the Brazilian spirit, and not the spirit of Internet users," he reasons.

The way he sees it the only manner to avoid Internet criminality while preserving individual rights to use the Net is to punish crimes immediately after they are found, thus inhibiting the committal of more crime.

August 22, the São Paulo Federal Public Attorney Office filed in court a public civil action asking that the federal justice compel Google Brasil to turn in all the information they have on users who utilize Orkut to spread child pornography and other illegal content. He also asked that their operations in Brazil be shutdown if they don't comply.

For Getschko, there are two factors to be considered before Google is compelled to sing what they know. First, the company is based and has its servers in the United States, which makes it difficult to determine where the crime was committed.

The second factor to be considered is the way people register in the site. Nobody has to present any document. A Google email is all that's required. People intent on breaking the law can and probably do fake all the information they give.

And Getschko continues, "What we can get from Orkut are navigation data that may allow us to see from where the individual accessed the site and from there find out the national provider if the person really accessed while in Brazil. There is also the possibility that despite the fact that the content is in Portuguese, the perpetrator of the crime might neither be Brazilian nor live in Brazil."