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Experts say Russia's war on Ukraine is accelerating the 'Splinternet'. But what is the Splinternet?

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Russia's war on Ukraine is bringing on the arrival of the "Splinternet."

That's according to France's digital affairs envoy Henri Verdier, who told Bloomberg news that the combination of Russia's increasing online censorship with Ukraine's intensified calls for Russia to be taken offline could be bringing the world closer to the "fragmentation of the Internet."

The Splinternet refers to the splintering of the cyberspace into disparate realms controlled by autonomous political blocs or any other controlling power—such as tech or e-commerce companies, or countries with diverging national interests tied to nationalism or religion.

"Will the unique, neutral, multi-stakeholder, free Internet survive this crisis?" he said. "I'm not sure."

What is the Splinternet?

Clyde Wayne Crews, a researcher at the Cato Institute, first coined the term "Splinternet" in 2001 to describe "parallel Internets that would be run as distinct, private, and autonomous universes."

Over the last 15 years, state security concerns and the privatization of e-commerce have led to walled-off infrastructure and techno-isolationism separating the Internet with geopolitical borders, in the same way the earth is carved up today.

According to the author of *Splinternet: How Geopolitics and Commerce Are Fragmenting the World Wide Web*, Scott Malcomson, the Splinternet is a growing threat to the Internet's status as a globe-spanning network of networks, and according to Henri Verdier, may encourage cyberattacks.

Verdier warns that any move by Russia to create an independent Internet "would have very severe consequences," as countries insulated from the Internet of other countries might be more tempted to launch cyberattacks.

“Today if I break the Russian Internet, probably I will break my own Internet, because it’s the same,” Verdier argued, noting the interconnectedness of the World Wide Web protects all of its users from losing service.

“If we have two or three or four Internets, the temptation to disconnect the other will be very high,” Verdier said, warning that if the Splinternet is accelerated, authoritarian countries could be tempted to take democratic countries offline if mutual dependence was lost.

Worries about this kind of attack have also been growing since the invasion of Ukraine, with U.S. President Joe Biden announcing on Monday that there is "evolving intelligence that the Russian Government is exploring options for potential cyberattacks."

Russian sovereign internet

Russia has been pushing forward on plans to create a more sovereign Internet for several years.

In May 2019, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed legislation known as the "sovereign Internet" law to shield the country from what it called the "aggressive nature" of the United States' national cyber security strategy. The law, which came into effect in November 2019, installed technological equipment to counter external threats and allow the Russian network to track, filter and reroute Internet traffic.

Russia has also run tests on its RuNet intranet by disconnecting itself entirely from the global Internet. In June and July last year, RBC daily reported that Russia tested all major Russian telecom firms "to determine the ability of the 'Runet' to work in case of external distortions, blocks and other threats," a source told Reuters.

The test involves sequentially disconnecting major telecom firms and ISPs from the global Internet so in the eventuality that major global Internet servers were instructed to stop serving web pages with the Russian .ru domain, Russian companies could serve cached copies of those pages with minimal delay.

Russia has also blocked access to private tech platforms such as Meta’s Facebook and Instagram, and Twitter. Other foreign Internet services have suspended some or all of their activities in Russia because of sanctions or on their own initiative; companies like Apple, Microsoft, Netflix and ByteDance’s TikTok have limited their presence in the country.

A senior U.S. State Department official told Bloomberg that Putin’s attempt to establish sovereign boundaries in cyberspace was fully intended as a way to control his people. “He wanted a new Iron Curtain; that’s what he’s doing. He just found an easy way to do it, where everybody’s helping him.”

The acceleration toward the Splinternet was “everything that Putin has ever wanted,” he said.