

# CANADA'S CYBER STEWARD ON DIGITAL ESPIONAGE, DEMOCRACY AND PROTECTING THE INTERNET

Ron Deibert, the director of Citizen Lab, the University of Toronto's vaunted digital watchdog, explains the importance of the Cyber Stewards Network project, which supports building cybersecurity in places such as Asia, Africa and Latin America

POSTED BY NIKI WILSON ON DECEMBER 16, 2016

**Ask Ron Deibert** how to think about cyberspace and you won't get an impenetrable discourse on network architecture. For Deibert, director of the University of Toronto's [Citizen Lab](#), a digital watchdog that researches the exercise of political power in cyberspace, it's much simpler than that. "We should think about it as a global commons," he says. "Something like the environment that we need to work together to steward and protect."

Deibert, who wrote [Black Code: Inside the Battle for Cyberspace](#), a [documentary film](#) adaptation of which premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival last September, knows plenty about protecting and stewarding cyberspace, especially in regions where Internet use is growing. Here, he discusses the lab's [Cyber Stewards Network](#), which partners with groups in the global south — Africa, Latin America, developing Asian nations and the Middle East — to uncover emerging digital threats.

## On cybersecurity issues in the global south

The most interesting issues in cybersecurity come from the global south. The majority of the world's population resides there, and the growth of Internet users is extraordinary. In Indonesia alone there are about 800,000 new users a month.

Most of that growth is happening in countries that are failed states or that are sliding into, or just emerging from, authoritarianism. Many are conservative cultures that have different norms around access to information and freedom of speech, and in many there are insurgencies, armed conflict and terrorism. These states are the target of a huge market selling products and services that enable governments to engage in mass surveillance, cellphone tracking and social-media monitoring. That's why we have to pay attention to what's happening there.

## On the formation of the Cyber Stewards Network

The development of the Internet is one of the most profound changes in communications in human history. We need people around the world working locally but thinking globally about how to protect it, so in partnership with the International Development Research Centre, Citizen Lab formed the network, which combines research and advocacy. A lot of the groups in the network want to do more than just research — they want to push for change. We help them with the research and they do the advocacy.

A clip from *Black Code*, the documentary film based on Ron Deibert's book of the same name. The film made its world premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival in September, and is scheduled to be released in Canada in early 2017.

## On how the network helped exiled Tibetans

One of our most successful partnerships was with some exiled Tibetans in Dharamsala, India. As targets of highly sophisticated cyberattacks by the Chinese government, Tibetans are like canaries in the coal mine — they are often the first in the world to be hit by new kinds of threats.



Ron Deibert, director of the University of Toronto's Citizen Lab, which runs the Cyber Stewards Network. The network works to combat digital threats in Africa, Latin America, developing Asian nations and the Middle East. (Photo: Riley Stewart/Munk School of Global Affairs)

The groups we worked with shared samples of malicious software and email attachments they'd received. They also allowed us to better understand their communities, how they grappled with these attacks and the harm that comes from cyber espionage, which helped inform our research. They then developed better ways to defend themselves against these threats. For example, they created a campaign called [Detach from Attachment](#), which plays on Buddhist philosophy and teaches people not to click on email attachments, which was the primary way they were being targeted. They also have a project called [Be a Cyber Superhero](#) that takes the findings of our collaborative research to teach the community how to mitigate the threat.

## On what happens if the global community doesn't work for a secure cyberspace

Unfortunately, there's a silent epidemic in civil society. Activists, journalists and NGOs are being targeted with the most advanced surveillance technologies, and they're not equipped to deal with it. Unlike governments or private companies, they don't have the resources to hire digital security experts or companies to monitor their networks. Sometimes, they barely have enough resources to hire someone to plug in the printer, let alone deal with Chinese cyber espionage.

Governments — whether in Nigeria, Latin America or the Middle East — are putting in draconian restrictions such as mass surveillance programs and curtailing the activities of journalists, all under the rubric of cybersecurity. Securing cyberspace involves more than technical solutions because however valuable those may be, they're not going to solve the problem in its entirety because technologies are always changing. We also need to approach the problems as an issue that arises from government and private-sector behavior, which will require wholesale legal and policy changes. Otherwise, these restriction and surveillance activities will ultimately result in a crisis of democracy.

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## READING AS THINKING

Answer the following in complete sentences.

1. Before you read the article, read the following quotation from the text: "They barely have enough resources to hire someone to plug in the printer, let alone deal with Chinese cyber espionage." Predict some of the themes of the article based on this quotation.

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### After reading the article:

2. In 200 characters or fewer, state the main idea of the article.

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3. If you were to add another photo to the article, what would it depict and what would its caption be? Justify your choices.

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4. What might be some reasons for the rapid growth of Internet use in the global south?

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5. Why do we need to pay attention to cybersecurity issues in the global south?

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6. Predict what would happen if the global community does not work to make cyberspace secure. Use your own ideas and evidence from the text to justify your predictions.

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7. How would restrictions and surveillance jeopardize democracy?

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8. In the article, Ron Deibert says, "We should think about it as a global commons. Something like the environment that we need to work together to steward and protect." Do you agree with this perspective? Why or why not? In the article, it is mentioned that drones are being used to take pictures and videos as a way to study the coastal areas. What are some concerns people might have about using drones?

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## Think-Pair-Share

### 9. *Think*

Watch the clip from *Black Code*. Think of the difficulties that arise in balancing cyberspace security and personal privacy. From different perspectives, explain the concerns of the groups listed below regarding this balance.

	CONCERNS	POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS
CITIZENS		
GOVERNMENT		
POLICE		
OTHER		

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## 10. *Pair*

Compare your answers with a partner. Discuss some solutions to address the concerns. What role would each stakeholder play?

## 11. *Share*

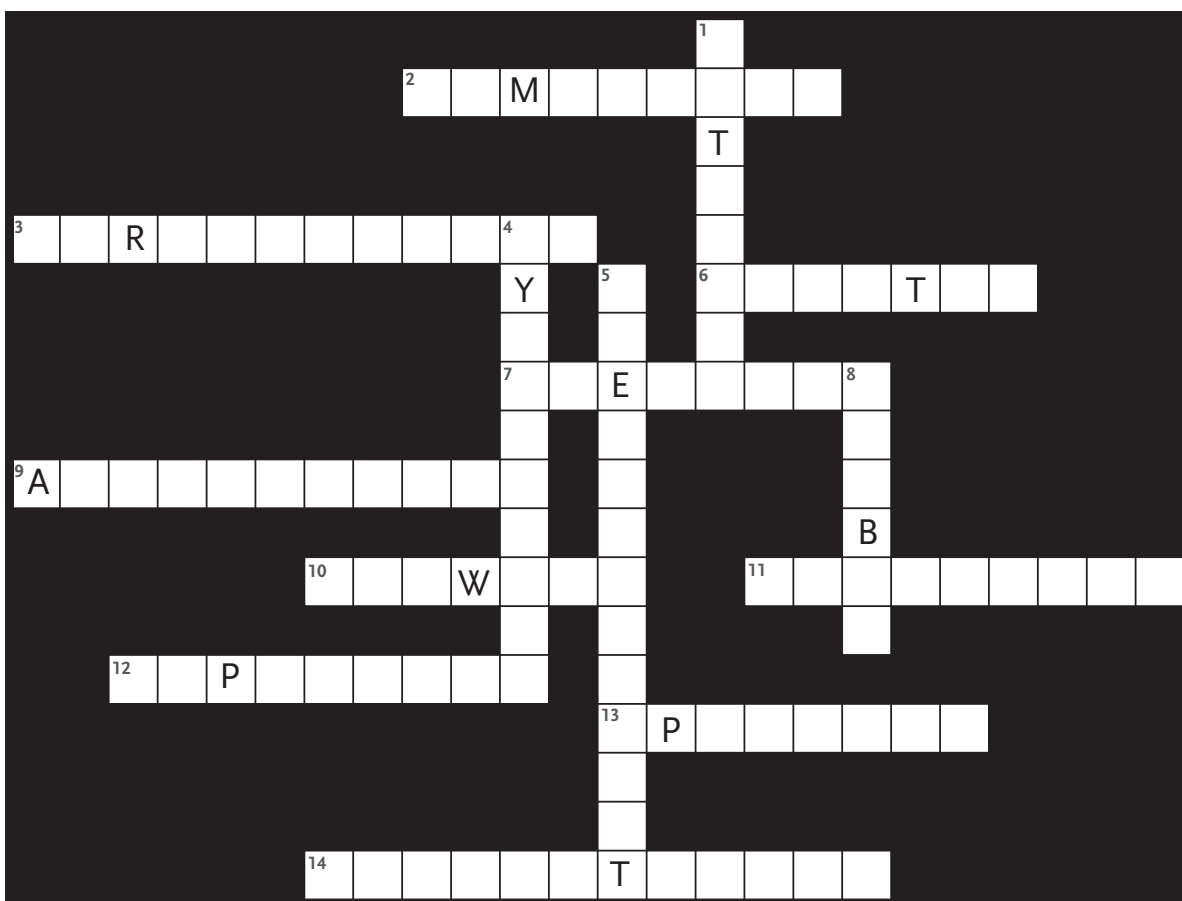
As a class, share your concerns from each perspective and develop roles for each stakeholder to balance personal privacy and cybersecurity. What consequences would there be if the stakeholder were to work outside their role?

## ONLINE

- Using [Google Maps](#), locate Dharamsala, India, and explore the city by using Street View and the satellite and map modes. Using the quick facts section and other research tools find the following:
  - The population
  - The neighbouring cities
  - The major bodies of water
  - The distance between Dharamsala and Tibet
- Read through the articles posted on the media section of [Black Code: Inside the Battle for Cyberspace](#).
- Watch this [video](#) of Ron Deibert's TEDx Talk to reflect more on privacy and technology.
- Learn more about the work that [Cyber Stewards Network](#) is doing.
- Read more about [Be a Cyber Superhero](#).
- Watch some of Tibet Action Institute's [cybersafety videos](#). Make your own video.
- Explore the [Stop. Think. Connect. website](#) for tips and resources to stay safe online.

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## CROSSWORD:

### Across

2. A system of government, known as the "rule of the commoners"
3. Close observation
6. Relating to computers
7. Gaining political independence
9. Extra parts
10. A custodian
11. Oppressive
12. Spying
13. An outbreak
14. Inexplicable

### Down

1. A monitor
4. Computer networks and the web
5. A region extending from Egypt to Western Asia
8. In reference to the whole planet