# Policing the cyberspace

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Daniel Pearl's death made it to the lead in almost every newspaper in the country on February 5 when a videotape exposed this to the world. With this, the focus has shifted towards locating the remains of the unfortunate journalist whose mysterious disappearance kept the police and intelligence agencies on their toes for many weeks.

For the first time in the history of the country, a crime involving the use of cyberspace has come to light. Does this mean the end of once idealised notion of free electronic frontiers or the beginning of a new era that marks an assimilation of cyber-laws? Whatever be the case, this precedent heralds an unavoidable change in the way the law allows net cafes to function.

## cafes

Pearl's case can very well set a trend that might lead to bigger and more frequent problems. Therefore, it is a dire need of the hour that factors involved are studied and users are educated in the context of safe cyber use.

Cyber crime, in its many forms ranging from hacking to spamming, is widely debated these days. The United States and European countries have systematically defined the legitimate use of the e-mail and the process is an on-going one. Most European countries have already banned unsolicited e-mails and spamming (filling recipient's mailbox with junk e-mails) owing to its negative effects on businesses. To achieve this end, ISPs have been advised by respective governments to regulate junk e-mails through their network by means of legislation. Unfortunately, the priority list of authorities in Pakistan does not include these issues and hence the local netizens lack proper knowledge of the subject.

Following Pearl's case, *TNS* conducted a survey to solicit views from various stakeholders in IT sector and the government officials to get a holistic view of the situation. Reports suggest that a net cafe in Karachi was used to send the e-mail containing threats and Pearl's images. Afterwards, the security agencies traced the origin of the e-mail and made way to the net cafe. The owner of the cafe was taken into custody and was subjected to intense interrogation. The entries in the log-book of the net cafe kept for monetary purpose was not very helpful from the investigative point of view, so, the owner had to pay the price.

The question here is: how can net cafe owners avoid being punished for an act not committed by them? To this end, the study revealed that owners of net cafes are totally unaware of the potential risk to themselves and their business as a result of any illegal activity performed through their premise.

*TNS* visited some net cafes in the city including Hamza Internet Club situated in Ichra. Sajid, the young man who runs the cafe, said, "Usually net cafes maintain log-books to keep record of users and usage. These log-books roughly contain names of the users and the time they use the net service."

When asked if they have ever asked users for their ID cards or any other means of verification, he replied: "Users don't like to give out their details. We have a number of women customers who resent giving details about themselves. Quite often people visiting our net cafe come up with fake identities and if such a restriction is imposed, we will not be able to sustain our business."

He said the most frequent users are teenagers who usually go in for chatting and pornography. "Chatting is hot these days and so is pornography. Therefore no one appreciates the idea of giving out their names," he said.

Asked if he has ever needed to call the police to control a situation , he said some of the visitors are from police department but their help has never been sought. "Local police squads have come to us occasionally asking for cooperation," Sajid said.

Most of the other net cafes that *TNS* visited listed down similar practices and problems. Some of these net cafes are not even in the habit of listing names. All they do is record the number of the terminal/computer used by a person and the time that person has used it for. These practices make the owner even more vulnerable. Looking at Pearl's case they would not be able to aid an investigation if the situation calls for it — consequences of which can be serious given the ways of the Pakistani police.

When the owners were asked what can be done to avoid such an instance, they said that government should outline a clear policy describing which legal action can be called upon if someone uses their premises for any illegal activity and what should be the safety valves for owners. At the same time they insisted that net cafes should not be restricted through any legislation since it would hurt their business.

*TNS* also interviewed visitors to these net cafes to seek their opinion. Most of them rejected the idea of giving out details about themselves and also confirmed that sending and receiving of obnoxious e-mails, getting into other users' mailboxes and the like are common practices. "People even trace passwords of other users and send obnoxious e-mails using someone else's address. I have myself been a victim of this," said Tauqeer, a student who is a regular internet user.

Another student, Yasin, said that to most users, net cafe is the right place for all the wrong reasons: one can get away with anything there, by using a disguise or by impersonating as someone else, with no fear of being traced.

Understanding the mechanics of tracing an e-mail is a crucial issue here. Imran Aslam Afridi, a networking professional, was quick to grasp the issue at hand. He said: "At the simplest level, each e-mail that is sent contains an address for a reply. In the case of anonymous e-mail services such as HushMail, e-mails are sent to an anonymising server. But this address is not the only clue to the identity of the sender. Every e-mail also contains what is called an IP address in the header that reveals the location of the computer it was sent from."

Imran further said, "You could easily set up an anonymous Hotmail account in a cyber-cafe but you would only be able to send one message via that account. The more information you send, the easier it is to trace you. For a computer enthusiast with some knowledge of how e-mail works, it is possible to send fairly disguised messages. If anonymising services believe that someone is abusing their service, they will hand over the IP address of the user to the authorities."

Given these remarks, it is reasonable to believe that the only way for a person pursuing irresponsible ends to avoid capture would be to make sure they used an internet cafe to send their message, in which case the IP address would not help track the suspect down. Therefore, say the experts, the need to keep net cafes under strict vigilance to minimise, if not totally eliminate, the chances of cyber crime.