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## Another blow for mainland web users

Popular internet tool used to get round the 'Great Firewall' censor is being disrupted

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Updated on *May 25, 2011*

Hundreds of thousands of internet users on the mainland are being denied access to many foreign websites because of the widespread disruption of a popular internet tool used to bypass the "Great Firewall".

It has raised fears that it could be the latest action by Beijing to restrict internet freedom.

Virtual private network (VPN) connections at many mainland universities and corporate offices have experienced service outages since earlier this month. Access to sites such as Gmail, Facebook and YouTube through VPN is often blocked.

A VPN creates an encrypted connection between computers and makes data transmission between them impossible to monitor, making it a default choice to bypass Beijing's internet censorship.

Problems are being reported across the country but seem to be mainly limited to corporate and university users of VPN, with home users mostly left unaffected. The corporate and university users primarily use VPNs to establish secure connections so they can connect directly to internal network services, such as company servers or databases.

A notice posted by the library of the Southern Medical University in Guangzhou stated that users could no longer connect to some overseas

research databases. Mainland media reported that IBM staff on the mainland were not able to access the corporate website when connected to its VPN. Some internet engineers and programmers at Tencent's Shenzhen branch and Shanghai-based Shanda Interactive Entertainment — two of the mainland's internet giants, also said they had experienced disruptions to their VPN service.

VPNVIP, a commercial VPN operator based in the United States, recently warned its users to change server name because it claimed its original domain name had been hijacked. "China government just poisoned the DNS name of our original domain," it said.

The cause of the service disruption is unclear. While some believe it is part of a central government crackdown, others say there could be a commercial reason.

People blaming Beijing say the disruption coincided with an announcement by Xinhua on May 4 of a new State Internet Information Office. The office would "direct, co-ordinate and supervise online content management" and would be managed by the vice-ministers of industry and information technology and of public security, as well as senior officials from the State Council Information Office, Xinhua said.

The webmaster for [bestvpnservice.com](http://bestvpnservice.com), a website and blog dedicated to the use of VPNs in evading censorship, said the ban of VPN services and the blocking of foreign websites was "wholly linked with Xinhua's announcement". It said that corporations and universities were targeted because they were more easily answerable to the state.

A spokesman from [greatfirewall.biz](http://greatfirewall.biz), a website that tracks search queries and websites that are blocked by Beijing's "Great Firewall", said the websites of eight commercial VPN operators were recently blocked.

William Long, a Shenzhen-based technology blogger, suggested the latest firewall upgrade may include a counter for monitoring connections to foreign sites from IP addresses on the mainland. But he said the blockade on VPN, if intended, could be commercially motivated.

Mainland internet service providers, such as China Telecom, would have to pay extra fees to foreign information service providers for data

flow, giving them an incentive to curb the use of VPNs.

Professor Fang Binxing , president of Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications, also said that the interruption was due to internet service providers' economic concerns. "Service providers have to pay the bill of the international internet flow for their users. So there is an incentive for the companies to discourage users to visit foreign websites," he was quoted by the Global Times as saying.

A researcher from the University of Hong Kong's Faculty of Law specialising in internet censorship on the mainland, cautioned against hasty conclusions, saying that relevant reports were still weak. He said the announcement of the new State Internet Information Office had little relevance to the VPN issue.

He said the most reasonable explanation could be that the service interruptions were an unexpected outcome of "an upgrade to the 'Great Firewall' or a large-scale test on its blocking or filtering abilities".

### **Additional reporting by Stephen Chen**