

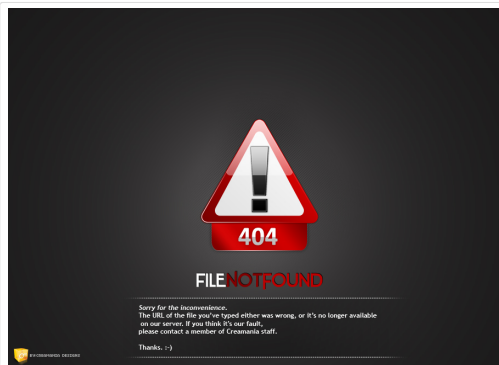


Chinese Internet Users Unable to View Overseas Websites

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May 25, 2011

By Nathan Griffiths



Many Internet users find Error messages appear in place of overseas websites (Credit: Creamania)

Chinese universities and corporations are bearing the brunt of an unexplained wave of service interruptions that are blocking access to popular overseas websites and services including Gmail, Yahoo, and even Apple's iTunes Store.

Complaints began surfacing online on May 6 that Chinese Internet users were having problems accessing foreign websites while connected to Virtual Private Networks (VPN) at universities and corporate offices. Users posted notices from schools and offices online, which advised that VPN connections to many foreign websites were unstable or had been blocked entirely.

Online notices at both Southern Medical University and Zhejiang University said the school's Internet Service Providers (ISP) had restricted the number of connections to foreign websites allowed by the schools. The Chinese Academy of Sciences indicated that access to overseas websites had been blocked because their VPNs were being used to access illegal content.

A VPN works by creating an encrypted connection between computers that cannot be monitored, making VPNs a popular way for users in China to access websites blocked by the "Great Firewall." By using a VPN to make a secure connection to a computer outside China, users inside the country are able to surf the Internet without restriction or fear of surveillance.

William Long, a prominent Chinese technology blogger, suggested that authorities may have upgraded China's firewall to monitor the number of connections to foreign websites. A researcher on Internet censorship from the University of Hong Kong, however, felt the service interruptions were most likely accidental, perhaps the "unexpected outcome" of an upgrade to the firewall.

Chinese authorities have remained silent on the matter, declining to comment or denying any knowledge of the issue.

Whatever the reasons, the problems are common enough that some organizations began warning users to only visit "work related" foreign websites. A Chinese Twitter user posted an internal corporate memo requesting that staff avoid using "circumvention tools and VPN to get access to overseas websites [which] could result in the blocking of corporate port to overseas IPs."

Despite widespread reports of connection problems at businesses and universities, VPN connections for individual users appear largely unaffected.

While some users have complained of slow connections on their home VPNs, the webmaster for bestvpnservice.com, a website and blog dedicated to the use of VPNs in evading censorship, said that he was able to confirm with several commercial VPN operators that their users in China had not been experiencing abnormal service interruptions. Several users with personal VPNs also confirmed that they have not been experiencing any connection problems.

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