

The Other Face of Google

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Journalist Who Exposes U.N. Corruption Disappears From Google

NEW YORK — How big do you have to be to earn the wrath of the United Nations and Internet giant Google? If you're journalist Matthew Lee, all it takes are some critical articles and a scrappy little Web site. Lee is the editor-in-chief, Webmaster and pretty much the only reporter for Inner City Press, a pint-sized Internet news operation that's taken on Goliath-sized entities like Citigroup since 1987.



Since 2005, he's been focusing almost entirely on stories that deal with internal corruption inside the U.N., posting several stories online almost daily.

He's been especially interested in the inner workings of what could be called the practical-applications arm of the international organization, the United Nations Development Programme.

Many of Lee's stories were featured prominently whenever Web users looked for news about the U.N. using the powerful Google News search engine, a vital way for media outlets both large and small to get their articles read.

But beginning Feb. 13, Google News users could no longer find new stories from the Inner City Press.

"I think they said, 'If we can't get this guy out of the U.N., let's disappear him from the Internet,'" Lee said.

It began with an innocuous-sounding yet chilling form letter from Google to Lee, e-mailed on Feb. 8:

"We periodically review news sources, particularly following user complaints, to ensure Google News offers a high quality experience for our users," it said. "When we reviewed your site we've found that we can no longer include it in Google News."

As soon as he read it, Lee immediately suspected one thing: That someone at the UNDP had pressured Google into "de-listing" him from Google News — essentially preventing Inner City Press from being classified on Google News as a legitimate news source and from having its stories pop up when someone conducts a Google News search.

Over the last couple of years, Lee has proved to be a constant — and controversial — thorn in the U.N.'s side.

Though his writing is clunky, his methods unorthodox (and often highly annoying) and his news judgment sometimes more than a little off the mark, Lee has hit his share of bull's-eyes and became an outlet for whistleblowers inside the U.N.

In 2006, for example, he drew attention to human-rights abuses by the Ugandan People's Defense Force during a U.N. disarmament program, including incidents in which four people were killed and over 100 homes destroyed.

In November 2007, during a press conference in which Google announced its partnership with the UNDP to achieve anti-poverty goals, Lee earned a less-than-friendly response when he asked why the Internet company hadn't signed a global human-rights and anti-censorship compact —elements in the U.N.'s Millennium Development Goals.

[Google spokesman Gabriel Stricker told FOXNews.com that "Google generally does not sign petitions or join coalitions but prefers to support public-engagement and advocacy efforts through the work of Google.org and by leveraging our products, such as Google Earth."]

It was this incident, Lee said, that put him in the crosshairs. Lee said he felt certain that the Internet company and the international agency had now joined forces to make his work less accessible to the public.

"I've been covering ... U.N. stories, three to four a day, for two years, and for the last two years there's been no problem at all," Lee said. "Then that Friday, I received the e-mail. There's something a little skeezy here. I think that Google got involved with the U.N. on these Millennium goals and thought, this is the United Nations, if they tell you some small Web site is a thorn in their side and there's a credible reason you could remove them from your news service, you do it."

According to Stricker, on Feb. 1 someone e-mailed Google a complaint about Lee's Web site, alleging that Inner City Press was a one-man operation, thus violating the Google News ground rule that news organizations it lists must have two or more employees.

Lee is vague about how many people work for the Inner City Press, but said there's at least one woman who works for the organization full-time, as well as "about half a dozen" volunteers.

"If people work for us as volunteers, why does it not count?" he said. "Is it their business?"

Stricker said it is the only complaint that Google has ever received about Inner City Press and doesn't publish the qualifications it requires for being included, to thwart those who want to abuse the system.

But on Feb. 8 Google notified Lee about his new "de-listing" status.

When Lee received the e-mail from Google, he responded immediately, noting that Inner City Press had been accredited by the U.N. and was mentioned frequently in other media as an important U.N. watchdog.

A Google representative answered that Inner City Press would be restored to the Google News service as usual, but that the process might take "a couple weeks," according to Lee. Still, from Feb.

13 on, Inner City Press stories stopped showing up on Google News, something Google attributes to a technical error.

"We acknowledged our misunderstanding ... but it takes time for the restoration to occur," Stricker said. "The glitch will be resolved as soon as possible. We're working on it."

The reaction to the de-listing, however temporary, has been furious. The non-profit Government Accountability Project lambasted the company, calling Inner City Press "the most effective and important media organization for UN whistleblowers."

"We're alarmed," said Bea Edwards, GAP's international-program director. "The question is, is what user sent the complaint? And it's probably not too hard to guess. We would guess the complaints came from the UNDP."

Tuyet Nguyen, president of the U.N. Correspondents Association, said he was fully behind Lee, who was elected first vice president of the association in December 2006.

"The sad story about Google is that they're shutting people up and not doing a good thing for society by only defending their business interests," he said. "They have a responsibility to society in letting people speak out. And I'm not surprised that those U.N. agencies are trying to hide."

But UNDP spokesman David Morrison called allegations of the agency's involvement preposterous.

"It wasn't us," he said. "We did not contact Google."

Google refuses to reveal who sent the complaint against Inner City Press, citing privacy concerns.

Lee, who hasn't stopped writing his U.N. exposes despite the temporary de-listing, said that he's taken aback by the lengths to which, according to him, an international organization ostensibly dedicated to world peace will go to silence a critic as obscure to the general public as himself.

"It's a little weird," he said. "I guess they're just so unused to being covered like a public organization."

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