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FLASH NOTES

"Short analytical briefs on emerging topics related to The SecDev Foundation's work"

CIRCUM-WHAT? CIRCUMVENTION WIDELY EMPLOYED, POORLY UNDERSTOOD IN VIETNAM

A survey of 2,015 Vietnamese internet users finds that 53% use a circumvention tool; but overall knowledge on circumvention techniques remains low.

Independent news blog Dan Luan conducted a survey of 2,015 people in late December 2015. The survey respondents, mainly Dan Luan's Facebook Page fans, thought that more outreach to youth is needed to raise awareness of circumvention tools.

Demographics

Most respondents (96%) were located in Vietnam, and the vast majority were were male (89%). The respondents were evenly split among age groups, varying from a high of 27% in the 19-24 year group to a low of 15% in the over 50 segment.

TIA SANG VIETNAM

Tia Sáng Viêt Nam provides ongoing data and analysis on internet access and freedom in Vietnam.

The initiative aims to support a range of stakeholders by analyzing internet access data from Vietnam and monitoring mainstream and social media, and political events relevant to the online world.

Tool Use

While 53% of respondents said they used a circumvention tool to access the internet, 20% replied that they did not know what 'circumvention' (vuot tuong lua) meant. Interestingly, some in this latter group indicated that they did use circumvention tools (a VPN or proxy service) in subsequent answers. This confusion in responses could be due to a lack of familiarity with related terminology.

According to the survey, a wide variety of circumvention tools and methods are used in Vietnam. The most popular tool among respondents was Hotspot Shield (51%), followed by Zenmate (14%). Among the 'other' category, many reported using Ultrasurf which, along with Hotspot Shield, was one of the top recommendations on web forums in the 2008-2009 period when Facebook was blocked.

Respondents choose tools based on cost – with 62% selecting a tool because "it was free." A majority of respondents (74%) said they would not pay to use a circumvention tool. Those who indicated they would pay a small amount often used Hotspot Shield, which offers a free version with a bandwidth cap.

The survey also asked those using VPNs if they tunnel their whole device or just their browser. Almost half (43%) said they did not understand the question – an indication that people are using tools without fully understanding how they work. A true VPN tunnels a device's entire internet connection (including Skype or other non-browser applications), while free services like Hotspot Shield and Zenmate only tunnel particular browsers (typically they operate as plug-ins for the major commercial browsers such as Chrome and Firefox).

Reasons for Use

"Reading independent news" was the most cited reason reason for using circumvention tools (59%). However, as most respondents came to the survey via an independent news Facebook Page, this is perhaps unsurprising. Playing games and streaming online videos were also listed as reasons to use a circumvention tool.

Asked to pick reasons why more youth don't use circumvention tools, respondents felt that youth:

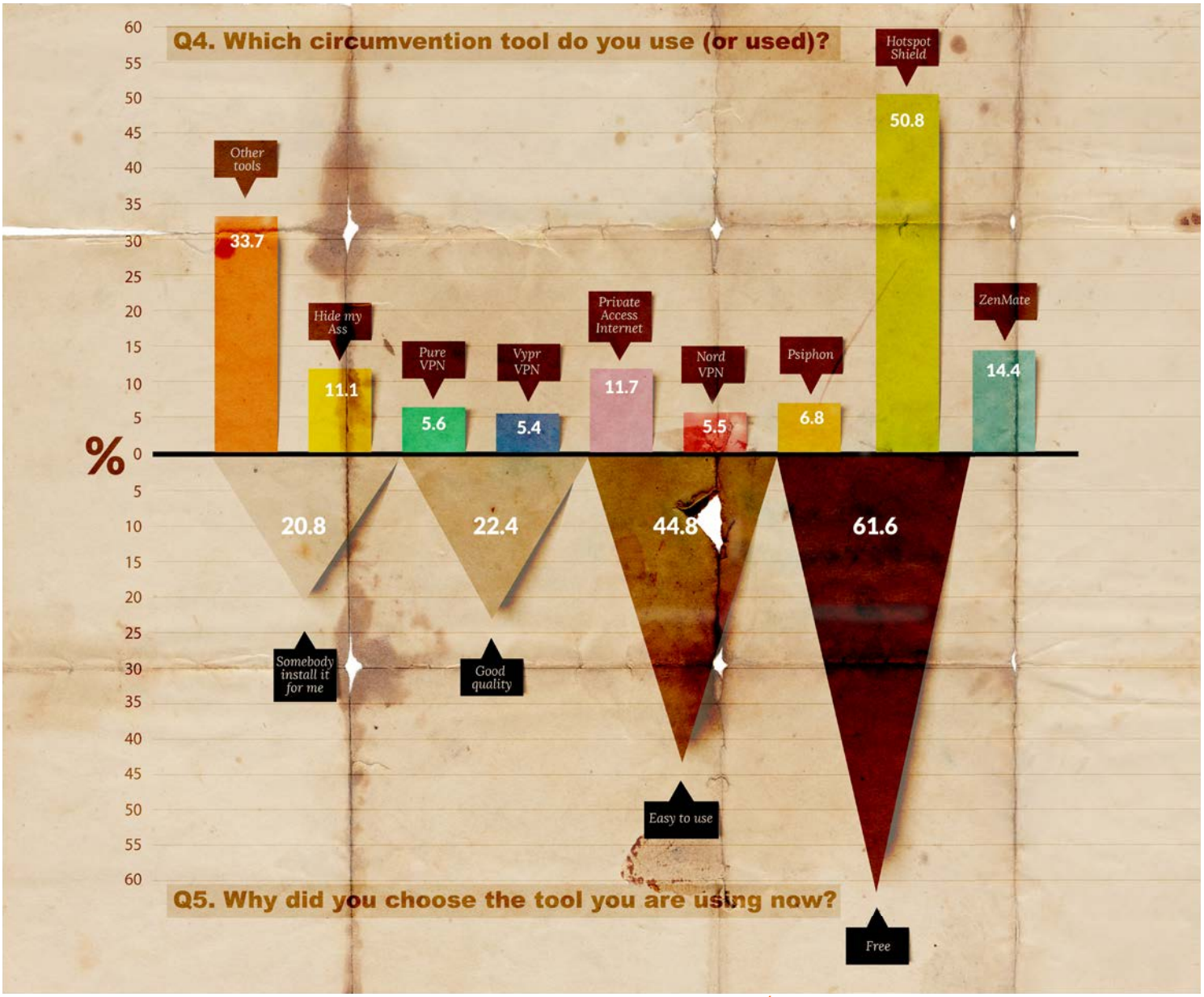
- **Lack technical skills (37%);**
- **Don't know what a firewall is (32%);**
- **Don't care about reading independent news (28%); and**
- **Are afraid of doing something 'illegal' (18 %).**

The vast majority of respondents were male

The respondents noted that more youth would use circumvention tools if they were free (52%), if they cared more about independent news (49%), or if the tools were better advertised to youth (45%).

Raising Awareness of Circumvention

The Dan Luan survey suggests more should be done to raise awareness around circumvention tools in Vietnam. Circumvention tools are as much a part of protecting data privacy (particularly on public WiFi), as they are about helping users access firewalled content. More should be done to explain the role of circumvention tools in data privacy to encourage more widespread adoption in a country such as Vietnam. Awareness-raising should focus on providing simple information that helps familiarize users with the terminology, purpose and risks of using circumvention tools, in the Vietnamese context.



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THE SECDEV FOUNDATION

The SecDev Foundation is an Ottawa-based think-do tank that works at the cross-roads of security, development and new technology. The SecDev Foundation believes that information can change the world. We see that new technologies can empower people out of conflict, insecurity and oppression. Our mission is to understand how; our goal is to help that change happen.