



The internet

Of cables and conspiracies

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An online frenzy that seems way out of line

WHEN two undersea cables were damaged, apparently by ships' anchors, five miles north of Alexandria on January 30th, it seemed like a reminder of the fragility of the internet. The cables—one owned by FLAG Telecom, a subsidiary of India's Reliance Group, the other (SEA-ME-WE 4) by a consortium of 16 telecoms firms—carry almost 90% of the data traffic that goes through the Suez canal. When the connections failed, they took with them almost all internet links between Europe and the Gulf and South Asia.



Egypt lost 70% of its internet connectivity immediately. More than half of western India's outbound capacity crashed, messing up the country's outsourcing industry. Over the next few days, as cable operators sought new routes, 75m people from Algeria to Bangladesh saw internet links disrupted or cut off.

But when, on February 1st, another of FLAG Telecom's cables was damaged, this time on the other side of the Arabian peninsula, west of Dubai, the story started to change. As an internet user known as spyd3rweb wrote on digg.com, "1 cable = an accident; 2 cables = a possible accident; 3 cables = deliberately sabotaged." The conspiracy theories started to take wing.

"We need to ponder the possibility", declared a posting on defensetech.org, "that these cable cuts were intentional malicious acts. And even if the first incident was just an innocent but important accident, the second could well be a terrorist copycat event." Or American villainy, said others. A user called Blakey Rat reported that "the US navy was at one point technically able to tap into undersea fibre-optic cables using a special chamber mounted on a support submarine." A website called the Galloping Beaver asked, "where is the *USS Jimmy Carter*?"—a nuclear attack submarine which had apparently vanished.

Global Marine Systems, a firm that repairs marine cables, says more than 50 cables were cut or damaged in the Atlantic last year.
