Tech firms, rights groups to form Web conduct code

By Michelle Nichols
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NEW YORK (Reuters) - Technology companies Microsoft, Google, Yahoo and Vodafone are in talks with human rights and press freedom groups to draw up an Internet code of conduct to protect free speech and privacy of Web users.

The parties said in a statement on Friday they aim to produce a code by the end of this year that would counter such trends as the increased jailing of Internet journalists, monitoring of legitimate online activity, and censorship.

Talks are being led by the Washington-based Center for Democracy and Technology and San Francisco's non-profit Business for Social Responsibility. They are trying to craft a code to hold companies accountable if they cooperate with governments to suppress free speech or violate human rights.

"Technology companies have played a vital role building the economy and providing tools important for democratic reform in developing countries," said Leslie Harris, executive director of the Center for Democracy and Technology.

"But some governments have found ways to turn technology against their citizens -- monitoring legitimate online activities and censoring democratic material," Harris said.

The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) said the spotlight had been put on Internet companies after arrests in China of Internet writers such as Shi Tao, who was jailed in 2005 for 10 years for leaking state secrets abroad.

Rights groups have accused Yahoo of helping China trace Shi Tao's e-mail exchanges with a New York-based news Web site.

"Governments around the world are jailing Internet journalists at a growing pace, with 49 bloggers, online editors, and Web-based reporters behind bars at the end of 2006," said CPJ Executive Director Joel Simon.
"Protecting the rights of these journalists to express ideas and exchange information without fear of reprisal is one of the highest priorities for the press freedom community today," he said in a statement.

A CPJ census found that the number of journalists jailed worldwide hit a record last year with 134 in jail on December 1, more than one-third of whom were Internet bloggers and online reporters.

In addition to Yahoo, Microsoft, Google, and Vodafone are among the companies involved in the talks.