Schmidt joins elite few to glimpse net in NKorea

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SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — Google chairman Eric Schmidt's glimpse of the Web being used at a top university in Pyongyang makes him part of a tiny elite that has seen the Internet in North Korea.

His four day visit to the North was a golden propaganda opportunity for North Korean officials striving to give one of the world's most closed societies a modern, tech-savvy face. But the images of students surfing the Web in a brightly lit, spacious computer lab were far removed from daily reality for most North Koreans.

Access to the Internet is all but impossible for ordinary North Koreans and even the very few lucky enough to get online are subject to strict oversight of each click and every Web site. Outside Pyongyang, the word "Internet" is not in the daily lexicon and North Korea's own intranet only provides state-approved information.

"I occasionally used a computer to play a war game at a friend's home but I never used the Internet," said a 20-year-old man from the northeast of North Korea who fled the country in 2010 to live in Seoul. He requested anonymity, saying he did not want to risk endangering family members he left behind in North Korea.

During the private visit, Schmidt, accompanied by former New Mexico Gov. Bill

Richardson and Jared Cohen, the head of Google's innovation think-tank, toured Kim Il Sung University and saw students surfing the Web and searching information online, using Google and Wikipedia. The trip was criticized by the U.S. State Department as being "ill-advised." Senator John McCain called the delegation "useful idiots" on his Twitter account.

"It's a show, no more or no less," said Kim Heung-kwang, who majored in computer science at North Korea's Kim Chaek University of Science and Technology in the early 1980s.

Those students can "never" freely surf the Web, he said. Kim taught as a professor at North Korea's Hamheung Computer College for 19 years before defecting to Seoul in 2004. That was before the Internet was introduced in North Korea but he said he has up to date information about Internet use from contacts in the country.

At Kim Chaek University, instructors and students wishing to use the Internet must register first for permission and submit an application with their requests for research online, Ryu Sun Ryol, head of its e-library, told The Associated Press in Pyongyang last month.

Computers at Pyongyang's main library at the Grand People's Study house are linked to a domestic intranet that allows users to read state-run media online and other material selected by North Korean officials.

Schmidt, at any rate, did not appear to be any under illusions about what he saw.

"As the world is becoming increasingly connected, their decision to be virtually isolated is very much going to affect their physical world, their economic growth and so forth," he reporters at Beijing airport after leaving Pyongyang.

"The government has to do something. It has to make it possible for the people to use the Internet."

But Schmidt's comments would probably not be reported in North Korea's state-controlled media and the high profile delegation likely will provide a domestic propaganda boost for North Korea's young new leader Kim Jong Un as he cements his hold on power.

"It would not be surprising if next week the North Koreans were to air a prime-time feature on the Google chairman's trip," said Scott Snyder, a senior fellow for Korea studies at the New York-based think tank Council on Foreign Relations. "This is one way that the regime can use such a visit for legitimation purposes."

Kim called for using the Internet to collect the latest information from abroad and learn global trends in a speech last April but its use remains heavily restricted.

Mobile phones are increasingly popular but don't connect to the global Internet. More than 1.5 million North Koreans out of a population of 24 million use a cellphone network provided by Egypt's Orascom Telecom. North Koreans are

restricted to calling domestically, while foreigners using cellphones in North Korea are limited to making calls overseas and to businesses and embassies with international phone lines.

Schmidt tested North Korea's Samjiyon tablet computers, which use software by North Korean engineers and foreign-made hardware.

What North Korea showed the U.S. delegation is probably the best computer technology it has, said Victor Cha, former director for Asian affairs at the National Security Council in the George W. Bush administration, and now a professor at Georgetown University. Cha traveled to North Korea with Richardson in 2007.

He said North Korea will likely remain very cautious about easing its control over information, despite Schmidt's call for unfettered access to the Internet.

"Some may write about it as a genuine desire to open, but North Korea's problem has always been that they want the modern accoutrements of life, the cash, etc., without opening up the country, and thus any interaction with the outside world ends up being half-hearted," said Cha.

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