

# WebMemo



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## U.S. Must Improve Internet Freedom Outreach Effort

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More than 2 billion people worldwide now have some degree of access to the Internet, a figure that has doubled over the past five years. Yet while the Internet is emerging as an increasingly powerful tool for political activism, governments around the world are also becoming more expert at controlling electronic communication.

As part of the U.S. effort to defend freedom of speech and expression throughout the globe, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has asserted the Administration's dedication to Internet freedom time and time again. Actions, however, speak louder than words.

**U.S. Agencies and Appropriations.** It took the State Department more than three years to allocate the \$50 million given to the department by Congress for its global Internet freedom efforts. In this year's Continuing Resolution, Congress gave another \$20 million to the State Department and \$10 million to the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) to further pursue their Internet freedom agendas. This time around, the funding must move more speedily and efficiently to invest in proven technologies and fill gaps in private-sector investment. At the same time, the U.S. government should call attention to those countries that are the worst perpetrators of Internet censorship. These offenses are already recorded in the State Department's Annual Human Rights Report to Congress.

**Internet Freedom's Worst Offenders.** In January, Freedom House released "Freedom on the Net 2011: A Global Assessment of the Internet and Digi-

tal Media," examining Internet freedom in 37 countries across the globe.<sup>1</sup> Most of the worst offenders are no surprise. At the top of the list were: Iran, Burma, Cuba, China, Tunisia, Vietnam, Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia, Belarus, Bahrain, and Thailand.

The report shows that threats to Internet freedom continue to grow. In 19 of the 37 countries examined, the Internet was subject to some degree of centralized control. In Egypt, for example, the decision of the government to completely shut down the Internet for five days in the midst of political upheaval and protests this past January showed the power of such centralized control.

Further, in 12 out of the 37 countries examined, officials imposed repeated blocks or bans on popular social networking and media sharing sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Bloggers and other Internet users were arrested in 23 of the 27 nations, while activists' networks were targeted or under surveillance in at least 12 countries.

Freedom House is not the only one tracking the perpetrators of cyber repression. Each year on World Day Against Cybercensorship, March 12, Reporters without Borders publishes its own list of "Internet enemies."<sup>2</sup> Citing many of the same top offenders,

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this year Reporters without Borders highlighted the oppressive cyber policies of Burma, China, Cuba, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam. As of March of this year, these countries had some 119 netizens behind bars—China, Vietnam, and Iran being the worst offenders.

Disconcertingly, the mass Web-filtering tools used by Middle Eastern and North African governments are often created by Western companies. According to a recent report by the OpenNet Initiative, a collaborative effort between several universities dedicated to exposing and analyzing Internet filtering operations, McAfee, Websense, Blue Coat Systems, Palo Alto Networks, and Netsweeper have all sold their Web-filtering systems to repressive regimes that use these products to censor Web content. Websense has publicized a clear policy that it “does not sell to governments or Internet Service Providers (ISPs) that are engaged in government-imposed censorship,” but it has sold a product to Yemen that filters content and also prevents users from disguising their identity from monitors.

In defense of their actions, these companies argue that they have no control over how clients use their products, just as a car company does not have responsibility for how people operate its vehicles. While at some level this argument seems reasonable, it does not account for the fact that many of these companies have not only provided the regimes with the requisite software, but also continually update the list of URLs that are filtered through the program. This updating has an immediate effect on the information that entire nations of people can access.

**Slow to Act.** In February, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton reasserted the Department of State’s

dedication to Internet freedom, committing to “a comprehensive and innovative approach—one that matches our diplomacy with our technology, secure distribution networks for tools and direct support for those on the front lines.”<sup>3</sup> The actions of the department, however, have not fully matched this commitment.

While the State Department dragged its feet on doling out its funding, the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) stepped up. With its modest amount of funding—\$1.5 million—the BBG gave a grant to the Global Internet Freedom Consortium, run by the Chinese-exiled Falun Gong religious sect, specializing in developing and deploying anti-censorship technologies. The Global Internet Freedom Consortium supports the proliferation of the anti-censorship programs Ultrareach and Freegate, just two of the proven circumvention technologies on the market.

Within the Department of State, however, \$28 million of the total \$50 million received by the State Department for promoting Internet freedom remained unallocated until May of this year. Noting this fact, Congress gave the department only \$20 million in fiscal year 2011 and gave the BBG another \$10 million. State has since announced its plans to allocate the funds “like venture capitalists,”<sup>4</sup> offering grants to fund the further development of circumvention technologies and to help train activists fighting cyber repression across the globe. Congress should continue to hold State to this commitment.

**Further U.S. Action Needed.** The Administration should:

- **Spend Internet freedom funds wisely.** Funds to support Internet freedom ought to be efficiently directed toward providing an incentive

1. Sanja Kelly and Sarah Cook, “Freedom on the Net 2011: A Global Assessment of Internet and Digital Media,” *Freedom House*, April 18, 2011, at <http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/fotn/2011/FOTN2011.pdf> (June 27, 2011).
2. Gilles Lordet, “Internet Enemies,” *Reporters without Borders*, March 2011, at [http://12mars.rsf.org/i/Internet\\_Enemies.pdf](http://12mars.rsf.org/i/Internet_Enemies.pdf) (June 27, 2011).
3. Secretary Hillary Clinton, “Internet Rights and Wrongs: Choices & Challenges in a Networked World,” address delivered at George Washington University, Washington, D.C., February 15, 2011, at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/02/156619.htm> (June 27, 2011).
4. Nicole Gaouette and Brendan Greeley, “U.S. Funds Help Democracy Activists Evade Internet Crackdowns,” *Bloomberg*, April 20, 2011, at <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-04-20/u-s-funds-help-democracy-activists-evade-Internet-crackdowns.html> (June 27, 2011).

for private companies to design more effective firewall circumvention technologies. The BBG has enjoyed a degree of success in funding the Global Internet Freedom Consortium.

- ***Speak out against Internet freedom's worst offenders.*** The U.S. should continue to unequivocally condemn nations who jail citizens for communicating on the net. Offenses can be recorded in the Annual Human Rights Report. The U.S. should let every nation know that its status as a free nation depends not only on its human rights record but also on the degree to which it restricts freedom of expression over the Web.
- ***Encourage other nations to join a coalition,*** which could provide the venue for “naming and shaming” offenders. The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) provides a model for voluntary

inter-governmental cooperation. Its purpose is combating money laundering and terrorist financing, and it encourages the development of national and international policies in member nations. An international Internet Freedom Task Force could similarly encourage the protection of freedom of expression on the Internet.

It is time for the State Department to end the empty promises and stop hoarding scarce funds. The U.S. must act in defense of global Internet freedom.

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