



HELSINKI COMMISSION BRIEFING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Testimony :: Hon. Sam Brownback

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Ranking Minority Member - Commission on Security and Cooperation in

Europe

Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this very important and timely hearing on the crucial role that new media plays—and will continue to play—in closed, authoritarian societies. As we approach the twentieth anniversary of the breaking of the Berlin Wall, we must gather our strength and commit ourselves to finding ways to tear down the new walls of the 21st Century, the cyber-walls and electronic censorship technology used by tyrants to repress the free expression of millions around the world. I look forward to learning from these distinguished panelists how we can move forward on this issue.

Let me first say a word about the freedom of information, and specifically Internet freedom. If information is the adrenaline of democracy, then our Internet-driven society is high on endorphins.

Individual citizens have never before had so much access to real-time political, economic, and social information affecting their lives. Generally, this has led to increased accountability and better outcomes.

Recently, we have seen the other side of the information spectrum. In Iran this past summer, the real battle took place—and is still taking place—on blogs, Facebook, and Twitter as Iranians struggle to tell their story while the regime desperately tries to block access to the Internet. The same was true for the Burmese opposition in 2007, where the junta struggled to contain the fallout from its bloody crackdown. Before that, text messaging played a crucial role in the Orange Revolution in Ukraine.

One thing is clear: **while physical brutality will always be the tool of oppressors, twenty-first century authoritarianism has already been defined by the lengths to which autocrats will go to limit online access to information.**

The Iranian dictatorship, the Chinese Communist Party, the Burmese junta, the Castro regime, and other regimes worldwide, all derive a large share of its power through media suppression and rigorous Internet censorship.

But before we discuss how to tackle this problem, we must understand its cause. Why do regimes monitor, limit, or even block, the use of the Internet? Surely allowing open use of the Internet, a modest investment, would make life for residents of these societies more bearable and more efficient.

The answer is control and survival. Free and open access of the Internet would allow unfettered criticism of regimes that sustain themselves only by forcibly perpetuating the appearance of perfection.

These dictators not only shield their populations from their own brutality, but also block information about the basic freedoms enjoyed by millions worldwide.

Leaders of these oppressive regimes disdain criticism and challenge because it pushes back against this fiction of success they peddle to the masses. As the fiction crumbles, their grip on power dissolves. Like with the Polish Solidarity movement, the defiance of the people eventually cracked the defiance of the government.

This is why we must focus our efforts on promoting the freedom of information, specifically Internet freedom.

As individual information exchanges become effortless through wireless communication, authoritarian regimes must devote ever more resources to maintain their electronic wall.

If information is power, then it is time to help bring the power to the people. We must ensure that all closed society residents have free and open access to the Internet. This is the surest, and most cost-effective, way to jumpstart liberty.

Indeed, the more the oppressed see and understand the real nature of their regime, and the more they share with the outside world, the more power they will have to determine their own future.