

U.S. Helsinki Commission
Briefing on “Twitter against Tyrants: New Media in Authoritarian Regimes”

Tearing Down That Firewall

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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, members of this Commission, ladies and gentlemen:

The Internet is a vast, fast, and inexpensive way to access information, to communicate, and to organize. It is perhaps the greatest hope for global information freedom and democratization, and it provides an important vehicle for the development of civil societies.

While authorities in closed societies can easily shut down newspapers, block TV channels, jam short-wave radios and ban books, control of the Internet is far more elusive and difficult to attain. But this is not for lack of effort. In the past decade, repressive governments around the world have invested heavily in censorship and surveillance of the Internet.

China is perhaps the best example of systematic control of the Internet. Tens of thousands of cyber police engage in monitoring and surveillance of Internet users, some of whom end up in prison for voicing their opinions online. China’s “golden shield” – censorship technologies developed with the help of western corporations like Cisco – blocks many websites completely, and filter out topics deemed too politically sensitive by the ruling party.

China’s model of Internet censorship is now being emulated elsewhere. The repressive governments such as that of Burma, Cuba, Iran, and now some Central Asian states of the former Soviet Union, are increasingly adopting technologies to stifle dissent, control information, and prevent citizens from communicating with the outside world. The Internet censorship firewalls have become the 21st century Berlin Wall that separates our world.

Yet amid the darkness of the Internet censorship in closed societies, a shred of light still remains. It is the Internet lifeline offered by the anti-censorship systems like that of the Global Internet Freedom Consortium – GIF for short, which has been providing millions in closed societies with free access to the Internet for years.

GIF consists of a small team of dedicated Chinese-American engineers, including myself, who were brought together by our practice of Falun Gong. Many of us were also among the students on Tiananmen Square during the 1989 Massacre, and we watched in the days and weeks that followed the massacre as the government began to rewrite history and distort the truth. We relived a similar experience in 1999, when the Chinese regime banned the Falun Gong spiritual practice and engaged in a campaign of misinformation and censorship to turn public opinion against Falun Gong, and to suppress news of the brutal persecution being carried out.

Through these events, we have personally experienced how frightening the state-controlled media can be – it confounds right with wrong, incites hatred, and institutionalizes ignorance. It is our belief that free flow of information is the most effective and powerful way to peacefully transform a closed society and promote human rights and civil liberties.

This conviction has driven us to spend many sleepless nights contending with the tens of thousands of Internet monitors and censors in China and around the world so that the citizens inside those repressed countries may safely communicate with each other and with the world. The men and women of GIF maintain operations out of our own pockets, but we provide our products and services to the citizens of closed societies entirely free of charge.

We have developed a series of software programs – most notably FreeGate and UltraSurf – that provide users with encrypted connections to secure proxy servers around the world. We constantly switch the servers IP address at a rate of about 3,000 times per hour in the earlier time, now about 10,000 times per hour, so it makes the censors more difficult to block.

After years of hard work, our anti-censorship system has attained a global reach – it is used by people from almost every closed society in the world, and has been supporting the largest user base in the world's most censored countries like China, Iran, and Burma. Today approximately over 90% of anti-censorship traffic comes through our servers.

During the Saffron Revolution in Burma in late August 2007, we experienced a three-fold increase in average daily traffic from Burma. Many Burmese used our system to post photos and videos of the crackdown to the outside blogs and websites. The Burmese government had to entirely shut down the Internet to stop the outflow of information about the suppression.

Before the Beijing Olympics, when uprisings in Tibet led to thousands of arrests and large-scale human rights abuses, we saw our traffic from that region increase by over 400%.

Perhaps the best example of the role of GIF software was during the Iranian elections this past June, when our traffic from Iran increased by nearly 600%. On the Saturday of June 20, an estimated over 1 million Iranians used our system to visit previously censored websites such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Google. The Iranian users posted videos, photos, and messages about the bloody crackdown.

GIF systems have also been of benefit to US-based organizations such as Human Rights in China, Voice of America, and Radio Free Asia – and even companies like Google and Yahoo who self-censor, since we bring the uncensored version of their services into closed societies.

In fact, when the U.S. Internet companies such as Google, Yahoo, Microsoft are criticized for complying with the censorship demands of dictatorships, they often claim that they have few options but to do so. However, powerful anti-censorship systems make it effectively impossible for the regimes to demand censorship of those companies' in-

country sites. This is because the more in-country sites are compromised by censorship demands, the more likely people in those countries will be to ignore them and to hook up to the uncensored overseas sites through anti-censorship systems.

The services GIF provides are invaluable, and the impact goes far beyond the Internet. When the people in closed societies gain a taste of freedom and are given a way to share information, they will no longer acquiesce to tyranny and injustice. Internet freedom has the potential of transforming the closed societies in a peaceful but powerful way that must not be underestimated.

Imagine what it would mean, for instance, if the Pope were able to conduct a web-based service with half a million house church Catholics in China. Imagine if the President of the United States could hold interactive town hall meetings with hundreds of thousands of Iranian students, or for Burmese, Syrians, Cubans, Tibetans, others to have full, free and real-time ability to communicate with each other and with supporters throughout the world. Imagine, if you will, how much safer the world could be, how much better we could understand each other, and how quickly authoritarianism and repression would collapse when confronted with an engaged, educated, and free citizenry.

This may sound far-fetched, but consider this: for every dollar we spend on anti-censorship technologies, repressive governments must spend hundreds—perhaps thousands—of dollars to block us.

Congress is now considering a \$30m appropriation for Internet freedom that, if passed, could allow us to increase our current user capacity from 1.5 million people per day up to 50 million per day, and allow us to greatly enhance the rate at which our technology switches users' IP addresses. These developments would make it prohibitively expensive for any repressive government to counter our efforts.

The information warfare over the Internet has now boiled down to the battle of resources. We have the technology and the commitment. With a modest amount of resources, we will have the capacity, and together we will be able to tear down the 21st century Berlin Wall.