

Internet Freedom Is the First Freedom of the 21st Century

by [Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](#)

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.



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The internet provides the medium through which political freedoms are accessible to all for the first time in human history.

The Arab Spring has provided us with a new perspective: for people living under authoritarian regimes, far from being a shopping mall, the internet is the mecca of freedoms. As events in Egypt and elsewhere have demonstrated, the internet is allowing oppressed people the ability to exercise freedoms previously unavailable to them.

The virtual environment of the internet is making real political change possible.

The internet provides the medium through which political freedoms are accessible to all for the first time in human history. For this reason, it is time to consider internet as the first freedom of the 21st century, the gateway to all other freedoms.

The most recent Freedom House report on internet freedom titled "Freedom on the Net 2011" makes for depressing reading. The report notes that governments are finding innovative ways to monitor, censor, slow or, when they feel ultimately threatened, shut down the internet altogether. Hosni Mubarak's Egypt provided the most egregious example of the latter when, in desperation, it cut Egypt's link to the global internet almost completely. Reports that the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria has now mobilized an "electronic army" to go on offensive attacks against the mounting opposition there represent the latest iteration of the government's effort to add internet access suppression to their repression tool kit.

Authoritarians learn fast; sometimes faster than we who live in free societies and take for granted the extraordinary ways the internet has expanded our personal freedom. In nearly every aspect of our lives, our rights to speak, associate, worship, or pursue happiness have been greatly expanded by our ability to access the internet where we are freely able to connect with knowledge, information, and each other in ways inconceivable only 10 years ago.

In closed, repressive societies, the internet is often the only place where individuals live freely. This was surely the lesson of this year's Arab Spring, which was fueled by young men and women from Tunisia and Egypt who were living such free lives virtually that they decided their authoritarian reality had to change.

In the Virginia Statute of 1786, Thomas Jefferson laid the foundation of the first amendment to the constitution, which recognized that if hearts and minds are not free then the meaning of freedom becomes an absurdity. Today, this "first freedom" remains as critical as ever; and since the internet is the venue through which hearts and minds are being liberated in the 21st century, internet freedom must be vigorously protected.

The Barack Obama administration has commendably elevated internet freedom as a key priority. Until now, the administration has focused primarily on expanding normative definitions and has sought to work through multilateral institutions such as the United Nations to embed internet freedom in the international legal firmament. They must do more.

Of first priority is a massive public-private partnership to rapidly expand internet access globally, particularly in transitioning societies. Egypt and Tunisia, for instance, would make ideal candidates for such an initiative. At the time of the revolutions, only 25 and 34 percent of the population, respectively, had access to the internet. A rapid expansion of internet access in these two countries could help consolidate a wobbly transition and better safeguard the emerging democracies there.

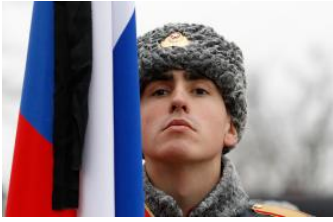
The ultimate solution for complete internet freedom is ridding the world of the monopoly of the internet service provider, or ISP. China, Russia, and others keep their people locked behind firewalls and compel ISPs to carry out their censorship. Similar to the scientific efforts that brought mankind to the moon in the 1960s, the monumental engineering task of the early 21st century is to provide instantaneous, broad-band internet access to any place in the world without having to go through an ISP.

Hopefully, a team of computer engineers in Silicon Valley and elsewhere are working toward this immense achievement that would be the "moon landing" of the 21st century.

Soner Cagaptay is director of the [Turkish Research Program \(/template102.php?](#)

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