

Briefing to the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
“Twitter against Tyrants: New Media in Authoritarian Regimes”
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New media has created significant opportunities for advancing freedom in countries ruled by authoritarian regimes. It has expanded the space for free expression and facilitated civic activism.

But authoritarian regimes have pushed back. They have restricted Internet freedom in a variety of ways. And they are likely to further limit the space for free expression and civic activism on the Internet unless the United States Government works pro-actively and vigorously to keep that space open.

Impact of New Media

The impact of digital media on authoritarian regimes was evident in Iran following the rigged presidential election of June 12. Digital media made important contributions to the “Green Movement” of post-election protests:

- The Movement’s leader, Mir-Hossein Mousavi, communicates to Iranians primarily through his blog and Facebook
- Protests are announced and organized largely via the Internet
- And images of police crackdowns and of defiance by protestors often are transmitted across Iran and to the outside world through Facebook and Twitter with the help of anti-censorship technology

The Green Movement was sparked by public anger over the blatant electoral fraud committed by supporters of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. It is kept alive, in large part, by the use of new media.

Citizens in the former Soviet republics have used new media to assert their rights and to challenge abuses of power.

In Russia, for example, the Internet was the primary means for drawing attention to fraud in this month’s local elections. When observers in the Moscow district of Zyablikovo found a group of individuals hired to vote for United Russia multiple times, they used Twitter and LiveJournal blogs to spread the news immediately and to publish photos of the violators. A member of that district’s electoral commission, Andrey Klyukin, gave an

online interview to describe in detail the plan behind this fraud. The interview was widely viewed on Russian YouTube and covered by several traditional media outlets.

Another group of observers published video footage of a polling station chairman in the city of Azov as he tried to mix fraudulent ballots, which were already filled in for United Russia, with legitimate ballots. This video became a hit in the Russian blogosphere and prompted a criminal investigation of the polling station chairman.

Digital media spread the news of vote fraud in Russia's local elections and contributed to a real-world response. The news triggered a public demonstration on October 12 in Moscow's Pushkin Square and prompted all three opposition parties to walk out of parliament in protest.

In Belarus, traditional media is highly restricted. Belarus is near the bottom—ranked 188th out of 195 countries—in Freedom House's global survey of *Freedom of the Press* 2009. But the Internet provides extensive space for independent expression and activism. Most Internet users in Belarus turn to non-state sources for news. The top 20 news and information websites include only three state-run sites; 12 are independent or pro-opposition; and the rest focus on sports or other non-political subjects.

In Kazakhstan, the free speech advocacy group Adil Soz spearheaded an online campaign this past summer against a bill before parliament to restrict the Internet. This campaign used blogs, Facebook, and Twitter to mobilize opposition to the bill. And as part of the protest, Adil Soz delivered to parliament a keyboard wrapped in chains. Despite widespread criticism in Kazakhstan and internationally, the bill was passed into law in July 2009. But a key provision of the bill, which would have allowed prosecutors to suspend any media outlet without prior court approval, was removed.

Restrictions on Internet Freedom

While new media plays an important role in expanding free expression and facilitating citizen engagement, it does not drive political change. New media alone cannot undermine authoritarian regimes.

Authoritarian regimes, in the former Soviet republics and elsewhere, continue to repress their citizens. And their repression extends to digital media.

In Russia, for example, Internet freedom has declined significantly over the past few years, as bloggers have become subject to hacker attacks, legal prosecution, and physical violence. Although there is no technical filtering in Russia, officials often make phone calls to pressure web hosts or Internet service providers to remove unwanted content. Aleksandr Ovchinnikov, the director of a leading hosting company, Masterhost, admitted that his company gets about 100 requests each day from authorities to black out "inconvenient" websites.

In Belarus, authorities conduct surveillance on Internet users and have “outsourced” surveillance to cybercafés. Owners of cybercafés are required to register each user’s browsing history and to denounce to the police any user who goes to sensitive sites.

Kazakhstan’s government is increasing its restrictions on online freedom of expression. Despite protests, it introduced the law in July 2009 to regulate the Internet. This law makes all forms of Internet content—websites, blogs, chat rooms, etc.—subject to the same restrictions that are in place for traditional media.

Struggle for Cyberspace

Restrictions on the Internet are likely to increase, unless citizens in Russia, Kazakhstan, and elsewhere struggle to keep the Internet open. And this struggle requires U.S. support.

Authoritarian regimes use a variety of methods to limit online freedom of expression. The United States therefore has to respond in multiple ways. The U.S. response needs to:

1. Prevent the use of U.S. technology in violating the rights of Internet users
2. Build effective coalitions among democratic governments in defense of Internet freedom
3. Invest in technology for circumventing censorship and strengthening user privacy
4. Support indigenous efforts in Internet-restricted countries to expand space for free expression online

The Internet is a medium for communication. The impact of the Internet in authoritarian regimes ultimately depends less on this medium itself than on the messages it conveys and on the messengers who use it to drive progress toward democracy. Therefore the United States should not only invest in anti-censorship technology but also support the creation and distribution of pro-democracy content and back the courageous and creative activists in repressive environments who are struggling to bring about political change.