



Written by [C. Mitchell Shaw](#) on November 18, 2016

Is Online Freedom in Danger?

The freedom to visit websites, communicate, and post to the Internet without the interference of government is a right people around the world should be able to take for granted. Unfortunately, for a growing portion of the world's population, that is not the case. In fact, the Freedom on the Net report by the online activist group, Freedom House, shows that "Internet freedom around the world declined in 2016 for the sixth consecutive year."



The [report](#) — directed by Sanja Kelly — points to the growing trend among oppressive regimes to enforce censorship and to resist (if not outright criminalize) the use of social-media platforms and applications that make widespread and private communication more easily accessible. The report says:

Internet freedom has declined for the sixth consecutive year, with more governments than ever before targeting social media and communication apps as a means of halting the rapid dissemination of information, particularly during anti-government protests.

Public-facing social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter have been subject to growing censorship for several years, but in a new trend, governments increasingly target voice communication and messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Telegram. These services are able to spread information and connect users quickly and securely, making it more difficult for authorities to control the information landscape or conduct surveillance.

The report includes several graphs and maps showing the various degrees of freedom enjoyed by people living in different nations. One graph shows that by the standards of Freedom House, only 24 percent of the world's population live in areas that are free.

Since — as Thomas Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence — governments derive "their just powers from the consent of the governed" and that "whenever any form of government becomes destructive of" the unalienable rights of the people, "it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish" their government and create a new government which is more likely to protect those rights, oppressive governments fear the ability of people to communicate freely and privately. In the digital age, communication is easily instantaneous, widespread, and private.

Enter the surveillance state.

By monitoring the calls, texts, e-mails, and other communication tools of the people, oppressive — or even potentially oppressive — governments are able to make an example of anyone who strays too far from the party line. For this reason, many have turned to encrypted forms of communication, which, as the report says, "make it extremely difficult for authorities to obtain user data."

Censorship and surveillance are two sides of the same tyrannical coin. The nations that are the most willing to oppress their people are also those that enforce censorship and resist encrypted forms of communication.



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Since the control of the people depends in large part on the ability to control the flow of information in and out of oppressed countries, the report states,

Authorities in several countries have even resorted to shutting down all internet access at politically contentious times, solely to prevent users from disseminating information through social media and communication apps, with untold social, commercial, and humanitarian consequences.

Even when coming up short of shutting down the Internet entirely, many oppressive governments, such as those in China, Thailand, and Saudi Arabia, have jailed citizens for something as innocuous as “liking” unapproved posts on Facebook and other social media. The report says the types of posts that can lead to imprisonment include “mocking the king’s pet dog in Thailand” and “‘spreading atheism’ in Saudi Arabia” and notes that the number of countries where such imprisonment takes place has increased more than 50 percent in the last three years.

While imprisonment is on the rise, its growth is minor in comparison to the growth of censorship. By controlling Internet access, governments are able to block certain content and communications while allowing others. This selective flow of information is designed to create the illusion that there is little or no dissent because there is little or no oppression. The report says:

Governments have expanded censorship to cover a growing diversity of topics and online activities. Sites and pages through which people initiate digital petitions or calls for protests were censored in more countries than before, as were websites and online news outlets that promote the views of political opposition groups.... Censorship of images — as opposed to the written word — has intensified, likely due to the ease with which users can now share them, and the fact that they often serve as compelling evidence of official wrongdoing.

Oppressive governments have good reason for fearing the power of the Internet. The report says, “In over two-thirds of the countries in this study, internet-based activism has led to some sort of tangible outcome, from the defeat of a restrictive legislative proposal to the exposure of corruption through citizen journalism,” adding, “During the year, for example, internet freedom activists in Nigeria helped thwart a bill that would have limited social media activity, while a WhatsApp group in Syria helped save innocent lives by warning civilians of impending air raids.”

From the perspective of a tyrant who wants to quell all dissent and maintain power, silencing the voice of the people, conducting mass surveillance, and enforcing censorship are necessities. That is why those things take such priority and account for disproportionately large budgets.

But even with the heavy hand of government doing all in its power to silence the voices of the people, the Internet is still an effective tool in the struggle for freedom. As quickly as governments close one portal of communication, another opens. Encryption is impossible to combat since it is — at its core — nothing other than math. While governments may be able to identify commercially available applications such as WhatsApp, online activists can still create their own encryption using the readily available PGP standards.

While the governments of nations such as China and North Korea lead the pack among those heavily invested in censoring and monitoring the communications of people, the report also tracks those governments that are moving in the direction of China and North Korea and says, “The steepest declines [in Internet freedom] were in Uganda, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Ecuador, and Libya.

And while the United States is still listed in the report as a “free” nation, the reality is that with [the rise of the surveillance state in the wake of 9/11](#), the [freedom of Americans to control the privacy of their](#)



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[communications has greatly receded](#). The only thing still protecting that freedom is robust encryption. And that has come under increasing attack over the past year. If that trend continues, the United States may soon find itself listed in a different category in future reports from Freedom House.

Without mentioning the United States, the report does point out the philosophy and the mechanics behind much of the decline in online freedom. And that philosophy and those mechanics are alive and well, right here in the land of the free and the home of the brave. The report notes:

In an effort to boost their national security and law enforcement powers, a number of governments have passed new laws that limit privacy and authorize broad surveillance. This trend was present in both democratic and nondemocratic countries, and often led to political debates about the extent to which governments should have backdoor access to encrypted communications. The most worrisome examples, however, were observed in authoritarian countries, where governments used antiterrorism laws to prosecute users for simply writing about democracy, religion, or human rights.

With [increased calls for backdoors into encryption](#) under the pretext of fighting terrorism, and the passage of [Net Neutrality](#), which grants government the power to regulate everything about the Internet, including content, the United States may not be very far from a real crackdown on the ability of the people to communicate freely and form resistance to heavy-handed government policies. Concerned citizens need to resist any and all forms of restrictions on robust encryption and work to unravel the tangled web of Net Neutrality.



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