



Written by [Thomas R. Eddlem](#) on September 2, 2010

## The Power of the Internet

When the Founding Fathers adopted the Bill of Rights guaranteeing that “Congress shall make no law ... abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press,” few could possibly have foreseen that any person of modest means could publish a truth accessible to the entire world (via the world wide web) to be read or viewed by potentially hundreds of millions.

In fact, the Founders had much more respect for newspapers than they did for the very federal government they established. “The basis of our governments being the opinion of the people,” Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1787, “the very first object should be to keep that right; and were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.”



Jefferson maintained this opinion despite being mercilessly criticized by the press during his presidency. “The advertisements,” he bitterly wrote to Nathaniel Macon several years after his term had ended, “contain the only truths to be relied on in a newspaper.” But Jefferson never changed his view that, as he explained in an 1823 letter to John Adams, “the light which has been shed on mankind by the art of printing has eminently changed the condition of the world.”

### Powerful Free Press

The Internet has become the natural outgrowth of the power of the free press that has continued to accelerate that change in the world. One recent example of how the free press — supercharged with the power of the Internet — continues to change the world is the story of the whistle-blower website WikiLeaks.org essentially overturning a corrupt Kenyan government in 2007. WikiLeaks spokesman Julian Assange explained how it happened to TED TV’s Chris Anderson:

*Julian Assange:* The Kroll Report. This was a secret intelligence report commissioned by the Kenyan government after its election in 2004. Prior to 2004, Kenya was ruled by Daniel arap Moi for about 18 years. He was a soft dictator of Kenya. And when Kibaki got into power — through a coalition of forces that were trying to clean up corruption in Kenya — they commissioned this report, spent about two million pounds on this and an associated report. And then the government sat on it and used it for political leverage on Moi, who was the richest man — still is the richest man — in Kenya. It’s the Holy Grail of Kenyan journalism. So I went there in 2007, and we managed to get hold of this just prior to the election — the national election, December 28. When we released that report, we did so three days after the new President, Kibaki, had decided to pal up with the man that he was going to clean out, Daniel arap Moi. So this report then became a dead albatross around



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President Kibaki's neck.

*TED TV's Chris Anderson:* And — I mean, to cut a long story short — word of the report leaked into Kenya, not from the official media, but indirectly. And in your opinion, it actually shifted the election.

*Assange:* Yeah. So this became front page of the *Guardian* and was then printed in all the surrounding countries of Kenya, in Tanzanian and South African press. And so it came in from the outside. And that, after a couple of days, made the Kenyan press feel safe to talk about it. [I]t ran for 20 nights straight on Kenyan TV, [and] shifted the vote by 10 percent, according to a Kenyan intelligence report, which changed the result of the election.

*Anderson:* Wow, so your leak really substantially changed the world?

*Assange:* Yep.

Though Kibaki claimed victory regardless of the election tallies, in an election that was mired with fraud, he was forced to share power with his electoral rival, Raila Odinga. Thus, it's no surprise that dictators across the world have long regarded a free press as an enemy to slavery. Napoleon Bonaparte, the first dictator of the modern totalitarian state, observed: "A journalist is a grumbler, a censorer, a giver of advice, a regent of sovereigns, a tutor of nations. Four hostile newspapers are more to be feared than a thousand bayonets." Likewise, Soviet-era dictator Nikolai Lenin observed shortly after coming to power: "Why should freedom of speech and freedom of the press be allowed?... Ideas are much more fatal things than guns. Why should any man be allowed to buy a printing press and disseminate pernicious opinion calculated to embarrass the government?"

In 2009, WikiLeaks again demonstrated the power of the Internet when it revealed causes of the Icelandic banking crisis in a leaked government document. The WikiLeaks exposure had uncovered that the private bank Kaupthing — then in government receivership to prevent bankruptcy — had loaned billions of dollars in risky ventures to its shareholders. Though the Icelandic government tried to censor the document, procuring a court injunction to block discussion of the report in the Iceland state press, the report was widely distributed through the Internet anyway and the government was so thoroughly discredited that the Icelandic Althing (parliament) passed a sweeping free press haven law to prevent government censorship in the future.

The Internet is certainly a powerful magnification of the might of the free press — arguably more powerful than the U.S. government. Today, 250 billion e-mails are sent daily (of which 200 billion are spam). And there are 250 million websites (125 million blogs), nearly 30 million tweets from Twitter.com daily, and more than 35 *trillion* page views per year on Facebook alone (from a population of more than 400 million Facebook users). YouTube.com has more than one billion videos in its online library, where 12.2 billion videos are viewed every month. No longer does a person have to have a printing press to make his views known to the whole world; the strength of the message now determines its reach.

If the Internet were a country, with nearly two billion "netizens," it would be by far the most populous nation on Earth. It would also be the fastest growing country, with some 40-percent increase in population every year.

Forrester Research "estimates that \$917 billion worth of retail sales last year were 'Web-influenced,'" and that this figure is expected to increase to \$1.4 trillion by 2014 — an amazing 40-percent growth



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over five years. Compared to countries, the Internet had the 14th largest economy in the world last year, equivalent to Australia's, and by 2014 it will be in the top 10.

But perhaps the most important indication of the power of the Internet over governments is the fact that often governments can do nothing about citizen Internet journalism. A single video- and cellphone-equipped "netizen" has become a dangerous weapon to wage war against government repression on both the individual and national policy levels.

### **A Great Equalizer**

One example of this is the unprovoked Prince George's County, Maryland, police attack on John McKenna after a Maryland-Duke basketball game earlier this year. McKenna, peacefully reveling in the aftermath of the game, was charged with disorderly conduct and assaulting a police officer in a falsified report by the police officer. But an anonymous cellphone user had captured the video of the "disorderly conduct" — which was in actuality an unprovoked attack by a police officer against McKenna — and submitted the video to YouTube, where it became an Internet sensation.

The video resulted in the dismissal of the officer from the police force, as well as the dismissal of charges against McKenna. "You have a person who has committed no crime, who was completely defenseless and who was beaten," John McKenna's attorney, Christopher Griffiths, told the local College Park, Maryland, television station. "You can see that he stops. The police don't give him a single order. He doesn't say a thing to the police and they jump him." Police Chief Roberto Hylton agreed: "I'm outraged and disappointed. This is not the type of conduct that I condone in this agency. That type of use of excessive force will not be tolerated."

This scene has been repeated constantly around the country. One other example is a random attack on a bicyclist by a New York City policeman that resulted in the policeman losing his badge. Back in 2008, police arrested Christopher Long, of Hoboken, New Jersey, because he was supposedly obstructing traffic in the heart of Times Square. They charged him with attempted assault, resisting arrest, and disorderly conduct in a falsified police report that stated Long had deliberately steered his bicycle into the officer and caused both of them to fall to the ground. But citizen video-journalism from a cellphone revealed precisely the reverse had happened. The police officer had picked out Long at random and — despite Long's obvious efforts to avoid him — the officer had charged Long and brutally pushed him off his speeding bicycle onto the ground. Again, the video made its way onto YouTube, where it provoked national attention. The result? The charges were dropped and the abusive police officer is a policeman no longer, courtesy of the Internet.

Thus, it's no surprise that some police officers' unions are campaigning to outlaw citizen videography of police brutality. In Massachusetts — one of a dozen states where filming a police officer is a felony — citizen video-journalists are often arrested, even if they are rarely convicted. Jon Surmacz, a part-time producer at the *Boston Globe's* website, Boston.com, was arrested in 2008 for filming Brighton, Massachusetts police breaking up a Christmas party. The charges were eventually dropped, Surmacz argued, "because I didn't do anything wrong." He added: "Had I recorded an officer saving someone's life, I almost guarantee you that they wouldn't have come up to me and [said], "Hey, you just recorded me saving that person's life. You're under arrest.'"

In short, corruption hates the light of exposure. The political reality is that citizen video-journalism is a far more powerful medium than the legal statutes of any American state attempting to curb the First Amendment protections of free speech. And citizen video-journalists usually don't need court decisions to protect them. Massachusetts and other states may declare video-journalism of police brutality a



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felony, but it's difficult to find a jury to convict a person documenting official abuse, or to support a government official's "right" to privacy while that official is engaging in a corrupt practice on the taxpayers' dime. Most citizens decide to follow the advice of James Madison — that the very purpose of the First Amendment was to expose government corruption. Madison wrote:

Nothing could be more irrational than to give the people power, and to withhold from them information without which power is abused. A people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with power which knowledge gives. A popular government without popular information or the means of acquiring it is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy, or perhaps both.

The Internet even has the power to defy the U.S. government, as another WikiLeaks case reveals. The website's release on July 25 of some 90,000 "secret" documents on the Afghan war exposed to the world that our so-called War on Terror includes aiding and abetting, even to the extent of providing military intelligence to, a regime (Pakistan) that is guiding the insurgency against U.S. forces in Afghanistan. Naturally, the defenders of our interventionist foreign policy want to keep the people ignorant of such things, so they have clamored for prosecuting those responsible for the leaks — which they claim harm our national security.

Of course, no one has explained how national security could possibly be damaged by demonstrating to the world that the United States is effectively helping both sides of the conflict in Afghanistan. Those who use American wherewithal to wage attacks against Americans already know what they are doing; shouldn't the American people know as well, despite our government not wanting this information to be known?

Congressman Mike Rogers (R-Mich.) even called for the death penalty for Bradley Manning, the man alleged to have given WikiLeaks the documents. And while the government may be able to prosecute Manning, WikiLeaks — based in European nations with liberal press laws — is clearly beyond the reach of even the immensely powerful U.S. government. "If you're going to prosecute Wiki[L]eaks, where would you go?" David Carr of the *New York Times* asked MSNBC after the WikiLeaks posting. "Where does Wiki[L]eaks live? I mean, their stateless news organization exists literally on the web. And so you have this black box out there. And what government would you go through, what justice system?... It's a lot more complicated than it used to be."

Thus, it's not surprising that many governments have decided to try to censor the Internet. But they have had only limited success. China has forced search engines and computer manufacturers to install its censorship software, called Green Dam-Youth Escort, in order to prevent its citizens from hearing negative information about the government. The so-called "Great Firewall of China" was nominally erected to stop Chinese from viewing pornography, but the real purpose has been to stop the kind of Internet revolution that happened in Kenya. As China becomes more wired, however, the Chinese people will only become more adept at circumventing the censor's knife, something that the Iranian and other Islamic governments are already learning.

Internet censorship across the Islamic world is pervasive, officially to stop pornography that conflicts with the doctrines of Islam, but another key reason for censorship is for political reasons in nations such as Iran and Saudi Arabia. The OpenNet Initiative explains: "The [area of the] Middle East and North Africa is one of the most heavily censored regions in the world. Human rights watchdogs and free speech advocacy groups continue to criticize the media restrictions and repressive legal regimes, and over the past few years, a great number of bloggers and cyber-dissidents have been jailed."



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Nowhere in the Islamic world is the Internet more censored than in Iran. Yet even there, Iranians have become adept at circumventing government censors. Al Jazeera's Riz Khan explained that Iran — the most Internet-accessible nation in the Middle East — has raised a generation of hackers:

The government's tight control of the internet has spawned a generation who are adept [at] circumventing cyber roadblocks.

Access to networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter and the photography site Flickr have been blocked in Iran, where the government has also been accused of blocking text-messaging, launching denial of service attacks and spreading misinformation to protest communities online. But internet users have been able to get around those roadblocks by the thousands, on internet proxies — web servers set up in other countries that allow Iranians to hide their computer[s'] internet protocol address[es] from censors within the country.

The Iranian — and eventually the Chinese — experience in government censorship, despite a little short-term success, has an air of futility about it. It is increasingly backfiring, as computer users become smarter than the incompetent governments trying to prohibit people's access to information. And as with the old American scandal Watergate, the coverup itself is more disgraceful than the malfeasance the government is trying to hide.

The Internet is the new global public square where free speech and free press are merged; ultimately no government can control it — and hopefully never will. Despite the seedy side of the Internet — with its pornography, rumor-mongering, spam, and viruses — it has become a powerful force against government repression of all kinds. It's an electronic proof that truth is a more powerful weapon than the raw weaponry of government.

That's why dictators such as Benito Mussolini have always vigorously opposed freedom of both speech and the press, claiming Western civilization was "talking itself to death. The people do not know what they want; they do not know what is the best for them. There is too much foolishness, too much lost motion. I have stopped the talk and the nonsense. I am a man of action."

While there is "foolishness" on the Internet, any negative aspects are far outweighed by the value of the undiluted truth it broadcasts to the world.



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