Chapter 92
Negotiating Boundaries between Control and Dissent:
Free Speech, Business, and Repressitarian Governments

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ABSTRACT

Increases in access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) have given citizens new tools to organize politically. This development has particular importance for those living under authoritarian regimes that rely on the repression of free speech to maintain power. These repressitarian elites resort to a variety of means to establish (or re-establish) control over citizen online communications. However, it is counterproductive for countries to crack down too tightly on Internet expression, because such actions can create negative economic consequences for countries hoping to engage in the 21st century's wired economy. The friction between online free expression and government repression is playing out with close interest of Western governments, human rights advocates, and citizens because it places many technology companies in the difficult position of either facilitating such government repression or finding themselves unable to compete in those markets. This chapter examines recent developments in Iran, Egypt, China, and Singapore. All four countries have been identified as having severe impediments to free expression. Iran and Egypt, however, have seen the rise of some organized opposition movements despite the controls on media expression, while China and Singapore offer useful case studies on the economic dimensions of the balance between participating in the global networked society and controlling citizen expression. This chapter considers how financial and economic factors lead to more moderate views of Internet use in those countries and examine the struggles between maintaining openness and crackdowns.

INTRODUCTION

Increased public access to the means of media production has opened new questions related to freedom of the press and expression in countries such as Iran and China, whose governments could be classified as repressitarian. They are both repressive in terms of human rights practices and authoritarian in terms of governance (Freedman, Shafer & Antonova, 2010). Information and communication technology (ICT) provides oppositional groups new opportunities to spread information in countries where free speech is normally curtailed, although those regimes continuously undertake exhaustive efforts to block or remove such critical messages from the World Wide Web.

Those crackdowns reveal the harsh consequences of online dissent. In the past few years, among the targets of criminal action in Iran were bloggers Hossein Derakhshan–nicknamed Iran's *blogfather*–sentenced to 19½ years, and Hossein Maleki Ronaghi, sentenced to 15 years. Web designer Saeed Malekpour received a death sentence for purportedly designing and moderating adult sites, "agitation against the regime," and "insulting the sanctity of Islam." Blogger Omid Reza Mirsayafi, serving a sentence for propaganda against the state and criticism of Iran's supreme leader, died in Evin Prison, although the cause of death is disputed. Some sentences include flogging, such as those of bloggers Omid Memarian, Roozbeh Mirebrahimi, Shahram Rafizadeh, and Javad Gholamtamimi, who were sentenced in 2009 to up to three years in prison (U.S. State Department, 2011).

The situation elsewhere reflects many similar obstacles for users of the Internet and social media across the globe. These examples from 2010 are illustrative, as drawn from international media reports and human rights advocacy groups: The Ukrainian Security Service questioned a blogger for purportedly insulting and threatening the country's president and removed some of his Live Journal posts. The administrator of "Troktiko," Greece's most popular social and political blog, was fatally shot in front of his home. Turkmenistan authorities hacked the website of a Europe-based Turkmen-language human rights organization. Acting under court order, Turkey banned YouTube for three years. Kuwait sentenced a blogger to one year for criminal defamation based on an article criticizing the prime minister. After finishing a 30-month term on trumped-up tax evasion charges, a Vietnamese blogger remained in custody pending investigation of a new charge of carrying out propaganda against the government. And the Palestinian Authority detained a man for supposedly criticizing Islam and other religions on Facebook and in blogs.

In contrast to such human rights violations stands immense progress in regards to free speech through computer-mediated communication. Consistent with Prensky's (2001) digital natives concept, the generations of users who have grown up in the Internet age seem to be increasingly skilled at finding ways to circumvent government controls. Young, tech-savvy protestors throughout the world avoid censorship by creating proxy websites and servers to access illegal information (Iran Proxy, 2007; Samin, 2008). Additionally, youthful protestors try to outwit detectors in censoring software by replacing "forbidden" words with symbols and characters (Shuguang, 2008).

Social media users in countries such as Iran and Egypt have used such tools to organize mass protests outside of government scrutiny, while in China and Singapore they have been able to bypass the official gatekeepers at news media organizations handcuffed by government control. Groundbreaking news reports ignored by the mainstream press outlets have made their way to the public through the Internet in Indonesia, Myanmar, and Moldova, among many other nations under authoritarian rule. For instance, in Kyrgyzstan, an advocacy blog provided a temporary alternative to official information and a shuttered independent newspaper in the run-up to the 2005 "Tulip

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