



# General Assembly

Distr.: General  
25 May 2011

English only

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## Human Rights Council

Seventeenth session

Agenda item 3

**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,  
political, economic, social and cultural rights,  
including the right to development**

### **Written statement\* submitted by Reporters without Borders International, a non-governmental organizations in special consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[14 May 2011]

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\* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

## **Internet and the new media in the spotlight and at the crossroads**

These past months have firmly established social networks and the Internet as mobilisation and news transmission tools. They have created a public space of freedom which would not otherwise exist in closed societies. They must be protected.

The events that rocked the Arab world in late 2010 and early 2011 have made watchwords of “Twitter Revolution” and “Facebook Revolution”. The “online” movements were coupled with “offline” demonstrations, hastening the fall of governments. The Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings, to name a few, turned out to be, first and foremost, human revolutions but were facilitated by the Internet and social networks. Facebook and Twitter served as sound boxes, amplifying the demonstrators’ frustrations and demands. They also made it possible for the rest of the world to follow the events as they unfolded, despite censorship.

In countries where the mainstream media are controlled by the government, online journalists and bloggers can cover sensitive topics of general interest and take charge of the investigative work other journalists cannot do.

In countries where freedom of the press exists, the new and traditional media have proven to be increasingly complementary. The new media have become key tools for journalists to find news stories, first-hand accounts and visual illustrations.

Further, by flooding social networks with news and pictures, Arab revolutionaries were also ensuring the attention of the international media and in turn, this enabled them to put pressure on their governments and mobilized international public opinion.

Journalists are no longer alone in filtering information – their work is now scrutinised by their readers. Their essential work of verification has become tougher; they need to rely on a network of trusted contacts that can corroborate the “breaking news” coming from citizen journalists.

This collaboration is illustrated by changes in WikiLeaks’ strategy. Initially focused on the massive release of unedited confidential documents, the website gradually developed partnerships with several international media outlets. This strategy allowed it to combine the new media’s assets (instantaneousness and a virtually unlimited publishing capacity) with those of the traditional media (information checking and contextualisation). More than 120 journalists of various nationalities worked together to decipher the diplomatic cables and to remove the names of local informants from the documents to avoid putting them at risk.

Some governments use the Internet successfully to monitor dissidents and infiltrate their networks as well as to relay government propaganda and enforce a police state. Censorship and repression have become more sophisticated. Authoritarian states no longer rely on simple blocking techniques as they used to, but have moved to online tampering and propaganda. Countries such as China, Saudi Arabia and Iran are still increasingly practicing strict filtering. In Iran and in Belarus, the authorities redirected users of opposition websites to look alike sites with pro-government content. China is now tackling the anonymity of the Internet and cell phone users. Uzbekistan, Syria, Vietnam – to name but a few – have enhanced their censorship methods to stifle the echoes of the revolutions agitating the Arab world. Some 60 countries are carrying out some form of Internet censorship with content filtering and/or netizen harassment. Others will probably join their ranks soon.

Today, 126 netizens are behind bars and the authorities are finding new ways to hinder bloggers’ and cyber dissidents’ freedom of action. The number of false releases or forced

disappearances is growing, and so are house arrests. As a result, self-censorship is on the increase.

The world's biggest jailers for netizens remain: China with 77 netizens, including Nobel Peace Prize winner, Liu Xiaobo, in jail, Vietnam with 18 and Iran with 10.

Propaganda and manipulation are also increasing. To prevent dissidents from monopolizing the web, the authorities use various techniques such as denial-of-service (DDoS), cyber attacks or phishing, which involves stealing users' passwords as did the Syrian government in May 2011. Google's website and those of some 20 other companies in China were hacked in late 2009. Cyber attacks are also used in Vietnam to muzzle dissident opinions.

Connection speed has become the barometer of a country's political and social climate with authoritarian regimes slowing down bandwidth during elections or periods of social unrest. Iran has become an expert in this. Ben Ali's and Mubarak's regimes also resorted to it. Often such disruptions are accompanied by jamming or shutting down cell phone networks in targeted areas. The 5-day blocking costed more than 90 million dollars to Egypt. Today, as Internet is part of the global economy, very few countries can afford being cut off from cyber space for too long. That's why Myanmar has revamped its national portal to make it possible, next time there is an uprising, to cut the population from the Internet without affecting government and military connections.

Finally, every government seeking to control the net has created a cyber police which monitors dissident activities closely and posts pro-regime comments online.

Where Internet is concerned, democracies are confronting the "I love you – me neither" quandary.

Last February 2011, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated: "On the spectrum of Internet freedom, we place ourselves on the side of openness." However, those principles are in conflict with the treatment reserved for WikiLeaks. Prior to the WikiLeaks publication, the Pentagon had asked the media "not to facilitate the leak" of classified documents concerning the war in Iraq, claiming that it would endanger national security. The website may still be facing judicial action.

Alleged concerns about security tend to affect the web. Blackberry maker RIM is facing growing pressures from the Gulf States, as well as from Indonesia and India, which are trying to gain access to the content of its secured communications by invoking the fight against terrorism.

In the name of copyright protection, the French government adopted the « Hadopi » law which makes it possible, after issuing warnings, to suspend the Internet connection of an individual suspected of illegally downloading copyrighted files online. This "graduated response" scheme, known as the "three strikes", has inspired other countries such as the United Kingdom's Digital Economy Act. Spain's Sende Law also provides measures for website blocking subject to a court order.

In addition, the French Parliament passed an internal security law ("Loppsi 2") which provides for an administrative filtering of the web – a dangerous precedent potentially applied for political purposes – in the name of the fight against child pornography. The Australian filtering system, which has already been tested, has been put on hold for now. The highly controversial Hungarian media law could also have negative impact on online media and bloggers and Italy is attempting to regulate the posting of videos online.

The principle of Net neutrality seems to be increasingly at risk. In December 2010, in the United States, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) adopted various measures concerning net neutrality based on two principles: 1) Internet service providers must ensure transparency in their Internet management and 2) must ban any discrimination in the

manner in which “legal” content is transmitted. Such measures could leave the door open for FCC filtering of what it deems to be ‘illegal’ websites. In France, the Minister of Industry, Energy and the Digital Economy is calling for central regulation of Internet traffic if traffic saturation warrants it and for abandoning the Net’s absolute neutrality principle.

Following the positive role played by the Internet and social media in helping topple dictators, democratic countries need to avoid double standards in supporting more effectively a free and open Internet.

Internet access should be recognized as a human right at national level. It should also be clearly considered a fundamental right in the context of the right to free expression included in the International Covenant on Civil and Political rights, ratified by all UN members.

The issue of Internet censorship as an obstacle to economic exchanges should be raised at the World Trade Organization.

Tougher export controls or limitations are needed for software and equipment sold by Western companies to Internet-restricting countries for cracking down on dissent.

More resources should be allocated to circumvention tools and practical assistance for cyber dissidents. Political pressures to get netizens in jail released should be stepped up.

It is legitimate and essential to protect national security and copyright as well as to fight vigorously against child pornography but this should not lead to broad and long-term interference with the free flow of information online. This in turn would result inevitably in the undermining of all human rights.

It is also imperative to fight against digital segregation such as access to different versions of the Web depending on the geographical area where users connect.

Currently, one out of every three Internet users is unable to access a free Internet. This is unacceptable and it threatens the future of the Internet.

Above all we must realize that the Internet remains a tool which can be used for the best or the worse and it’s our responsibility to ensure it remains fully free to be used for the best; this is the best way to avoid the worst.

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