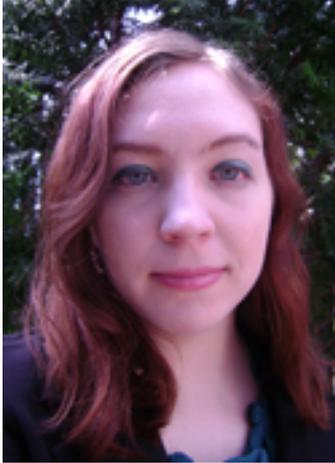


Syria's Internet silence could happen to us

Stephanie Carmichael, Contributor



On Tuesday, May 7, Syria disappeared from the Internet. It went offline in a targeted act of censorship, yet the blanket of silence fell over the entire country. While severe government crackdowns often happen halfway across the globe, the ripple effect is spreading farther all the time.

This kind of mass shutdown has happened before — just last year, actually, in November. The Syrian government blamed it on terrorist activity, but evidence [showed](#) [1] that the credit belonged to the ones pointing fingers. Cutting Internet communications, along with phone services, was more about [hampering](#) [2] rebel attacks than quieting citizens.

But that was a serious consequence, and now the same has happened again, months after the previous blackout. Syria's online pulse returned this month after [19 hours](#) [3] without a single beat. (November's outage lasted three days.)

State media used a "fault in optical fibre cables" as an excuse, but security experts [believe](#) [4] that someone with access to the four physical cables connecting Syria to the Internet (three under the sea and one over land) dropped the Border Gateway Protocol (BGP), which handles core routing decisions on the Internet, so that information essentially fed to nowhere.

Like last time, the government was likely attempting to sniff out the location of rebel groups, which use two-way satellite devices as an alternate means of connectivity. They're much easier to track that way.

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Censoring these opposition groups also muzzles Syria's people and isolates the country from the rest of the world. When a government can control what information gets out and how, it shackles its people.

Of course, we are talking about Syria, whose authorities are one of the [worst violators](#) [5] of human rights on Earth. But it's not the only country to restrict its people by blocking websites and ["controversial" material](#) [6] — whatever it deems that to mean, as any power entity does — on the web. Censorship is becoming a worldwide problem.

In China, Internet users [must record](#) [7] their real names with Internet service providers, and the government encourages companies to delete and report posts of a forbidden nature. Many foreign websites such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are off-limits because the Chinese Communist Party considers their content to be politically sensitive — the kind of commentary that can land native users (more than an estimated 500 million total), including bloggers and journalists, behind bars.

Censorship works two ways: It inhibits people from saying what they want and hides or removes information that authorities don't want them to see. The rise in virtual private networks (VPNs), which can circumvent these censorship attempts, may not be enough as the Chinese government is eliminating those as well.

We have it good in America, where blogging is a free means of expression and social normality and we can peruse whatever websites we please. The biggest risk is picking up nasty computer bugs or starting a flame war. That could all change as the Internet becomes an even bigger part of our future.

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The Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) of recent years would have restricted search engine links and severed access to websites suspected of enabling or supporting copyright infringement. Major sites like Wikipedia locked down to protest SOPA and the related Protect Intellectual Property Act (PIPA), which would place similar power in the hands of the U.S. government.

More than 14 million people wrote their names [in opposition](#) [8], as these legislations threaten creative expression and free information on the web. That's serious business. One new law could facilitate others and turn good intentions — stopping piracy, preventing security attacks — into paranoia. What more is censorship than the fear of one's people?

Internet regulation is on the minds of government officials around the world, like with the latest [treaty negotiations](#) [9] of the U.N.-sponsored International Telecommunications Union (ITU), which would make Internet control easier and more widespread. As it plays a bigger part in our economies and social lives, the Internet is perhaps becoming too great a tool to let loose unrestrained.

The line between “regulation” and “censorship” is incredibly fine, and the Internet is a whole new kind of culture and community — a country within a country but also a gateway to the world at large. How small our governments choose to make it and how they allow others to operate within that space reflects how they view their citizens. Can people belong to one connected world, free of political boundaries, or is their place within the shelter of a single nation?

While issues like piracy are much heavier than the censorship of bloggers, who only want a soapbox to stand on, or of citizens who want to understand the world outside their small one, we must tread carefully. The Internet is a beautiful thing — an ecosystem built from the very hands that contribute to its massive, rich design. But censorship and over-regulation could tear it apart.

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Links:

[1] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/11/29/syria-internet-down_n_2211458.html

[2] <http://www.ecnmag.com/news/2012/11/internet-down-nationwide-syria>

[3] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-22447247>

[4] <http://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/05/07/syria-loses-access-to-the-internet/?smid=tw-nytimesbits&seid=auto>

[5] <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/01/24/us-syria-rights-idUSTRE70N5S620110124>

[6] <http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/middle-east/syria-tightens-control-over-internet>

[7] http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/29/world/asia/china-toughens-restrictions-on-internet-use.html?ref=internetcensorship&_r=2&

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[8] <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/21/technology/senate-postpones-piracy-vote.html>

[9] http://www.philly.com/philly/news/breaking/Congress_bill_to_stop_Internet_censorship.html