

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH

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March 13, 2012

Representative Chris Smith
2373 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Representative Smith,

We write in strong support of H.R. 3605, the Global Online Freedom Act of 2011. This bill is an important tool in preventing repressive governments from enlisting U.S. companies in their effort to transform the Internet into a tool of surveillance and repression.

The Internet is an incredible tool for communication, but as some governments have discovered, it is also an effective tool for censorship and oppression. Many repressive countries, including China and Iran, among others, are transforming the Internet into a powerful and effective tool to silence political and religious speech and to track down those who are fighting for freedom. Even more worrying, is that these methods of repression are spreading. Countries like Vietnam and Thailand are increasing their efforts to censor content or identify internet users exercising their rights to free expression or assembly.

We have witnessed an increase in the arrests and detentions of bloggers, the blocking of websites, online intimidation and surveillance of peaceful political activists, and aggressive denial of service attacks against websites that promote the free flow of legitimate political and religious speech. As witnessed during the Arab Spring, the internet has the ability to allow billions of people to exercise their rights of speech, assembly, and association. But an open internet is not guaranteed. Governments, companies, and civil society must be vigilant to ensure that the internet is a platform that people can use to express their legitimate aspirations and to hold their governments accountable. People in every country deserve to be able to take part in building a more peaceful, prosperous, and democratic society, and H.R. 3605 will help promote a more open and free Internet.


The Global Online Freedom Act would require companies to demonstrate that they have put policies and procedures in place to protect human rights online and to safeguard their users. Such mechanisms are particularly pertinent given the role of the U.S. Internet firm Yahoo in turning over to the Chinese government user information which led to the arrest, conviction and 10-year prison term of the journalist Shi Tao in 2005 on a charge of “divulging state secrets abroad.” It would strengthen

efforts by the US government to protect internet freedom by giving the government new resources to keep the internet open and give it new authority to ensure that certain technologies do not fall into the hands of repressive governments.

Finally, it would level the playing field for responsible businesses by ensuring that US trade negotiations protect freedom of expression and thereby allowing innovative companies to fairly compete, especially in countries where governments try to censor their products or services. These are modest, but critical steps needed to help keep the internet open.

By moving quickly to pass the Global Online Freedom Act, the U.S. Congress can send a powerful message to dictators around the globe that we will not idly stand by while fundamental freedoms are eroded online. Thank you for introducing this important legislation and we look forward to supporting its passage.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Arvind Ganesan', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Arvind Ganesan
Director, Business and Human Rights Division
Human Rights Watch