# The Two Internet Freedoms: Framing Victimhood for Political Gain

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This article, via framing analysis and textual analysis, examines the rhetoric of U.S. officials and political commentators toward Internet usage in other countries versus Internet policy in the United States. The article will argue that *Internet freedom* has been defined differently based on who frames the discussion, and what the strategic and political implications might be. This in turn leads to different perceptions of who the victims are when Internet access is threatened.

## Introduction

This article argues that the U.S. political establishment has two vastly different definitions of *Internet freedom* that lead to contradictory policies in which Third World protesters receive more support for their Internet access than do U.S. citizens. In countries where the United States has strategic interests in regime change, Internet freedom has been equated with the fight for political liberty, because free citizens' Internet usage should face no restrictions from any party. However, this frame has not been extended toward Internet policy in the United States, where access providers have claimed the freedom to operate networks without government oversight, perhaps to the point of discrimination against particular users or websites.

This article analyzes U.S. policy toward Internet usage at home and abroad, reviewing the texts of an exemplary selection of official governmental statements, political commentary, and news reports about both for trends in framing and rhetoric. The article will argue that from a geopolitical standpoint, Internet freedom has been defined differently based on who frames the discussion and what the strategic and political implications might be. This in turn has led to different perceptions of who the victims are when Internet access is threatened.[1] The ramifications of inconsistent and politicized use of the term *Internet freedom* are likely of interest to researchers in journalism ethics, public opinion, or cross-border

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[1] Note that the term *Internet freedom* has been used in other contexts, perhaps adding to the practical and political confusion surrounding that term as discussed throughout this article. For example, Yochai Benkler (see, for example, 2006, 2012) frequently uses the term to support prescriptions for unfettered technological access to networks. The term tends to be used similarly in policy papers by civil society groups and think tanks like the Center for Democracy and Technology.

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communications because the framing of complex political issues can affect support for certain politicians and their policy decisions, both domestically and abroad.

**American Rhetoric on Internet Freedom for Oppressed Peoples**

In many documented cases, national governments have directly blocked certain websites or entire subject categories of websites, often justifying their move as helping to maintain social and political stability or restrict content that contradicts religious traditions. Such acts are particularly prevalent in the Middle East and North Africa, where telecommunications providers are either enterprises directly controlled by national governments, or private firms subjected to draconian regulations and threats of government reprisals (Deibert, Palfrey, Rohozinski, & Zittrain, 2010). This includes Pakistan's February 2008 attempt to shut down YouTube—which made the site inaccessible to much of the planet for two hours—because of either a video of a European politician criticizing Islam or a video depicting a woman participating in an election (Associated Press, 2008).

Meanwhile, several nations have actually shut down the Internet and other advanced telecommunications services altogether, in the interests of preserving social stability or quelling popular unrest. During a contentious handover of power in 2005 after voters rejected a monarchy lasting more than 200 years, the ousted king of Nepal partially succeeded in blocking Internet access throughout the country (Jones, 2005). In 2007 the repressive military regime in Myanmar (Burma) cracked down on 150,000 people who were protesting high fuel prices, and government troops killed more than 200 people. When footage of the brutality leaked to the outside world via the World Wide Web, the regime shut down service to the entire country for several weeks (Deibert et al., 2010, pp. 433–435; McCurry, Watts, & Smith, 2007).

China has achieved high Internet penetration and fast connection speeds, but physical and virtual access to the Internet are strictly controlled by the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (Deibert et al., 2010, pp. 453–454; Morozov, 2011b, pp. 54, 259). In the summer of 2009, unrest broke out in China's far western Xinjiang Province between the indigenous Uighur ethnic group and Han Chinese living in the area. The Chinese government concluded that blog posts inflaming ethnic tensions were to blame and simply turned off the region's Internet communications for 10 months.

The Xinjiang unrest incurred a total regional shutdown, but China is better known for its veritable army of Internet watchdogs and filterers, and actions against particular groups or websites have caught the attention of the outside world and raised accusations of human rights abuses via censorship. Since 1999 the central government has tried to suppress the Falun Gong religious group, which it considers a subversive cult. Exiled members of the group have gained prominent supporters in the West while finding ways to work around the Chinese government's bans on the group's own and affiliated websites (Lum, 2006, pp. 7–10). Shiyu Zhou, the founder of a Falun Gong-affiliated group that designs and distributes software solutions that help users evade China's infamous firewalls, compares his group's techniques to a Cold War-style arms race: "for every dollar that we [American-backed Falun Gong dissidents] spend, China has to spend a hundred, maybe hundreds of dollars" (quoted in Markoff, 2009, para. 35) on counter-evasion tools.

Falun Gong's American friends have perpetuated Cold War analogies. For example, *Wall Street Journal* columnist Gordon Crovitz (2010) argued that the U.S. government should fund Falun Gong's online dissent efforts, backing up his argument by opining that "the Cold War was won by spreading information about the Free World" (para. 12). Pressured by Falun Gong's conservative supporters and editorials in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Wall Street Journal*, in May 2010 the U.S. State Department granted the group $1.5 million to further develop such technology (Morozov, 2011b, pp. 38–39).

The Internet censorship situation in China occasioned the West's first notable conflations of access and freedom. For several years Google had been involved in a contentious dispute with China's censors, who demanded that the search engine suppress the visibility of sites on topics ranging from Falun Gong to the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre to ongoing Tibetan resistance (Powell, 2010). Google finally gave up and terminated its services in China in 2010, a move that was hailed as a milestone in human rights activism. *Newsweek*'s Jacob Weisberg (2010, para. 7) called the move "heroic," and prominent Internet activist and researcher Clay Shirky used the magic word, saying "What [Google is] exporting isn't a product or a service, it's a freedom" (quoted in Landler, 2010, para. 5). These pronouncements of human rights heroism were made after Google gave up its years-long effort to do fully transparent business in China on its own terms, leaving that country's citizens to their own heavily policed search engines. Then, after a slight ramping-down of rhetoric on both sides, in early 2012 Google decided to reenter the Chinese market (Varma, 2012)—the freedom-related ramifications of which are still to be proclaimed.

Censorship and harassment in China inspired the West to see Internet access, and its suppression by unfavorable regimes, through the lens of democratization and human rights. The watershed political moment was Iran's Green Movement in summer 2009, in which thousands of citizens reportedly used social media and online networks to organize protests in the wake of a disputed presidential election. At the height of the unrest, the Iranian regime blocked access to Facebook, which was suspected to be the protestors' main organizing tool (BBC News, 2009). In an example of the politically oriented framing analyzed throughout this article, the Western media, without sufficient evidence or understanding, initially called this movement the "Twitter Revolution," even though it was not directly enabled by Twitter and was probably not even a revolution (Rahaghi, 2012).

Access blockages during Iran's Green Movement motivated U.S. policy makers to seriously consider Internet freedom as a matter of foreign policy. For example, Alec Ross, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's senior adviser on technology and innovation, stated with little evidence that "social media played a key role in organizing the [Iranian] protests" (Morozov, 2011b, p. 18). Jared Cohen of the U.S. State Department's Policy Planning staff sent an e-mail to Twitter's corporate managers in June 2009 imploring the company to delay a planned maintenance-related slowdown of the site so as to not hamper the protests in Tehran. The company complied. The irony of the U.S. government requesting action by an Internet firm while hoping Iran would not do the same was lost on most of the U.S. establishment (Morozov, 2011b, pp. 9–22).

Hillary Clinton (2010) solidified this emerging viewpoint in a seminal speech at the Newseum in Washington, DC, in January 2010. The speech was full of generalizations like "Information freedom supports the peace and security that provide a foundation for global progress" (para. 51) and "We need to put these tools in the hands of people around the world who will use them to advance democracy and human rights" (para. 40). Clinton also resorted to Cold War terminology, alluding metaphorically to the Berlin Wall with "as networks spread to nations around the globe, virtual walls are cropping up in place of visible walls" (para. 16) and the Iron Curtain with "a new information curtain is descending across much of the world" (para. 17). In addition to *information freedom*, Clinton also made use of the term *freedom to connect*, comparing this to the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment freedom of assembly, but in cyberspace. "It allows individuals to get online, come together, and hopefully cooperate. Once you're on the Internet, you don't need to be a tycoon or a rock star to have a huge impact on society" (para. 33).

This selective interpretation of democratization as enabled by modern communications technologies reached full flower during the Arab Spring in the first half of 2011, when popular revolts and revolutions rolled across several Middle Eastern nations. In January 2011 the government of Egypt turned off the Internet throughout the country in reaction to mass protests against President Hosni Mubarak, whose regime tended to use political threats as an indirect method of controlling information and access to it (Deibert et al., 2010, 538–539; Gross, 2011). The U.S. government condemned this move via Twitter, a networking technology used by many Egyptian protesters. White House spokesman Robert Gibbs advanced the U.S. stance on the incident via a tweet stating "government must respect the rights of the Egyptian people & turn on social networking and internet" (Albanesius, 2011b, para. 12).

As the Arab Spring picked up steam, Libya too shut down the Internet and other telecommunications services several times between the first stirrings of revolutionary unrest in February 2011 and the overthrow of longtime dictator Muammar Gaddafi several months later (Cowie, 2011). During popular unrest in Tunisia around the same time, that country's government employed a unique strategy to counter perceived threats from the Internet: it deployed its seasoned press censors (Deibert et al., 2010, pp. 582–584) to harass website operators (O'Brien, 2011). As the wave of popular protests spread across the region, Bahrain managed to throttle Internet traffic significantly via an increase in filtering (Rashid, 2011). The insurrection that broke out in Syria in mid-2011, which instigated violent government reprisals leading to thousands of deaths, also resulted in government shutdowns of Internet service on multiple occasions (Bakri, 2011). (The situation in Syria is still ongoing at the time of writing.)

Promoting Internet connectivity for citizens under repressive regimes has now become an official item of U.S. foreign policy, and the Obama administration has claimed Internet freedom as a high priority in U.S. diplomacy. The early rumblings of the Arab Spring in February 2011 also inspired Hillary Clinton (2011) to give another speech on the topic of Internet freedom, in which she characterized the regimes in Iran and Egypt as "using violence against protestors seeking basic freedoms" (para. 7). Consequently, Clinton promoted Department of State awards of more than $45 million over several years to "technologists and activists working at the cutting edge of the fight against internet repression . . . because we know that repressive governments are constantly innovating their methods of oppression and we intend to stay ahead of them" (para. 51). The State Department even granted $2 million to a secretive project to design a mobile connection device called "Internet in a Suitcase" that can be surreptitiously

transported across borders, and it has spent millions more to develop "stealth" or "shadow" wireless networks to outflank the censors of repressive regimes (Glanz & Markoff, 2011).

Policy analysts in the U.S. government, lobbyists for technology firms, and researchers at think tanks and civil society groups have eagerly joined the fight for connectivity in the Middle East and other areas where citizens are supposedly clamoring for democratic reforms. In typically charged political language, officials and pundits have declared the effort a matter of "Internet freedom." As is common in U.S. foreign policy rhetoric of the past several decades, viable and supported definitions of the ambiguous term *freedom*, or even *Internet*, are unnecessary in America's push for democracy around the world (Morozov, 2011b, pp. 33–45, 310–311).

### A Side Order of Freedom Frames

The use of terminology in the Internet freedom discussion reflects the effects of framing in news reports and discussions in the public sphere. Goffman (1974) and Tuchman (1978), the originators of research into how news-related information is framed, found that a "frame of reference," "context," or even "news angle" is required to organize and simplify complicated and fragmented pieces of news information and public commentary. Framing also reflects the perceptions of the journalist or commentator that conducts the framing to inform or sway the audience. Entman (1993, p. 52) added that "framing essentially involves selection and salience" on the part of the framer, unconsciously or consciously. Evidence indicates that for media reports on political controversies and subsequent reports on public discussion and commentary about those same controversies, the opinions of the audience reflect the framing patterns exhibited by the journalists and commentators (for a review see Scheufele, 2000, pp. 307–308). Capella and Jamieson (1997, pp. 98–100) found that the simplification or agenda setting inherent in the framing strategy tends to be repeated in subsequent public commentary and discussion, particularly for political topics, thus leading to sloganeering and cynicism.

More specifically for this article, the term *freedom* exhibits its own patterns of framing in the news and in political discussions that impact perceptions of complicated events, often leading to simplification and misunderstanding. *Freedom*, or the related but more precise political term *liberty*, is a philosophical concept dating back many centuries; a true explication of that concept is beyond the scope of this article. However, modern usage of the term *freedom* in U.S. foreign and domestic policy, and the associated public debates, is worth introducing here. Conceptions of political freedom in the United States are heavily influenced by Jean-Jacques Rousseau's social contract model (widely acknowledged as an inspiration for Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin) and its idea of popular sovereignty as government by will of the people (Rousseau, 1893 [1762], pp. 84–93, 137–138). Furthermore, the modern American conception of freedom features aspects of both sides of a dichotomy first proposed by John Stuart Mill. In his philosophical essay *On Liberty* (1863 [1859], pp. 144–180), Mill posited a difference between liberty as the freedom to act, and liberty as the absence of coercion. The policy rhetoric analyzed in this article mainly falls on the side of absence of coercion, but it depends greatly on who is doing the coercing.

The characterization of the oppressor who coerces the masses has changed over the course of American political history. During the revolutionary period, freedom was framed as a break from the old-world institutions of monarchy and aristocracy that prevented the common man from reaching his potential (Paine, 1976 [1776], pp. 71–80). Some historians contend that the American conception of freedom arose inexorably with the democratic system of governance designed by the U.S. Constitution, and exporting that system in the name of freedom originated in the doctrine of manifest destiny (Foner, 1998, pp. 50–54).

This philosophy of political freedom (and more specifically, Mill's freedom from coercion) was largely stable until the Cold War era, when the oppressor changed. The rise of socialism and communism brought a division of the planet into the "free world" and those nations without democratic systems of governance (Foner, 1998, pp. 252–261). The goal of exporting democracy in the interests of defeating communism became the primary, if not the only, philosophical doctrine of U.S. foreign policy during this period (Messer, 1977; Schlesinger, 1992). The Cold War also changed the nature of the common man's oppressor: The bogeyman was now big government that restricted not just democratic self-government but also economic liberties. As a reaction to the managed economies forming in the Soviet bloc, economist Milton Friedman influentially equated *Capitalism and Freedom* in his 1962 book of that title, theorizing an indirect link between ultimate political liberty and the freedom to carry out economic transactions without governmental interference (Friedman, 2002, pp. 7–21).

Freedom, in the American political mind, was now equated with both democracy (a political system) and capitalism (an economic system), though democracy and capitalism are not synonymous in either theory or practice, at least according to historians and political scientists (Schmitter & Karl, 1991, pp. 67–73). Regardless, according to political rhetorician George Lakoff, the American conception of freedom has split along party lines: progressives tend to view *freedom* through a lens of political human rights, such as equal protection before the law and the right to a fair standard of living; while conservatives view the same concept through a lens of economic liberties, such as protection from government restrictions on private property and free markets (Lakoff, 2006, pp. 134–150).[2] This split will become apparent in the next section of this article, which discusses how perceptions of Internet freedom change when the wishes of for-profit corporations are added to the rhetorical mix.

Meanwhile, ideological differences in framing the term freedom have resulted in a post-Cold War foreign policy that sometimes lacks coherence, as the rationales for acts of cooperation with economic allies often contrast starkly with the rationales for military action against political enemies—regardless of the given countries' favorable or unfavorable records of democratic self-government (Kupchan, 2002, pp. 12–17)—and foreign policy actions are justified by ill-defined and politically charged characterizations of friends and enemies (Maoz, Terris, Kuperman, & Talmud, 2007, pp. 101–102). Political scientists have also found evidence that foreign policy actions, though managed by government officials, are often conducted according to how the media and public frame political and economic concepts, while differing frames within the American public sphere can lead to confusion over whether foreign policy actions are

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[2] This article does not argue that this distinction corresponds perfectly to the policy platforms of the Democratic and Republican parties, respectively.

really dedicated to security, trade, both, or neither (Jacobs & Page, 2005, pp. 113–118). These framing patterns also affect how different segments of the population, and of the political establishment, perceive the risks and rewards of foreign policy actions (Porfiriev, 2004, pp. 21–22).

Mass media rhetoric has generally attempted to garner public support for the United States' recent diplomatic and military conflicts by framing them as fights against oppression and extremism, and for emotionally charged values, especially freedom. Government officials tend to believe their own public relations rhetoric, leading to a foreign policy based largely on emotionality and perceptions (or possibly misperceptions) of foreign differences from American values. But different sectors of the U.S. political establishment view those values differently, given their differing ideological preconceptions (Entman, 2004, pp. 123–143; Lakoff, 2006, pp. 114–118).

These differing (and perhaps incompatible) frames of freedom and American responses to overseas incidents has saddled the U.S. State Department, not to mention the American political establishment, with an inability to comprehend whether the Internet is a tool of liberation or oppression, which countries this question should be asked in, or how to determine whether the oppressor is economic friend or political foe (Morozov, 2011a). The Internet shutdowns described in the last section have certainly been framed through the political lens of freedom, which characterizes the aggressors as undemocratic dictatorships for which regime change would serve U.S. interests (for coverage of recent regime change actions, see ABC News, 2007; Downes, 2011; Gamage, 2011), and the victims as regular people clamoring for democracy.

This article argues that the quest for so-called Internet freedom illustrates these trends in political framing and the subsequent public discussion. This frame makes use of the emotionally charged term *freedom*—a value most Americans are willing to promote, assuming it is boiled down to its most basic definition (Lakoff, 2006, pp. 60–61, 203). Overuse of simplified, politically framed terms can also restrict understanding of the real problems faced by protesters on the ground in faraway countries, with short-term sloganeering trumping the systemic social and political change the protesters often desire (MacKinnon, 2010).

This rhetorical pattern is also comparable to differing economic and political conceptions of freedom that have manifested themselves in modern U.S. policy discussions. At home and abroad, the aggressor that threatens Internet freedom is always the state. But who are the victims? Are they people striving for democracy, or corporations striving for market power? The answer depends one's political frame of mind.

### Internet Freedom for Americans

American citizens' ability to freely access the World Wide Web without restrictions from above may also be under threat. The term *freedom* is certainly present in the popular and political rhetoric about this threat. However, the way this term has been framed, and by whom, is diametrically opposed to that seen in U.S. foreign policy.

In particular, the American conception of Internet freedom for oppressed peoples in other nations is at odds with recent U.S. Congressional and Federal Communications Commission (FCC) policy toward network neutrality—a controversy that has also been framed as a matter of freedom, but with the rights of Internet service providers (ISPs) added to the rhetorical mix. Network neutrality would require ISPs to refrain from slowing or blocking access to certain websites, and/or for certain users, in the interests of maximizing network efficiency. In the United States, network neutrality arose more or less organically and is already in place, though in recent years some ISPs have considered non-neutral operation of their networks because of heavy bandwidth demand and other network management challenges. This has inspired calls from some quarters to preserve network neutrality via FCC regulation or Congressional legislation (Frieden, 2007).

Interestingly, there has been no talk of the U.S. government providing software tools for American citizens to evade firewalls or other restrictions ISPs may enact for economic reasons. There will be no "Internet in a Suitcase" on the home front. It is not just the presence or absence of American political rhetoric about popular protests in unfriendly countries where oppressed peoples clamor for democracy that distinguishes the domestic and foreign cases. The question of Internet freedom is also shaped by who controls modern communications networks. In those nations where oppressive governments control networks outright or have no qualms about placing political pressure on private operators, the U.S. political establishment wants people to be free of government restrictions on their communications. American citizens, however, live in a nation where private firms control telecommunications networks and the government has exercised limited authority in regulating their operations, particularly regarding Internet connectivity. When it comes to network neutrality, Americans' popular conceptions of political freedom run afoul of the country's possibly stronger focus on economic growth and the pursuit of profits by politically well-connected corporations (MacKinnon, 2011a).

In late 2009, while speaking on the subject of network neutrality, Andrew McLaughlin, the deputy chief technology officer of the U.S. government, said, "If it bothers you that the Chinese government [censors the Web], it should bother you when your cable company does it" (quoted in Kang, 2009, para. 5). McLaughlin's sentiments do not appear typical of the U.S. telecommunications regulatory establishment. Here the argument over Internet freedom has mostly gone in a noticeably different direction.

The libertarian organization Foundation for Economic Education has characterized potential network neutrality legislation, which would allow government regulators to exercise oversight of telecommunications firms' network operations, as "government brutality" that possibly violates the Takings Clause of the Fifth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution (Summers, 2008). Under the provocative name Internet Freedom Coalition, a consortium of libertarian and conservative groups has framed any government regulation of the Internet as a theft of freedom, and the group's website explains that its - purpose is to "Stop Obama's Internet Takeover" (Internet Freedom Coalition, n.d.). In this political frame of the issue, the very real possibility of a corporate "Internet takeover" is not considered a threat, and political and corporate opponents of network neutrality characterize support for regulatory oversight as a left-wing partisan effort to reduce Internet freedom (Scott, Cooper, & Kinney, 2006, p. 22).

Conservatives in Congress have framed the issue in the same way. For example, Speaker of the House John Boehner stated in a 2011 speech at a broadcasters' conference that regulations to preserve network neutrality would constitute a "government takeover of the Internet" and "that freedom and free expression are under attack by a power structure in Washington populated with regulators who have never set foot inside a radio station or a television studio" (quoted in Dolan, 2011, para. 2). (Apart from political posturing around a then hot political issue, Boehner's logic for comparing network neutrality regulation to radio and TV is unknown.)

In an opinion piece for the *Wall Street Journal*, the Republican FCC commissioner Robert M. McDowell (2010), opposing his fellow commissioners' plans to pass regulations aimed at preserving network neutrality, claimed that such a strategy constituted governmental infringement on telecommunications firms' ability to manage their networks without oversight, concluding that such a move would be "the beginning of a long winter's night for Internet freedom" (para. 13). McDowell's opinion on the identity of the oppressor is evident in the column's title, "The FCC's Threat to Internet Freedom." However, McDowell noticeably declined to frame freedom as a matter of importance for the Internet users whom the FCC may be trying to protect from their access providers' non-neutral behavior.

On the other hand, progressive civil society groups in the network neutrality debate have co-opted the freedom frame from the international version of governmental Internet control. The New America Foundation has framed the issue as a matter of the public interest in which discriminatory network providers could violate freedom of speech and association (Meinrath & Pickard, 2008, pp. 225–228). Free Press has equated Internet freedom with consumer choice in accessing information (Scott et al., 2006, pp. 4–5). Free Press also heads Save the Internet, a consortium of nearly 700 community organizations whose website frames Internet freedom as the ability to connect to networks and devices without restrictions from telecommunications firms.

The difficulty the FCC faces in regulating the preservation of network neutrality principles among telecommunications firms and access providers stems mostly from judicial interpretations of the FCC's statutory authority. In 2008 the FCC ruled that Comcast had violated the rights of its users by throttling speeds at websites that hosted large amounts of uploading and downloading (BitTorrent in particular). Comcast appealed the FCC's decision in court, leading to a seminal ruling (Comcast Cable Communications v. Federal Communications Commission, 600 F.3d 642 [D.C. Cir. Ct. App. 2010]) in which the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia ruled that the FCC's governing statute, the 1996 Telecommunications Act, did not contain precise language enabling regulation of this type of ISP activity.

Reactions to the ruling were indicative of the differing frames of Internet freedom, based on whether one considers corporations or users to be the victims of government oppression. For example, Phil Kerpen of Americans for Prosperity, a group that advocates limited government, said that "the FCC has no legal basis for imposing its dystopian regulatory vision" (quoted in Wyatt, 2010, para. 9). Proponents of network neutrality regulation cited freedom in their commentary on the case, with author Robert X. Cringely (2010) of the *Network World* high-tech news website saying that the network neutrality battle is "about Personal Internet Freedom vs. Corporate Internet Control" (p. 2). Art Brodksy (2011) of the progressive group Public Knowledge also used the politically loaded term *war* to describe pro-

corporate opposition to network neutrality rules, characterizing the dispute as centered on a need for the FCC to protect consumers from telecommunications firms. Perhaps Mike Masnick (2010) of *TechDirt* best summed up the rhetorical confusion of both factions, pronouncing the court decision and the subsequent commentary to be a "political food fight that won't actually do anything about making sure that we have the broadband we need" (para. 7) and noting that the politicians and pundits contributing most loudly to the debate viewed the issue along partisan lines.

The politically framed rhetoric surrounding network neutrality (not to mention Internet freedom) in the United States reached Orwellian proportions in January 2011 when a group of Republican members of Congress (led by Representative Marsha Blackburn of Tennessee) introduced a bill known as H.R. 96. The introductory section of this bill said only that its purpose was "to prohibit the Federal Communications Commission from further regulating the Internet." With an astonishing lack of irony, this bill was titled The Internet Freedom Act. As written, the bill did not mention that most of the FCC's recent attempts to regulate the Internet aimed to prevent discrimination by service providers against users or websites. One can also infer that the Internet freedom of the bill's title was that of corporations, not citizens. When discussing the proposed bill, Rep. Blackburn stoked fears of a government takeover by stating, "the FCC is in essence building an Internet Iron Curtain that will restrict more of our freedom" (Karr, 2011a, para. 5). Such use of a Cold War analogy to communist oppression has also popped up in debates over Internet shutdowns overseas (most notably by Hillary Clinton, as discussed above), but with a completely different rhetorical strategy.

Less than a year later, the term *freedom* appeared in the title of another proposed bill targeting the Internet, this time in other countries. Sponsored by Republican Christopher Smith of New Jersey, H.R. 3605 is known as The Global Online Freedom Act of 2011. As written, this bill, which is about 4,200 words long, uses the word *freedom* 23 times (including in several section titles). Some key findings of the bill are that "the political and economic benefits of the Internet are important to advancing democracy and freedom throughout the world, but the potential benefits of this transformative technology are under attack by authoritarian governments" (Section 2(1)) and "the United States Government has a responsibility to protect freedom of expression on the Internet" (Section 2(7)). An important distinction of this bill is that it would prohibit U.S. businesses from assisting repressive regimes in blocking Internet access; however, the bill's text makes no mention of American companies suppressing access to the Internet within the borders of the United States.

Discussions of freedom are also noticeably distorted in (or absent from) reactions to other attempts by the U.S. government to regulate the World Wide Web. While the U.S. State Department was extolling the virtues of Internet freedom for the world's oppressed peoples, without irony the U.S. Congress was taking steps to give the U.S. government the power to drastically restrict that very same freedom for American citizens. Impelled by events in Iran, in 2010 representatives of both parties in the U.S. Senate proposed a bill titled the Protecting Cyberspace as a National Asset Act (S. 3480), which would mandate that all ISPs, search engines, and software firms comply with any federal government order to "preserve those networks and assets and our country and protect our people [*sic*]," according to one of the bill's co-sponsors, Senator Joe Lieberman of Connecticut (Grubb & Moses. 2011, para. 7).  In effect, this bill would allow the federal government to use its emergency powers to flip a virtual "kill

switch" to shut down the Internet for security purposes (McCullagh, 2010, para. 6).[3] Popular reactions to this proposed bill were relatively muted until the events of early 2011, when Hosni Mubarak essentially did the same thing to quell protests in Egypt. The sponsors of the "kill switch" bill in the Senate abruptly distanced their proposal from the strategies of Middle Eastern dictators, with an unnamed supporter in the Senate stating, "Our bill already contains protections to prevent the president from denying Americans access to the Internet—even as it provides ample authority to ensure that those most critical services that rely on the Internet are protected" (Sutter, 2011, para. 25). No technical details were given to explain how both of these goals could be achieved at the same time.

Contemporaneously with these actions in the U.S. Congress, Hillary Clinton continued to decry rising Internet censorship and access blockages by unfriendly regimes in the Middle East and Asia, while making no mention of efforts by her colleagues in the Legislative Branch to allow the same thing in the United States for undefined security purposes. Meanwhile, the Executive Branch has added to the policy contradictions regarding Internet shutdowns in other countries. For example, President Barack Obama has issued secretive executive orders allowing for cyber-attacks against the governments of China and Iran in response to perceived threats (Sanger, 2012; Whittaker, 2013), without comment on how he and the State Department earlier decried incidents in which those governments took similar actions internally, against their own citizens.

Meanwhile, in late 2011 the U.S. Congress was considering passage of the highly controversial Stop Internet Piracy Act (SOPA). Written in consultation with the music and movie industries, this act would have authorized them to ask the government to order ISPs to shut off service to persons who were merely under suspicion of trading copyrighted entertainment files. After widespread public protest over potential censorship and corporate influence, the House of Representatives placed further debate over SOPA on indefinite hold in January 2012 (BBC News, 2012). And finally, in mid-2011 news broke about an agreement struck behind closed doors among several American entertainment firms and ISPs, informally called the "six strikes" plan. Under it, copyright holders would reserve the right to track the traffic of their files across the World Wide Web, and entertainment firms could order ISPs to punish users merely suspected of copyright infringement, first with stern warnings and ultimately by discontinuing their service. This plan would have no government oversight whatsoever (Anderson, 2011).

The U.S. State Department and the various politicians and pundits who have praised the preservation of Internet freedom for protesters in China and the Middle East have thus far been silent on the threats to Internet freedom faced by U.S. citizens who run afoul of the corporate actors hoping to enforce plans like SOPA and "six strikes," or who may be trying to communicate online when the "kill switch" is engaged for security purposes.

The U.S. government has also been curiously silent about Internet shutdowns and similar events (or threats thereof) in friendly countries or those in which the United States has no interest in regime change. For example, in April 2011 the government of Uganda threatened to shut down Facebook and

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[3] At the time of writing, the Internet Freedom Act, Global Online Freedom Act of 2011, and the Protecting Cyberspace as a National Asset Act had not progressed beyond committee deliberations.

Twitter, claiming those tools had been instrumental in violent riots over food and fuel prices (Bariyo, 2011). When a police shooting sparked riots in the United Kingdom a few months later, a member of Parliament called on Research in Motion (the company that makes the Blackberry personal communication device) to disable its social networking services because apparently they were "helping rioters outfox Police" (Magid, 2011, para. 7). A search of documents and speeches on the U.S. State Department website reveals no comment from Hillary Clinton, or any other person of note in the Obama administration, on these particular foreign threats to Internet freedom.

Those who have praised social networking abroad while remaining silent or even promoting corporate Internet restrictions at home also had a very curious non-reaction to a 2011 incident in which, during protests related to the shooting of a homeless man by Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) security officers, officials for the city of San Francisco shut down cellular service in several BART stations because protesters had been using smartphones to access online social networking tools. Although progressive organizations like the Electronic Frontier Foundation raised the obvious parallels with contemporaneous events in Egypt and the FCC conducted an investigation (Albanesius, 2011a), very little political discussion concerned San Francisco's characterization of the shutdown as a matter of security. During the same period, the city of Cleveland passed an ordinance outlawing the use of online social media tools to organize "flash mobs" for purposes of creating a disturbance (Ott, 2011). The Internet freedom establishment has also been silent on the Cleveland ordinance.

Whether through national or local laws based on security, or corporate discrimination based on efficiency, the Internet freedom of American citizens faces its own threats. Journalist Rebecca MacKinnon (2011b) has characterized U.S. government actions (or lack thereof) to allow telecommunications firms and entertainment industries to lock down the Internet, in the interests of network management or protecting intellectual property, as the construction of a "Great Firewall of America,"[4] finding little difference between this phenomenon and China's actions to censor the Web in the interests of social stability. In effect, the American version of China's "social stability" might be merely the "economic stability" of telecommunications firms and entertainment industries, with the various factions within the political establishment framing the issues accordingly.

The U.S. State Department has praised the use of modern online technologies by citizens in oppressive regimes who are fighting censorship, but remains silent on the very real possibility of such censorship at home, although the restrictions would come from corporations rather than government. In the words of Timothy Karr  of Free Press, the FCC's failure to preserve network neutrality "enshrines Verizon and AT&T as gatekeepers," while the Obama administration has shown an "unwillingness to face down corporations that block our connections" (Karr, 2011b, para. 11). According to Internet policy researcher Evgeny Morozov (2011b, p. 211), focusing on governmental oppression of Internet freedom in other countries merely "diverts attention away from the misdeeds and poor policies of Western governments themselves." And in MacKinnon's words, "we must not let our excitement about new technologies blind us to the reality that all governments, powerful corporations seeking market

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[4] This term parodies the "Great Firewall of China" metaphor that has been used to describe Internet censorship in that country and that is itself a parody of the Great Wall of China historical monument.

dominance, and all kinds of other groups with resources and technical prowess can be expected to use digital networks to obtain and maintain power whenever the opportunity presents itself" (MacKinnon, 2011a, para. 6). Here MacKinnon is warning against a worldview based on older political frames, rather than the realities of the technologies being discussed and who provides access to them.

## Conclusion

According to Vint Cerf, currently a vice president at Google and highly respected as "the father of the Internet" (for his feats in both programming and cyber-activism), there is no inherent freedom to connect to the Internet, though people with potential to connect should not be restricted by governments (Gardels, 2012, pp. 1–3). This implies responsibilities on the part of political leaders, regardless of the rhetorical frames used to define the victims of governmental restrictions. A basic reading of Cerf's philosophy on the matter leads to the conclusion that governments should fight artificial Internet access restrictions of any kind, perhaps even those enacted by nongovernmental actors. Similarly, Timothy Karr of Free Press, an organization in favor of network neutrality, raises some very provocative rhetorical questions and a rare simultaneous use of all the frames discussed herein:

> Do you want Congress to surrender your right to choose online to a company whose sole motive is to generate as much profit as possible? Do you want to wipe away the only protection that prevents any entity—be it corporate or government—from blocking our right to connect with one another? (Karr, 2011a, para. 13).

If protesters in China and the Middle East deserve freedom from Internet access restrictions placed by their governments, it follows logically that users in the United States deserve freedom from restrictions placed by their own government—or their service providers. The U.S. political establishment's refusal to acknowledge this contradiction prevents true understanding of the real struggles faced by protesters in oppressive regimes, who may have been given false hope that the United States will meaningfully and effectively assist their struggles (Morozov, 2011b, p. 219). Meanwhile, condemning foreign leaders for obstructing Internet access will be politically ineffective—especially when citing the loaded and messy term *Internet freedom*—as long as those same leaders can easily read news reports on how the U.S. government clearly has no qualms about obstructing Americans' Internet access for reasons of security, intellectual property protection, or the apparent freedom of access providers to manage networks in a discriminatory fashion. According to Morozov (2011b), "Such is the cost of building government policy around highly ambiguous terms [esp. *Internet freedom*] and then choosing to use them in completely different contexts" (pp. 224–225).

On the domestic front, Free Press has reported that hundreds of thousands of American consumers equate Internet freedom with network neutrality, as opposed to the largely pro-corporate view of freedom for service providers to manage their networks in non-neutral ways (Scott et al., 2006, p. 22). This indicates the primary disconnect in the term's use in domestic policy matters and perhaps illuminates its sheer overuse regarding dramatic political events overseas. The ultimate result is rhetorical and practical discord in the U.S. political establishment's framing of who is victimized by governments' actions concerning Internet communications. In unfriendly regimes, the victims are regular people clamoring for a

better life; at home, the victims are corporations that want to maintain economic growth and stability. This contradiction rises above mere rhetoric when the U.S. government takes action to help perceived victims overseas, such as when the State Department grants millions of dollars of U.S. taxpayers' money to censorship-evasion projects in other countries; when (or if) the Obama administration secretly orders cyber-attacks against countries whose governments it has criticized for similar actions; and especially when political commentary and official government statements on such matters stoke international tensions even further.

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