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New Study Shows Global Internet Freedom Is on the Decline as More Countries Jail Bloggers

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The internet -- conduit of [cute cat videos](#), spreader of freedoms. As we've already seen in Egypt and Tunisia, it can be central to modern democracy. That's why Freedom House, an independent freedom watchdog, ranked the the [world's countries by levels of internet freedom](#). What exactly does that entail? Here, it's defined mostly as absence from politically motivated control, although things like legal harassment and expanding surveillance can damage the internet freedom ranking of relatively free countries.

So, how did the United States fare? Pretty good, coming in second overall out of 37 countries ranked, right behind Estonia. That's right, people who want to let their internet freak flag fly, anything goes in Estonia! Not so much in Iran and China, which, following the worldwide protest movements, had some of the biggest declines in internet freedom.

Globally, the outlook isn't that great. Twenty-three of the 37 countries assessed had at least one blogger arrested for content they posted online. In Vietnam, four activists were sentenced to 33 years in prison for using the internet to expose human rights violations. Fifty bloggers were detained in Iran following the country's 2009 elections. In China, a woman was sentenced to a labor camp for a satirical Tweet. In fact, social networking sites were often the ones most targeted; 12 of the 37 countries regularly banned sites like Twitter, Facebook and YouTube.

The report even found a few strong electoral democracies with significant internet controls, most notably Turkey and South Korea:

In Turkey, a range of advanced web applications were blocked, including the video-sharing website YouTube, which was not accessible in Turkey from May 2008 to October 2010. South Korean authorities blocked access to an estimated 65 North Korea-related sites, including the official North Korean Twitter account, launched in August 2010.

Censorship is one thing; cyber-bullying and online attacks are another. China takes the cake in this category, with assaults including "denial-of-service (DoS) attacks on domestic and overseas human rights groups, e-mail messages to foreign journalists that carry malicious software capable of spying on the recipient's computer, and largescale hacking raids on the information systems of over 30 financial, defense, and technology companies, most of them based in the United States." Then there is the issue of internet chokepoints. In countries like Cuba and Ethiopia, state-run telecommunications companies have a monopoly on internet service, while the governments of Egypt and Belarus both own their countries' entire network of fiber-optic cables.

The report identified five countries that are most at risk of devolving into full-blown internet police states:

1. Russia: Not a good time to be a blogger in Russia, as the country had "at least 25 cases of harassment of bloggers by the authorities" in 2009 and 2010.
2. Zimbabwe: May I introduce the Interception of Communications Act, which "allows the authorities to monitor telephone and internet traffic, and requires service providers to intercept communications on the state's behalf."
3. Venezuela: The upcoming election of 2012 looks to be a bad time for internet freedom as "the state-run telecommunications firm CANTV has a record of apparently restricting access to websites and blogs at sensitive times, suggesting that there is a strong possibility of increased censorship and harassment of internet users in the coming months."
4. Thailand: Internet censorship has been high since 2003 here, with tens of thousands of websites currently censored. One bad sign? A judge recently sentenced a web developer to 13 years in jail for political comments he posted online.
5. Jordan: While typically having a high level of internet freedom for the region, Jordan recently made waves with a new law that prohibits "the posting of any previously nonpublic information relevant to foreign affairs, national security, the national economy, or public safety."

Tough economic times and political unrest have not been kind to internet freedom. What can we do about it? Well, for one, we can decentralize the internet, whether through providing [free Wi-Fi with satellites](#) or small, [inexpensive servers like the FreedomBox](#). Two, we can stand up to countries that jail activists who spread their message via the Internet, like [China did recently with famous artist Ai Weiwei](#). The internet is quickly becoming the main way people criticize and analyze their governments; it's about time we do something to protect that right.

Keith Wagstaff is co-editor at [The Utopianist](#).

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