



Home Top News
Bloomberg

Cyberactivists Get Help From YouTube, U.S. to Thwart Repression

February 22, 2010, 04:18 PM EST

By Indira A.R. Lakshmanan

Feb. 23 (Bloomberg) -- Cameran Ashraf was instant-messaging from Los Angeles with an activist in Iran during anti-government protests Feb. 11 when the chat went dead.

Had Iran's government "shut down the Internet" to thwart dissidents from organizing online or had authorities come to arrest the man, Ashraf said he wondered as he described the incident during an online video interview. Ashraf, who said he sees himself as a digital aid worker, immediately alerted other Iranian contacts to block surveillance of their Web traffic.

A 29-year-old American whose parents emigrated from Iran, Ashraf is co-founder of AccessNow, a group of tech-savvy volunteers who joined forces during Iran's crackdown on election protests last year to help Iranians evade censorship. They are the type of cyberactivists the U.S. State Department is seeking to support with \$50 million in funds for an expanding counteroffensive against suppression of Internet freedom.

"The fact that many governments are trying to prevent their citizens from expressing themselves or obtaining information that would be critical" underscores the importance of defending online speech and assembly, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said in a Feb. 16 interview. The U.S. wants to support "garage-type" outfits trying to circumvent Web censorship, she said.

AccessNow has communicated with Google Inc. on censorship and security issues and received help from its YouTube subsidiary when Iranian protest videos were hacked, said co-founder Brett Solomon in New York.

"This is what we do, at the core of who we are: to make sure that everyone has access," said Scott Rubin, a Google and YouTube spokesman who works on free-expression issues.

Circumvent Firewalls

The State Department has given \$15 million in the past two years to private projects that use technology and training to promote online freedoms. It is reviewing applications for \$5 million to support work including research into circumventing firewalls and surveillance and \$30 million more will be available later this year, said Daniel Baer, deputy assistant secretary of State for democracy, human rights and labor.

Helping activists creates a dilemma by exposing them to retribution from repressive governments. Projects are so sensitive and the people involved at such risk that the State Department declined to identify current applicants. One Washington-based group that got the bulk of the money doled out so far -- more than \$13 million for projects worldwide -- asked not to be named, fearing Chinese employees would be jailed.

AccessNow's founders haven't received government funds and said they would have reservations about accepting any because they want to remain independent and protect contacts in countries where taking foreign money is a crime.

Surf Anonymously

The group does disseminate open-source software that receives indirect U.S. support, including Tor, a network of virtual tunnels that allows people to surf anonymously. Built on work by the U.S. Office of Naval Research, the science and technology arm of the Navy and Marine Corps, Tor was developed by researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge and volunteers. It is used by an average of 8,000 people in Iran and 100,000 in China at any moment, said Andrew Lewman, executive director of the nonprofit Tor Project in Dedham, Massachusetts.

Scrutiny of digital dissidents drew headlines last month when Google, the Mountain View, California, search-engine company, said e-mail accounts of Chinese rights activists were targeted in an attack on its computer systems. Clinton called on Chinese authorities in a Jan. 21 speech to "conduct a thorough investigation" and said U.S. technology firms should use their influence to protest censorship, surveillance and theft of information.

Technical Support

Iran's post-election restrictions on YouTube, Twitter and Facebook -- used to organize and publicize protests -- inspired Ashraf, Solomon and two Internet enthusiasts in Los Angeles, who all met online, to form AccessNow. A handful of other volunteers help run servers and share technical support.

"Our genesis is Iran, but the idea behind AccessNow is to develop a global movement," Solomon, a 39-year-old Australian, said in an Internet video chat, adding that he's sharing his experience with Tibetan, Burmese and Cuban dissidents.

The Internet has built-in perils for democracy advocates. Users who don't utilize encryption or other methods to obscure their identity leave a digital trail of conversations, contacts and Web sites visited.

Imprisoned Journalists

Global Voices Online, an international bloggers network, has documented 206 cases of bloggers under arrest or threat, most in China, Egypt and Iran. Last year, Internet journalists outnumbered print, radio and television reporters among 136 imprisoned members of the press, according to the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists.

Mehdi Saharkhiz, 28, an Iranian in New Jersey, joined AccessNow after his father, journalist Isa Saharkhiz, was arrested outside Tehran eight months ago. Mehdi has gathered 2,200 videos on his OnlyMehdi YouTube channel, including iconic footage by anonymous Iranians who won a George Polk Award in journalism last week for filming the killing of Neda Agha-Soltan, who has become a symbol of resistance.

"YouTube videos provided some of the only perspective of what was happening in Iran," said Olivia Ma, 27, news manager of the video-sharing site. During this month's protests, videos were hacked and erased; AccessNow alerted Ma, who restored them.

Not every problem is so easily resolved. Ashraf hasn't heard back from the Iranian rights campaigner who disappeared from his screen.

--Editors: Edward DeMarco, Melinda Grenier

To contact the reporter on this story: Indira Lakshmanan at +1-202-654-1277 in Washington or ilakshmanan@bloomberg.net

To contact the editor responsible for this story: Jim Kirk at +1-202-654-4315 in Washington or jkirk12@bloomberg.net

-0- Feb/22/2010 21:01 GMT