
Foreign activists stay covered online

By Farah Stockman

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A Walpole-based group of Internet activists known as Tor is playing a key role in helping Egyptians get around Internet censorship during this current political turmoil.

Over the last three days, 120,000 people — most of them Egyptian — have downloaded Tor software, which helps activists protect their identity from surveillance by repressive regimes and get around blocked sites, according to Andrew Lewman, executive director of Tor, which provides the software for free.

“We saw this huge amount of traffic,” said Lewman, who said the group normally gets about 20,000 downloads a day worldwide. “We started looking at what was going on and the Internet service provider called us and said, ‘You are getting a huge amount of requests from Egypt.’ It didn’t look like an attack. It looked like a flash crowd.”

Most of the downloads occurred just before the Egyptian government ordered a near-total block of the Internet on Thursday night, but usage remains high through the few pathways to the Internet that remain.

It is not the first time that Tor, which was formed in 2001 after two MIT students developed the anonymity software with a US Navy laboratory, has found itself in the center of a political uprising.

Iranian activists downloaded its software en masse during the massive protests after the contested 2009 presidential elections, and China has repeatedly tried to block Tor downloads and denied visas to Tor’s activists, who have trained people from over 20 countries, including China, at workshops in Hong Kong and Europe.

“It is plain that tools like Tor can be enormously value,” said John Palfrey, co-director of the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University, who did a study of software that activists use, including Tor. Since only the most tech-savvy know how to use such software, “there is enormous value in trainings and they pay dividends in crisis moments like this,” he said.

The group, which employs about 10 people, runs a network of about 2,500 computers around the world manned by volunteers who help the anonymous network run. It registered as a nonprofit in 2006 and receives about 75 percent of its funding from the US government.

About a year ago, Tor set up a special system just for Tunisian activists to protect their identity. So when the Tunisian government began monitoring Facebook pages and Twitter accounts during the recent uprising in Tunisia, “those people were already protected,” Lewman said.

In December 2009, Jacob Appelbaum, one of Tor’s main software developers, traveled to Cairo

and held workshops for human rights activists on how to use the software to avoid surveillance on the Internet.

The workshop appears to have paid off. As protests swelled in Egypt in recent days, so many people rushed to download Tor that one of its servers crashed on Thursday. They managed to keep their service up and running, but the downloads from Egypt plummeted Thursday night after the government apparently ordered a near-total block on Internet service.

An estimated 91 percent of routes to the Internet in Egypt were down in a matter of hours, according to Andree Toonk, the Dutch founder and lead developer of BGPMon.net, which monitors the Internet and routing.

But a few paths to the Internet have remained, and those who use them are continuing to use Tor, creating a spike in use despite the near-blackout in online communication.

One Internet service provider, a company called Noor, was left unaffected perhaps because it services banks or the Egyptian stock market, Toonk said. That means that it is probably being closely scrutinized by the Egyptian intelligence service, making anonymity software all the more crucial, Tor activists said.

"People in Egypt right now that are using the Internet really need to cover their tracks," said Appelbaum by telephone from Seattle. "Let's pretend that the government doesn't fall. . . . We don't know if they have analysts working in real time to try to find activists, and we are trying to make sure that people have access to Tor, so that people aren't hunted down in the streets."

Appelbaum, who also works with WikiLeaks, suggested that the Internet activists in Egypt who are using Tor to conceal their identities are not merely organizing meetings in the streets, but may also be engaging in on-line resistance activities, such as disrupting the Egyptian stock market or banking activities.

"One of the ways to hit the Egyptian government where it hurts . . . is to target the stock exchange, knock it off line or disrupt its activities, as a method of protest," he said.

He said he is not involved in such activities, but that he witnessed online discussions among Egyptian activists talking about taking such actions.

Appelbaum is also part of a separate group of activists that is trying to establish a satellite link to Egypt.

Steven A. Cook, a specialist on democracy movements in the Middle East who just returned from Cairo, said that the Egyptian government's unprecedented attempt to shut off the Internet had done little to quell the protests.

"Shutting off the Internet has done nothing to prevent the world from seeing what is going on," he said. "It didn't matter anymore because people were coming out into the streets regardless."