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The Internet and Academic Freedom

THE INTERNET IS AS VALUABLE A RESEARCH TOOL AS ANY MICROSCOPE OR MAGNETIC RESONANCE imaging scanner. It was shaped by researchers and academics who wanted to collaborate across campuses, then across borders. Many aspects of scholarship are now conducted online. This is particularly true in the sciences. Researchers around the globe store data in the “cloud” and analyze those data with software that requires connectivity. And critical discussions are routinely conducted by e-mail and videoconferencing. But the academic freedom that is often taken for granted depends on an Internet that is maintained as an open platform for the free exchange of information and ideas—or “Internet freedom.” At present, Internet freedom is threatened across the globe, and this should concern scientists and other academics as much as it does human rights activists.

At the same time that online information and education are vastly increasing access to knowledge and greatly improving opportunities for individuals and institutions in developing nations, more governments are seeking to control their citizens’ peaceful online activities by blocking or filtering content. This interference takes endlessly inventive and sometimes nefarious forms, including the use of advanced surveillance technologies and spyware that leads to human rights abuses. In a number of cases, governments have shut down the Internet entirely as a means of political control. According to the OpenNet Initiative, 47% of the Internet’s users live in countries that block legitimate content.* The blocked content isn’t only material judged to be political. It can include scientific topics considered controversial, such as evolution.†

As universities and laboratories become more and more digitized, these restrictions on the Internet will increasingly impinge on academic life and on the opportunities for global academic collaboration. One disturbing recent example is the Iranian government’s crackdown on the Baha’i Institute for Higher Education, an online university serving members of the Baha’i faith.‡ In response to a government rule barring those of the Baha’i faith from postsecondary education, the institute had founded an online correspondence school. Last year, seven professors and officials involved with the institute were sentenced to a total of 30 years’ imprisonment.

Within the past several months alone, the instances of Internet harassment and illegitimate surveillance of academics and students include the following: Student communications have been monitored and controversial conversations ended, hundreds of students have been expelled for what they posted on social media, and students and professors have been arrested for the expression of peaceful views.§ Last year, the governments of China and Russia, with support from others, came to the United Nations to suggest the need for an International Code of Conduct for Information Security. Were such a code to be adopted, it would inevitably erode online freedoms by legitimizing content control. This is only one of several efforts by governments to use international frameworks and institutions to control Internet content. Such official challenges to open use of the Internet are likely to grow more intense in the years ahead.

The Internet cannot be maintained as an open and global network unless government, business, and civil society work together. The U.S. State Department, with a coalition of like-minded countries, has made protecting global Internet freedom a foreign policy priority (see www.humanrights.gov/ifreedom). The scientific community, which benefits so dramatically from an open Internet, must become a leader in this effort by uniting with colleagues in their universities and scientific societies to promote Internet freedom. People everywhere have the right to participate freely online. We urge the academic community to remain in the vanguard of one of the seminal free speech issues of our time.

— Michael H. Posner

10.1126/science.1226099

*opennet.net/blog/2012/04/global-internet-filtering-2012-glance. †news.sciencemag.org/scienceinsider/2011/12/controversial-turkish-internet-c.html. ‡www.iranhumanrights.org/2011/05/bahai-university-attacked/. §Read about these cases and others at concernedscholars.org and scholarsatrisk.nyu.edu.



Science

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Science **337** (6090), 13.

DOI: 10.1126/science.1226099

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