

THE RIGHT STUFF

Dear Linux Magazine Reader,

Street battles rage in the Middle East, and elsewhere around the planet, movements flash and form through the power and immediacy of the information highway. The ability of the Internet to rally political forces and circumvent censorship has been a major theme in recent years. In 2009, the French Constitutional Council went so far as to declare that the Internet is a “fundamental human right” and “an essential tool for the liberty of communication and expression” [1]. In a 2010 poll conducted by the BBC [2] nearly 4 out of 5 people in 26 countries agreed that the Internet is a “human right.” Dr. Hamadoun Touré, Secretary-General of the International Telecommunication Union told the BBC, “The Internet is the most powerful potential source of enlightenment ever created.”

With all these laudatory words reaching out to the news wires, it might come as a surprise that Vincent Cerf, who many consider the founder of the Internet, has a very different viewpoint. In a recent New York Times op-ed piece [3], Cerf argued that “technology is an enabler of rights, not a right itself.”

According to Cerf, “There is a high bar for something to be considered a human right. Loosely put, it must be among the things we as humans need in order to lead healthy, meaningful lives, like freedom from torture or freedom of conscience. It is a mistake to place any particular technology in this exalted category, since over time, we will end up valuing the wrong things. Cerf adds “...at one time, if you didn’t have a horse it was hard to make a living. But the important right in that case was the right to make a living, not the right to own a horse.”

I must agree that we are placing way too much reverence and faith in the Internet itself, which is really a big jumble of wires combined with a not-so-clearly-defined collection of international cooperation pacts, government policies, and corporate service agreements.

Before we call the Internet a right, we’d better figure out whether we actually have the means to protect that right. The Internet doesn’t seem as invincible or uncontrollable as people make it out to be. Opponents of the SOPA anti-piracy bill in the US congress were happy to see the lawmakers strike the so-called “DNS Blocking” section, which would have allowed the US Justice Department to block access to domain names of of-

fending sites. But this issue should serve to remind everyone of how vulnerable the Internet really is to coercion or control through the DNS system.

The efforts by the Chinese government to monitor, censor, and control access to the Internet – the so-called “Golden Shield” project – has not been 100% effective in all cases. But, you’d better believe the Golden Shield is out there, “shielding” the citizens of China from information that might be unflattering to the authorities, while at the same time sustaining an illusion that Chinese Internet users are exercising their freedom to surf. In Russia, Twitter-born protests of election irregularities were easily drowned out by pro-government tweets clogging up the medium – all without denying anyone access to Twitter.

The Internet is a marvelous creation that will (maybe) serve us well as a conduit for free speech and freedom of expression for years to come. And, the Internet will probably continue to act as a beacon of freedom for people in countries with repressive governments – as long as the great democracies maintain their own commitment to freedom and serve as a bulwark for a culture of free expression. But, I worry about our depending too much on the Internet before we really understand what it is. The worst case scenario would be if the Internet put all the newspapers out of business, then the closed-silo content model championed by companies like Apple took control of the information pipeline, while the anti-net-neutrality lobby wins the power for the cable companies to decide what content you can see and how much trouble you need to go through to see it. Let’s figure out what we’re going to do about these problems first, then we’ll see if the Internet is still equipped to serve as the guardian of our freedoms.

Joe

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- [1] “French Court Rules Internet Access is a Fundamental Right”: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1192359/Internet-access-fundamental-human-right-rules-French-court.html>
- [2] “Internet Access is a Fundamental Right”: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8548190.stm>
- [3] “Internet Access is not a Human Right”: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/05/opinion/internet-access-is-not-a-human-right.html>