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U.N. Affirms Internet Freedom as a Basic Right

By SOMINI SENGUPTA

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Will Internet companies help or hinder government authorities that try to restrict their citizens from using the Web freely? And will their customers, investors or shareholders care enough to do something about it?

That debate was freshly stirred on Thursday as the United Nations Human Rights Council passed [a landmark resolution](#) supporting freedom of expression on the Internet. Even China, which filters online content through a firewall, backed the resolution. It affirmed that “the same rights that people have offline must also be protected online, in particular freedom of expression, which is applicable regardless of frontiers and through any media of one’s choice.”

The ball, in some ways, is now in the court of the technology companies that produce the tools that countries use to monitor and circumscribe their citizens on the Internet. China’s firewall uses technology from Cisco, for instance. American law-enforcement agencies routinely seek information from Internet companies; Twitter is among a handful of companies that insists on informing users when their data is sought, as it did with supporters of WikiLeaks and the Occupy Wall Street movement.

The Pew Internet Center recently asked a range of academics, policy analysts and technology company executives to reflect on how far the private sector would go to protect Internet freedom. The answers varied widely, though several experts pointed out that technology companies, like any others, would first worry about their bottom lines and in doing so, inevitably collaborate with repressive regimes in some instances.

“Firms might decide to implement steps that protect dissidents only if it is cost-effective for them to do so,” Simon Gottschalk, professor in the department of sociology at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, [told the Pew researchers](#).

One of the most common challenges for Internet companies with global operations is dealing with local laws that prohibit certain kinds of content, like certain kinds of references to the royal family in Thailand or atheism in Turkey. Google and Twitter publish how many requests they receive to remove content and how often they comply with the requests. Facebook, the world’s largest social network, does not, but it says that it removes posts and pages that are illegal in certain jurisdictions and violate the company’s terms of service.

The Pew report also asked experts to speculate on how far technology

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companies would go "in helping repressive regimes." Opinions were divided almost evenly between those who said consumers would punish companies that cooperate with authoritarian states and those who said the "urge for profits" would compel companies to turn a blind eye to how their products are used.

Meanwhile, the United Nations Human Rights Council resolution that was passed on Thursday is not binding. As Ken Roth, the executive director of Human Rights Watch, pointed out, it is principally useful for public shaming.

"That even China, despite the obvious hypocrisy, felt compelled to sign on shows it isn't comfortable publicly owning up to the Internet censorship regime that it tries to maintain," Mr. Roth said.

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Industries defined by Thomson Reuters	Today's % change	1-month % change	1-year % change
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Software	+0.54%	-2.05%	+6.94%
IT Services & Consulting	+0.50%	-6.45%	+11.41%
Communications Equipment	+1.00%	-4.99%	-1.84%
Semiconductors	+2.06%	+0.05%	+1.84%
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