

Online freedom: an app for that is coming

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An Egyptian man talks on the telephone in front of an army vehicle in central Cairo's Tahrir Square in May 2012. For people living in countries where the the government monitors and censors the Internet, help is on the way.

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It may be in a smartphone app or it could be a clandestine wireless network that looks innocuous but allows people to communicate out of the view of government censors.

A project funded by the US government and developed by a Washington think tank called "Commotion Wireless" is being readied for delivery early next year.

The effort seeks to promote free expression online and takes advantage

of the fact that more people are using mobile devices.

Such a system "is useful for people to communicate in situations when governments don't want them to," said Sascha Meinrath, head of the project at the New America Foundation.

While [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) played a role in the Arab Spring uprisings, these networks can also be used by governments to track or harass dissidents.

Commotion is designed as "a secure and reliable platform to ensure their communications cannot be controlled or cut off by authoritarian regimes," says the mission statement of the [open-source software](#) project.

Because it is a "mesh" network, each of those using the system becomes a "node," making it harder to shut down than a centralized access point.

"The [mesh network](#) doesn't live on any single device," says Preston Rhea, a program associate at New America who has been testing community wireless projects using the technology.

One test network was set up in a neighborhood in Washington where the local hacker community joined in by rigging up a makeshift antenna.

"The same technology would be able to help in countries like Syria where the government is trying to crack down on the free flow of information," said HacDC member Ben Mendis, who helped set up the local network.

The Commotion program became known as the "Internet in a suitcase," but those involved say it is a [misnomer](#).

"This is not a suitcase full of specialized equipment, this is meant to run on whatever exists on the ground," Meinrath said. "It's all software."

But even some State Department officials use the "suitcase" term to describe the effort to get a quick, easy way to help people get around filtering and surveillance.

-- Emerging technology meets an emerging need --

Commotion is one of several projects being funded by the US State Department to promote online freedom, an extension of other human rights initiatives.

The United States has provided \$76 million over the past four years for this and other programs for online freedom, and has another \$25 million in the pipeline.

Ian Schuler, program manager in the State Department's office of Internet Freedom Programs, said US concerns rose with revelations about repression and shutdowns of Internet services in countries during the Arab Spring uprisings.

Because Commotion can get around Internet shutdowns, he said it appeared to be "a good combination of an emerging technology that met an emerging need.

"We saw that people having rights in one realm helps them have rights in another realm," he said.

Some projects keep a low profile, but officials agreed to discuss Commotion because those working on it have been open about it.

Assistant US Secretary of State Michael Posner said recently that his agency is supporting "a dozen different circumvention technologies" including a "panic button app for mobile phones," a "slingshot" program to identify censored content, and training programs to help activists in repressive areas to keep operating.

Although the US government funds the Commotion project, it is not making decisions on where to deploy it, officials said.

"Our goal is to allow people to express themselves and exercise their rights," Schuler told AFP. "The goal is not regime change.... We're not picking who does and doesn't receive this technology."

-- 'Battling the firewall of China' --

Among those involved in deploying the technology is Radio Free Asia, which is seeking to protect its sources and correspondents as well as those of other US-funded international broadcast operations.

"We've had a long history of battling the firewall of China," said RFA president Libby Liu.

"It's a constant challenge but we have been successful in keeping our source network intact."

Liu said a key to getting this type of technology out is to make connections with "a group that has a tech-savvy, in-country network" and "to make it compatible with the digital platform in the country."

In using these systems, Liu said a priority is keeping those who use it anonymous and safe.

"If you're the one person who is connecting on a satellite phone that person is pretty obvious," she said.

Over time, the software and encryption can be delivered through smartphone apps or other software transfers. So even if it is blocked in a country, it would just need one person to bring in the app on a computing device, which can then be transferred to others, said Meinrath.

"These apps can be blocked, but if one person enters the country with a cellphone carrying that app it can then be distributed," he said.

"It's going to be very difficult to stop the implementation of this type of technology."

Meinrath said activists need to know the system is not yet ready with proper encryption and security, but that it could be available early next year.

And he said it will be designed "to be secure even when devices have been compromised or infiltrated."

When word filtered out about the "suitcase" project, Iran's intelligence chief said the country had been preparing for it and was working on countermeasures, leading to bemusement in Washington.

"It was an incredible outreach tool to have Iran's head of intelligence say this is a threat," Meinrath said.

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