

# Who really benefits from the 'internet space race'?

June 18 2015, by Adam Fish

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Solar-powered drones could fly for years at a time delivering internet access.  
Credit: Titan Aerospace

In the film [Elysium](#), the ultra-rich have left an apocalyptic Earth ravaged by global warming and overpopulation. Their utopian colony orbits high above Earth which festers below. Science fiction, but Silicon Valley techno-utopians also dream of rising above the planet's problems.

The [Seasteading Institute](#), for example, seeks to create floating cities far enough from land as to be outside of any regulatory jurisdiction. There,

farseers such as the likes of Google CEO Larry Page might be able to innovate, untethered by regulations. At Google's annual developers' conference in 2013, Page said: "I think as technologists we should have some safe places where we can try out some new things and figure out."

The seas of Earth appeal to some while the dry seas of Mars attract others: Elon Musk, CEO of Tesla Motors, is at the forefront of [commercial space travel](#) for the ultra-rich. At a cost of US\$36 billion he hopes his company SpaceX can start a [Mars colony](#). Space tourist tickets come in at a mere US\$500,000. He also plans to provide planet-wide internet access, [beamed from 4,000 satellites](#).

Facebook and Google have [shelved similar plans](#) for satellite internet access for those it has yet to reach. Instead, Facebook has opted for a less lofty approach, targeting not space but the stratosphere: its [Connectivity Lab](#) is tasked with bringing about an internet-saturated planet. To do this, they have invested in [solar-powered drones](#) capable of providing internet to underserved and disconnected areas. Google on the other hand, through its secretive X lab, devised [Project Loon](#) to provide internet via high-flying balloons.

Why are some of the world's most powerful technologists so focused on providing [internet access](#) by hook, crook, drones, balloon or satellite?

Above the Facebook flag at Facebook HQ flies another, bearing the symbol of Facebook's non-profit organisation, [Internet.org](#). The internet-dispersing drones under development are designed to bring about the objectives of Internet.org – connecting up the next three billion people yet to join the internet. But it isn't the "internet" as we know it today, instead, Internet.org allows users to access only Facebook and select other sites, not the entire internet. In an open letter to Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, 65 organisations from 31 countries criticised the project, claiming it [violated the principle of network neutrality](#), that no

site should be favoured over others. Security, privacy, censorship, and freedom of expression were among the other concerns voiced over Facebook's growing control.

It may seem axiomatic to those in the West, but what if people don't want access to the internet – of the type provided by Facebook, Google and SpaceX, or any other? There are well over a billion people living in states under governments that resist Western-style internet connectivity in order to preserve that country's status quo.

Technical approaches towards national internet sovereignty including IP address blocking, domain names, key words, and packet filtering. Non-technical forms of censorship include laws, regulations, threats, bribes, and arrests of publishers, ISPs, and authors. Reporters without Borders [identifies 19 countries](#) – including the US and the UK – along with Cuba, China, Iran, and North Korea, all of which use one or several of these tactics to create a distinct national internet.

Certainly, what governments want for their people and what the people want for themselves frequently diverge. But while we may agree that internet censorship by authoritarian dictatorships is an affront to free communication, can we really put our faith in Facebook's drones? It is possible to overthrow a government and depose a dictator but it is nearly impossible to revolt against corporate drones and extraterritorial CEOs.

With solar powered balloons raining internet down where it wasn't before, from inaccessible places such as high in the atmosphere or beyond, is resistance to the internet even an option? As US president Ronald Reagan knew when he initiated his Star Wars defence programme in the 1980s, space is the ultimate high ground. In the stratosphere and in space, the techno-liberal social engineering ideal – that the internet is inherently good – meets the desire to be above the fray of terrestrial, democratic regulation.

In the dramatic conclusion of Elysium, Max Da Costa (played by Matt Damon) flies a pod of illegal immigrants from Earth and crash-lands it into the luxurious orbiting utopia, rebooting the computer that keeps the citizens of Earth and Elysium in inequality. Those who do not want the [internet](#) may need a similar radical approach, because when the ultra-rich take to the skies it becomes nearly impossible to protest their decisions.

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