



# Toolbox V: What about freedom of **expression** online?

The advent of the Internet and the World Wide Web gave great hope to advocates of freedom of expression. Many believed that with the new technology, people can truly experience the full range of freedom of expression, from simple speech to artistic expression to political and religious debates.

**Key Concepts:**  
 Samizdat & audio-cassette tapes  
 Web 2.0 and social media  
 YouTube, Twitter, & Blogs  
 Citizen reporters

*A free press can be good or bad, but, most certainly, without freedom a press will never be anything but bad*

Albert Camus

(1913-1960) French philosopher, journalist,  
1957 Nobel Laureate for Literature

Developments in the Middle East and Northern Africa region, where the citizens are tapping into the power of social media to mobilize collective efforts, seem to suggest that repressive regimes will soon be taken over by “people power” and a great age of democracy will blossom. This is true to a certain extent; however, this excitement needs necessarily be tempered by some reality-checks. The reality in many countries is that the vast majority of society still does not have Internet access or in fact access to any kind of communication tools, including broadcasting and telephone. Even among the connected group there are countries where the Internet connection is filtered and controlled, thus preventing a more meaningful development of freedom of expression. Despite the limitations, the Internet with its participatory capabilities has already enabled some amazing progress in freedom of expression and this trend is most likely to continue in the future. In this section, we will look a little bit at the historical relationship between technology and freedom of expression. We will also see how web 2.0 or social media such as blogging and video-sharing sites have contributed to freedom of expression.

## 1. Samizdat and audio-cassette tapes

For some of us, it is hard to imagine now but before the Internet there were actually very limited number of ways in which people with alternative points of view could disseminate their opinions in a way that could reach a lot of people simultaneously. In late 1970s and through 1980s, people who wanted to express themselves but were not allowed to do so in the former Soviet Union resorted to printing leaflets of the so-called “censored materials” by themselves and distributing them by hand, from one person to another person. This was called samizdat (literally, self-published in the Russian language). The people who published samizdat were taking a great risk as the pun-

ishment for publishing these “illegal publications” was severe but self-publication was the only way for most to disseminate information at the time. Other forms of underground publications existed when oppression and repression prevented people from expressing their ideas and opinions. For example, audio cassette tapes containing speeches made by an exiled Iranian leader called Ruhollah Khomeini were produced in neighbouring countries and smuggled back into Iran and distributed underground. These ubiquitous audio recordings sowed the seed of the Iranian Revolution in the late 1970s.

## 2. Web 2.0

With the popularization of the Internet and especially with users becoming more savvy about how to circumvent official filtering systems set up by governments, seeking and sharing information has become easier and often with less risk for the producer of the information. With samizdat, there was the difficulty of hiding the bulky reprography machine and the stacks of pamphlets during an official raid. With cassette tapes, you also had the problem with smuggling in the actual physical tapes across the borders. However, the Internet eliminated some of these problems. You no longer have to buy reams upon reams of papers and raise suspicion in the process. More importantly, the latest Internet technology allows one to seek and receive information, as well as to produce and impart the information.

This has been dubbed the “Web 2.0 phenomenon”. It simply refers to the proliferation of the newer generation of Internet applications (you may already be using them such as Facebook, YouTube, Tumblr, various types of blogs, etc). They are also known as social networking sites. These differ from the earlier generation of Internet applications because they allow users to generate their own content fairly easily. For example, a user can write his or her own opinion piece on any subject and blog about it, report on an

incident which happened in the local community (before a big media company even knows about it), upload a video of an earthquake or hurricane, or even just a funny picture of a kitten.

This development has shifted the role for many Internet users from being a mere consumer of information to a producer of information as well. The term “produser” was coined to characterize this development. Therefore users now have the simple means to not only “seek” and “receive” information but also to “impart” information. And in many cases, by using social-networking media, they could even hold discussion of opinions without interference.

While Web 2.0 applications have given users an unprecedented amount of freedom to express themselves, they are not without their limitations. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) noted that in 2008 for the first time in history, more online journalists have been imprisoned or killed than traditional journalists. Various countries are also developing ever more efficient ways of monitoring and filtering the Internet and interpreting pre-existing media laws so they could be applied to the Internet as well.

## 3. Emergence of citizen reporters

With the advent of new media that is rich with user-generated content including blogs, social-networking sites, and video-sharing sites; another form of “news reporting” has taken root. These cases are generally referred to as citizen reporting or sometimes citizen journalism and even street journalism which means they have the semblance of traditional journalism but often lacking in a set of professional standards and tools. Using new media (also known as Web 2.0), common people have been able to upload their own reporting and opinions on the Internet. Citizen reporters have been influential in affecting change in many different countries

around the world.

**Quick Questions:**  
What do you think of citizen reporting? Do you think those who do it should be considered as journalists? What is your argument for or against?

## 4. Blogs, YouTube, & Twitter

Weblogs or blogs and other new media including video-sharing sites such as YouTube or Tudou, and social-networking sites such as Facebook, Badoo, or Renren, collectively known as Web 2.0, have become a cultural phenomenon in many parts of the world. Many blogs are filled with fun and light-hearted jottings of everyday life. And if you ever used a video-sharing site, you are likely to have viewed video clips of people or animals doing silly and often funny things. These are the whimsical sides of Web 2.0 but there are also many cases of it being used for socio-political commentaries, to break news that big media could not break, to disseminate contentious messages and to mobilize the grassroots to demonstrate in the streets. For various reasons, some governments have taken a very confrontational stance against these bloggers, video-loggers, Twitterer, and Facebookers for their dissensions and contentious writings.

### Does your country filter or block certain websites?

- Identify the websites that cannot be accessed in your country (doing a little research into international reports from press freedom agencies or news report is good starting point).
- Identify the reasons for these websites to be blocked.
- Do you agree or disagree with the reasoning? Why?



*Without freedom of expression, good taste means nothing*

Neil Young  
Canadian singer-songwriter,  
musician and film director

**Challenge:**  
Did you know there are some websites that cannot be accessed in some countries? Are there any websites in your country which you cannot access?

The international organization, Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF) observed in their 2007 Annual Worldwide Press Freedom Index that “more and more governments have realised that the Internet can play a key role in the fight for democracy and they are establishing new methods of censoring it” and that “the governments of repressive countries are now targeting bloggers and online journalists as forcefully as journalists in the traditional media.” Events from around the world offer tantalizing examples of how dissidents/citizens in these countries have embraced these new media to promote their cause.

In Egypt, a revolution took place in early 2011, which resulted in the overthrow of the Hosni Mubarak regime that had been in power since 1981. The revolution often touted as the “social media revolution”<sup>30</sup> was in fact the result of various factors that had been causing resentment and simmering anger amongst many of the population, including corruption, lack of economic opportunities, wide-spread torture practices that were exposed online and lack of political self-expression for decades. But it was the wide-spread use and availability of social media that helped give a final push in favour of the Egyptian people.

Yet, this has not been an easy journey. Over the last few years, there has been an increase in the arrests of various bloggers and social media users without a legal cause in Egypt. According to the OpenArab.net<sup>31</sup>, “bloggers are always kidnapped by non-uniformed security forces during covering or participating in certain activities or political demonstrations or during covering some tribunals” in Egypt<sup>32</sup>. It also estimated that “the number of bloggers who faced kidnapping or arresting was bigger” even than that of political activists and journalists and “they are targeted just for being bloggers”. For example, a 24-year old named Abdel Kareem Nabil Suleiman, better known as blogger Kareem Amer was sentenced to four years in prison for blog posts criticizing President Hosni Mubarak and the Islamist control of the country’s universities<sup>33</sup>. In another case, a female Egyptian blogger who writes on a blog called Eman Republic, was ordered to “willingly close down” her blog after she wrote a critical piece about Col. Gaddafi who at the time still ruled neighbouring Libya<sup>34</sup>. Usually, Egyptians have been able to “voice out” their dissatisfactions against the Government as long as they are not acted out. Fahmy Howeidy, an Egyptian writer who has often criticized the government, calls it the “freedom to scream” because “you can say what you want but you cannot act”<sup>35</sup>. The authorities have interpreted the publication of one’s thoughts on a blog as an actual act against the Government which would explain the increasingly frequent arrests of bloggers.

These examples show that the new media, specifically those which enable users to directly upload their own writings, pictures, and sounds are being used as a tool to allow them to express themselves in ways which would otherwise be impossible with more traditional forms of media. This is a development that is closely watched by governments, by activists, by commercial companies, and indeed by everyone.

## Toolbox V Summary

The use of new media technology in promoting freedom of expression is not new; Samizdat and audio-cassette tapes are examples of such use.

The advent of new media that is rich with user-generated content including blogs, social-networking sites, and video-sharing sites has given rise to citizen reporting.

Not every political establishment agrees or allows the unfettered use of online media for political expression. This has resulted in harassments, detentions, and other attacks on some political users of media.

Social media are powerful tools in disseminating and obtaining information.