

March 2016

FOC Joint Statement on Cross-border Attacks on Freedom of Expression Online

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The Freedom Online Coalition emphatically calls upon governments to halt measures designed, in contravention of states' international human rights obligations, to restrict the freedoms of expression, association and peaceful assembly online, as stated in the "Tallinn Agenda". These measures include imprisonment, harassment, physical violence, censorship, as well as illicit filtering, blocking, and monitoring of opposition voices. The "Tallinn Agenda" similarly conveys our resolve to collectively condemn — through diplomatic channels, public statements, and other means — violations and abuses of human rights and fundamental freedoms online as they occur in different countries throughout the world. The Freedom Online Coalition also believes states should strive to promote and protect the enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms online even when their obligations are not directly implicated.

The Freedom Online Coalition is therefore troubled by the rise in state-sponsored actions, which aim to block access to legitimate online content, intimidate Internet users, or harm intermediary technologies and companies, frequently with intended consequences beyond their borders. All too often, these actions are conducted under the pretext of security or public order and without appropriate safeguards respecting the rule of law.

We deplore tactics such as the use of malware to target exiled activists sent from computers located inside their country of origin. We decry organized campaigns that target legitimate user content worldwide by manipulating social media sites' terms of service procedures. We denounce the use of malicious code embedded in popular domestic websites that reroute global Internet traffic to incapacitate civil society websites hosted abroad, as well as other types of distributed denial of service attacks. These tactics negatively impact the exercise of freedoms online, diminish trust among actors in the digital space, and erode the Internet's economic and social benefits for all. Furthermore, actions designed to silence dissident voices and alternative viewpoints often incidentally or deliberately dismantle the Internet's benefits for political and religious expression, and damage the ability of other states and companies to create stable environments conducive to the exercise of human rights online.

We call on governments, the private sector, international organisations, and civil society worldwide to endorse this statement and we invite states that support a free and secure Internet for all to consider joining the Freedom Online Coalition.

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Freedom Online Coalition Background

The Freedom Online Coalition is a cross-regional group of 29 governments that collaborate to advance Internet freedom worldwide. The Coalition provides a forum for like-minded governments to coordinate efforts and work with civil society and the private sector to support the ability of individuals to exercise their human rights and fundamental freedoms online.

The mission and vision of the Freedom Online Coalition are founded upon the notion that human rights apply online as well as offline, as confirmed in resolutions 20/8 and 26/13, adopted by consensus by the UN Human Rights Council in July 2012 and June 2014, as well as resolutions 68/167 and 69/166, adopted by consensus by the UN General Assembly in December 2013 and 2014.

The FOC seeks to identify best practices regarding the application of human rights in the evolving online landscape, as well as to call attention to conditions that undermine those rights. For instance, the FOC's multistakeholder working group on "An Internet Free and Secure" seeks to bring a human rights framing to ongoing debates on cybersecurity and aims to develop, through multistakeholder dialogue, meaningful outputs that feed into existing processes.

The FOC, through the Digital Defenders Partnership, also provides rapid response to a range of threats to Internet freedom; from supporting bloggers and cyber activists who find themselves under digital attack, to helping them exercise their human rights online in countries where the Internet is censored, not accessible or where freedom is otherwise restricted. More information on the Digital Defenders Partnership is available at: <http://www.digitaldefenders.org/>.

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