“The Media Cold War”

An information war has erupted around the world. The battle lines are drawn between those governments that regard the free flow of information, and the ability to access it, as a matter of fundamental human rights, and those that regard official control of information as a fundamental sovereign prerogative. The contest is being waged institutionally in organizations like the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) and daily in countries like Syria.

The sociologist Philip N. Howard recently used the term “new cold war” to describe “battles between broadcast media outlets and social-media upstarts, which have very different approaches to news production, ownership, and censorship.” Because broadcasting requires significant funding, it is more centralized – and thus much more susceptible to state control. Social media, by contrast, transforms anyone with a mobile phone into a potential roving monitor of government deeds or misdeeds, and are hard to shut down without shutting down the entire Internet. Surveying struggles between broadcast and social media in Russia, Syria, and Saudi Arabia, Howard concludes that, notwithstanding their different media cultures, all three governments strongly back state-controlled broadcasting.

These intra-media struggles are interesting and important. The way that information circulates does reflect, as Howard argues, a conception of how a society/policy should be organized.

But an even deeper difference concerns the fundamental issue of who owns information in the first place. In January 2010, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton proclaimed that the United States “stand[s] for a single Internet where all of humanity has equal access to information and ideas.” She linked that stance not only to the US Constitution’s First Amendment, which protects freedom of expression and freedom of the press, but also to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which holds that all people have the right “to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.” Many governments’ determination to “erect electronic barriers” to block their citizens’ efforts to access the full resources of the Internet, she said, means that “a new information curtain is descending across our world.”

This larger struggle is playing out in many places, including the ITU, which will convene 190 countries in Dubai in December to update an international telecommunications treaty first adopted in 1988. Although many of the treaty’s details are highly technical, involving the routing of telecommunications, various governments have submitted proposals to amend the treaty that include provisions aimed at facilitating government censorship of the Internet.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has been open about his desire to use the ITU “to establish international control” over the Internet, thereby superseding current arrangements, which leave Internet governance in the hands of private groups like the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers and the Internet Engineering Task Force. The US would never sign a treaty that fundamentally changed Internet governance arrangements, but the point is that many
governments will try to use the treaty process to increase their ability to control the information that their citizens can access.

On the ground, governments are often still primarily focused on blocking information about what they are doing. One of the Syrian government’s first moves after it began shooting protesters, for example, was to expel all foreign journalists. Several weeks ago, the government of Tajikistan blocked YouTube and reportedly shut down communications networks in a remote region where government forces were battling an opposition group. The Chinese government barred all foreign journalists from Tibet when it cracked down hard on protesters before the 2008 Olympics.

These more traditional tactics can now be supplemented with new tools for misinformation. For close followers of the Syrian conflict, tracking key reporters and opposition representatives on Twitter can be a surreal experience.

Two weeks ago, Ausama Monajed, a Syrian strategic communications consultant who sends out a steady stream of information and links to opposition activities in Syria, suddenly started sending out pro-government propaganda. The Saudi-owned satellite news channel Al Arabiya has also reported the hacking of its Twitter feed by the “Electronic Syrian Army,” a shadowy group most likely comprised of free-lance operatives with the direct or indirect support of the Syrian government. It is one thing to read about sophisticated cyber-war capabilities; it is quite another to see the online identities of familiar people or Web sites suddenly hijacked.

In the many manifestations of the ongoing and growing information war(s), the pro-freedom-of-information forces need a new weapon. A government’s banning of journalists or blocking of news and social-media Web sites that were previously allowed should itself be regarded as an early warning sign of a crisis meriting international scrutiny. The presumption should be that governments with nothing to hide have nothing to lose by allowing their citizens and internationally recognized media to report on their actions.

To give this presumption teeth, it should be included in international trade and investment agreements. Imagine if the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and regional development banks suspended financing as soon as a government pulled down an information curtain. Suppose foreign investors wrote contracts providing that the expulsion and banning of foreign journalists or widespread blocking of access to international news sources and social media constituted a sign of political risk sufficient to suspend investor obligations under the contract.

Americans say that sunlight is the best disinfectant. Citizens’ access to information is an essential tool to hold governments accountable. Government efforts to manipulate or block information should be presumed to be an abuse of power – one intended to mask many other abuses.