



## When 'Free Speech' as a Concept Vanishes

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An Indonesian Muslim holds up a poster during a protests outside the U.S. Consulate in Medan, North Sumatra, Indonesia, Tuesday, Sept. 18, 2012. (AP/Photo: AP)

A sign mentioned in the New York Times coverage of the ongoing protests in the Muslim world crystallized a question that had been nagging at the back of my head since the attacks on the American embassies in Libya and Egypt. The sign read: “Shut up America!” and “Obama is the president, so he should have to apologize!”

What a strange non-sequitur, to Western ears! What does the president—or the U.S. government in general—have to do with some crude, rinky-dink YouTube video produced by an apparent con man? Surely, like the overwhelming majority of Americans, Barack Obama would never even have been aware of the trailer for “Innocence of Muslims” if it hadn’t become the bizarre focus of controversy abroad. Even if the video was more catalyst than cause of the outrage, commenters all along have remarked how absurd, almost surreal, it seems that one shoddy YouTube—surely one of many containing harsh criticism of Islam or its prophet—could trigger such a massive reaction. If people hadn’t died, it would be comical.

But perhaps it makes a little more sense against the backdrop of regimes where the government exerts far more control over what citizens may read or publish online—and where whatever lip service might be paid to “free speech,” it’s understood to be within tightly constrained parameters. If information is allowed to circulate widely for any prolonged period, it is safe to assume that some government official—or at least, some private intermediary operating under threat of government sanction—has made an affirmative decision to permit that circulation. All public speech carries a kind of tacit government endorsement.