What would an Internet "Kill Switch" Look Like?

by Jason Kuznicki on January 27, 2011

Probably nothing. Until it looked like Egypt, at which point it could be too late:

For those trying to follow events in Egypt, Wednesday was a chaotic experience. Unlike the close of Tuesday, when there was a single, dramatic episode to concentrate the signs of Government and opposition — the gathering in Tahrir (Liberation) Square in Cairo — yesterday forced the observer to try and gather information on a series of running battles.

Difficulties were compounded by the restrictions on communications by Egyptian authorities, who blocked Twitter and may have interfered with Facebook as well as disrupting cell phones in an effort to snap links between protesters. And of course the Government put security forces — thousands of them — on the streets of the cities.

Outside of squelching citizen-led protests, the government gains very little by commandeering the Internet. In any other time of crisis, media both old and new have always lined up voluntarily to help. The only time they wouldn't — that is, the only time we'd need a kill switch — would be if the government had lost the support of a large share of the people. In which case, protest may be a crisis, but if so, it's a healthy one.

The fact is that we have never had a "cybersecurity emergency." No more, at any rate, than we've ever had a "TV security emergency" or a "print security emergency." The very term should be laughable.

In all our real emergencies, like the Deepwater Horizon spill, Hurricane Katrina, or September 11, all the media outlets cooperated, instantly, in providing information about events as they developed, so that people could make the best of things in the aftermath. Not only did the media disseminate information as the government asked, they also *withheld* information as asked, blocking out about troop movements and intelligence to help the war effort.

It's just really, really difficult to dream up any scenario in which a takeover would be needed, except to stop the sort of legitimate citizen protest guaranteed under the First Amendment. Terrorists hack a computer at a nuclear power plant? (Do you really imagine the plant's owners *wouldn't* cooperate with the feds?) Terrorists somehow come to *own* a nuclear power plant? (If they did, the fault would lie with the SEC, the CIA, or any number of other agencies that could have stopped it a long time ago. And even then, it's not like terrorists would say "Oh, killswitch law. Here ya go. My bad.")

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