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In Light of Egyptian Meltdown, What If Obama Had Internet Kill Switch
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Anyone wondering what could happen if a controversial bill passed giving President Barack Obama an Internet "kill switch" in case of an emergency can look to the havoc in Egypt for a worst-case scenario: Government officials sent the country into Web darkness, and unplugged other communications as well, as one of their tactics to quell unrest.

"Egypt has gone offline," CNET reports. "In a stunning development unprecedented in the modern history of the Internet, a country of more than 80 million people has found itself almost entirely disconnected from the rest of the world."

The blackout in Egypt, of course, came after days of protests in the streets demanding an end to nearly 30 years of dictatorial rule by President Hosni Mubarak, a key White House ally. The government is employing the tactic to shut down communications among protesters.

Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube have represented important means of communication during popular uprisings around the world in recent months. That includes Iran, Moldova and the recent spasm of unrest in the Mideast, which began in Tunisia. Egypt's Internet service has been almost completely disabled. Only one Internet provider — Noor Group — is still functioning.

Even President Obama is criticizing Egypt's crackdown on the Internet, The Hill reports. In an interview with Steve Grove, head of news and politics at YouTube, Obama says, "There are certain core values that we believe as Americans are universal: freedom of speech, freedom of expression, people being able to use social networking and other mechanisms to communicate their concerns and that is no less true in the Arab world than it is in the United States."

As for the United States, a government kill switch for the Internet would have little use because its main function appears to be silencing popular protests, says Jason Kuznicki, a research fellow at the Cato Institute.

The specter of unbridled government control has kept it a controversial issue since Sens. Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut and Susan Collins, R-Maine, proposed it last year. Lieberman, an independent who caucuses with the Democrats, is chairman of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee.

The full Senate didn't act on last year's bill, but the proposal recently returned with the added provision that it wouldn't be subject to judicial review.

The bill isn't the first proposal for the president to have an Internet "kill switch." A draft Senate proposal that CNET obtained in August 2009 allowed the White House to "declare a cyber security emergency." And Snowe and Sen. Jay Rockefeller, D-W.Va., proposed giving the government power to "order the disconnection" of certain networks or websites. House Democrats made similar proposals.

Civil libertarians and some industry representatives have expressed fears about giving the executive branch such broad emergency power. Meanwhile, some companies, including Microsoft, Verizon, and EMC, supported the bill's initial version.

But the change in the bill last month that bans court reviews worries some companies. "Judicial review is our main concern," Steve DelBianco, director of the NetChoice coalition, which includes eBay, Oracle, Verisign, and Yahoo, tells CBSNews.com. "A designation of critical information infrastructure brings with it huge obligations for upgrades and compliance."

An Internet kill switch could cause more problems than it solves, according to a recent report from the London School of Economics and University of Oxford.

"We think that a largely military approach to cyber security is a mistake," said report co-author Ian Brown of the Oxford Internet Institute, according to PCWorld.com. "Most targets in the critical national infrastructure of communications, energy, finance, food, government, health, transport, and water are in the private sector."

As for the United States, Cato's Kuznicki notes, America's open media have proved to be a major benefit to citizens and the government alike in past crises. "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," he writes.

And it's not as if the media hasn't cooperated with the government during times of trouble, he points out.

"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," Kuznicki explains.

"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," he writes.