Feds Block MOOC Access in Sanctioned Countries

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Last October, the U.S. Department of State announced a partnership with massive open online corse provider Coursera to "expand learning opportunities worldwide."

In January, that partnership experienced some alterations.

The State Department began requiring MOOCs, including Coursera, to block IP addresses in certain sanctioned countries. Students seeking access to Coursera in Cuba, Iran, Sudan, and Syria are now blocked from the site's free online classes.

Apparently, the State Department feels that "worldwide" doesn't include all countries.

Although Coursera is working with the State Department to remove blocks, the issue is still unresolved after new interpretation of export control restrictions led to the blockages.

Hostile to Information
Sanctions against these countries for human rights abuses forbid material support to them through trade or donations.

"Material support traditionally was understood to mean financial donations, equipment," said Cato Institute scholar Julian Sanchez. "This isn't material support, this is sanctions on entire countries."

In the week after the ban went into effect, approximately 2,000 unique IP addresses were blocked from visiting Coursera. Students can log into the site from multiple devices so the number may equal the number of students. Since then, access has been restored in Syria.

Cutting off educational services in oppressed countries imitates the work of those regimes in being hostile to information, said Atlas Network CEO Brad Lips. Atlas is an international network of some 400 free-market nonprofit organizations.

"Even if you were to think that economic sanctions were helpful in some circumstances…cutting [free online classes] off would be doing what the regimes do," Lips said. "Toward the end of the

Cold War, countries talked about how important it was to have access to radio; our public diplomacy is much less effective these days, but the hunger in countries for educational services gives us an opportunity as a country to present our values as a society. These are services you think you would want to protect."

'Ineffective' at Best
Savvy internet users can easily route communications through a foreign IP address, making this an ineffective means of restricting information, Sanchez said. Instead, the restriction penalizes people who can't get around the IP restrictions.

Elsewhere, the State Department is "trying to promote internet freedom but…we're requiring U.S. organizations to block certain countries," Sanchez said. "There's an uneasy fit between those two messages."

Reinstatement Process
Coursera spokesmen directed questions to a blog post on Jan. 28. "Coursera is working very closely with the U.S. Department of State and Office of Foreign Assets Control to secure permissions to reinstate site access for students in sanctioned countries," it says.

A review of Syria General License 11A, which allows certain services into the country, led to a restoration of access there.

The post also notes that some students bordering sanctioned countries will be affected, but that "our engineers are working to mitigate this issue while pursuing a broader solution to the restrictions."

Fellow MOOC EdX is currently free from blocks in sanctioned countries, but offers fewer courses.