



December 18, 2024

The Honorable Antony Blinken
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Ms. Amanda Bennett
Chief Executive Officer
U.S. Agency for Global Media
330 Independence Avenue SW
Washington D.C., 20237

Dear Secretary Blinken and CEO Bennett,

As members of the House Select Committee on Strategic Competition Between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party, we write to encourage the Department to sponsor a federal prize competition to support satellite technology that offers internet accessibility for repressed citizens of authoritarian nations or countries at war. The value of access to untainted information cannot be understated: Authoritarian governments across the globe cut off internet access to their millions of citizens to maintain power and undermine freedom. Democracy will prevail on its own; it does not need propaganda or disinformation to defeat authoritarianism, but we must provide it with the space to compete.

According to the Office of Management and Budget and the Office of Science and Technology Policy, prize competitions benefit the federal government in specific, measurable outcomes. First, these allow federal agencies to pay only for success: competition increases cost effectiveness, stimulates private-sector investment, and maximizes the return on taxpayer dollars. Secondly, such competitions establish ambitious goals while increasing the number and diversity of individuals, organizations, and teams tackling a problem, including smaller to mid-size companies who have not previously received federal funding. Lastly, these underscore our commitment to some of our most deeply-held values as a democracy: that our country has the capability to motivate and inspire the public to tackle scientific, technical, and societal problems.¹

¹ Gallo, M. (2020, April 6). *Federal Prize Competitions*. <https://www.crs.gov/reports/pdf/R45271/R45271.pdf>

Though technology continues to evolve, freedom of accurate, reliable information remains paramount. In October of 2023 Freedom House released its annual “Freedom on the Net” report. The report showed that for the thirteenth year in a row internet freedom had declined across the globe, with Russia, Iran, and China earning three of the bottom five positions.² Losing access to the internet risks the loss of – at the very least – freedom of thought, freedom of movement, and freedom of knowledge.

These threats are not isolated incidents or at the mercy of geographical limitations. In the Red Sea, four telecommunication cables were cut, and the incident affected 25 percent of data traffic flowing between Asia and Europe.³ In Hong Kong, since the CCP’s assertion of governance, residents ranging from a 23-year-old student studying in Japan to a 48-year-old housewife have been charged with sedition because of their online comments.⁴ As authoritarian governments continue to limit internet access for their citizens, the U.S. government must prioritize and incentivize satellite providers to establish simple connectivity, for regions where governments deny their citizens unfettered access to information.⁵

There are already several companies working on satellite and rocket technology across the United States. These include Boeing, Lockheed Martin, and SpaceX, and others, with roughly twenty-five companies worldwide possessing the capabilities needed to help dissidents circumvent internet censorship.⁶ However, to date, there has been no demand signal sent to these firms or other potential market entrants that the U.S. government is interested in this technology from a human rights perspective, not just economic development or military end-uses.

A federal prize competition focused on the provision of the internet to repressed citizens of authoritarian nations or countries at war would offer a new way to collaborate and incentivize these projects that promote core democratic values. With ongoing communication and internet connectivity disruptions along with concerning delays to the satellite programs, ensuring internet freedom through satellite technology is more important than ever before.

Thank you for your consideration of this request, and we look forward to our continued work supporting a globally free and open internet.

² Shahbaz, Funk, Brody, Vesteinsson, Baker, Grothe, Barak, Masinsin, Modi, Sutterlin eds. (2023). “Freedom on the Net 2023”, Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2023-10/Freedom-on-the-net-2023-DigitalBooklet.pdf>

³ Gritton, D. (2024, March 5). *Crucial Red Sea Data Cables Cut, Telecoms Firm Says* BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-68478828>

⁴ Cheung, R. (2023, July 19). *Hong Kong Braces for a Court Ruling that could Spell the Beginning of the End of its Open Internet*. Fortune. <https://fortune.com/2023/07/19/hong-kong-open-internet-protest-national-anthem-google/>

⁵ Nazemi, P. (2023, September 18). *Satellite Internet Companies Could Help Break Authoritarianism*. Scientific American. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/satellite-internet-companies-could-help-break-authoritarianism/>

⁶ Harrington, J. (2023, April 17). *Nearly All Satellites Are Owned by These 25 Companies and Agencies*. 24/7 Wall Street. <https://247wallst.com/special-report/2023/04/17/nearly-all-satellites-are-owned-by-these-25-companies-and-agencies/>

Sincerely,



Jake Auchincloss
Member of Congress



John R. Moolenaar
Member of Congress



Neal P. Dunn, M.D.
Member of Congress



Raja Krishnamoorthi
Ranking Member
House Select Committee on
the CCP



Mikie Sherrill
Member of Congress



Andre Carson
Member of Congress