Google, Amazon assist in blocking encrypted communications

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Google and Amazon are assisting authoritarian governments in the Middle East aligned with Washington to censor the internet and prevent the use of encrypted communications by their populations.

On May 1, the developers of the Signal encrypted messaging application revealed that over the previous month, Google and Amazon took steps to stop Signal from continuing to bypass censorship measures in place in Egypt, Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. Workers, youth, journalists, lawyers and human rights advocates will no longer be able to use the application to send encrypted messages and evade government surveillance.

All of these affected countries are ruled by blood-soaked and repressive regimes. Egypt is run by General Abdel Fatteh el-Sisi's military dictatorship, which came to power in a US-backed military coup in 2013 through the overthrow of the elected Muslim Brotherhood president Mohamed Morsi and the slaying of more than 1,600 of his supporters on the streets of Cairo. In the five years since, el-Sisi's government has rounded up and imprisoned some 60,000 opponents and sentenced 1,000 to death in political trials. The UAE, Qatar and Oman are controlled by despotic monarchies.

Around December 2016, these governments instructed internet service providers to begin blocking all traffic to Signal's servers. In response, Signal implemented a change to its software code, known as "domain fronting," to make its web traffic appear to service providers and censors as though it were directed to Google's web domain (google.com). This allowed users to continue using the messaging service just by updating the app on their phones.

Sometime in mid-March, 2018, however, Signal received a 30-day advance notice from Google that it was introducing internal changes to stop domain fronting. The changes came into effect on April 16.

When Signal's developers announced plans to switch from Google to the web domain of Amazon's online marketplace in the Middle East, Souq.com, Amazon quickly sent a letter in late April warning that it would "immediately suspend" Signal if "you use third party domains without their permission." Then on April 27, Amazon modified its system architecture to prevent domain fronting altogether.

The practice of domain fronting requires that the "front" be a widely-popular service. In order to block Signal, government censors would previously have had to block traffic to Google or Amazon's online market as well. According to Signal's public statement, the changes by Google and Amazon mean there is no alternative to prevent government censorship of its application.

The change has implications beyond Signal. Other applications aimed at allowing users to evade surveillance and censorship, including the secure and anonymous web browser Tor, as well as the Great Fire Free browser, which is specifically designed to evade the Chinese government's internet firewall, also reportedly rely or have relied on some form of domain fronting.

Explaining its decision to end domain fronting in a statement to the Verge, Google claimed that it "has never been a supported feature at Google" but that "until recently it worked because of a quirk of our software."

Yet in 2014, Google's CEO Eric Schmidt co-wrote a New York Times op-ed declaring his support for such measures, claiming that "obfuscation techniques—when one thing is made to look like another—are also a path forward. A digital tunnel from Iran to Norway can be disguised as an ordinary Skype call … and the collateral

damage of blocking all traffic is often too high for a government to stomach."

In the intervening period, Google and the other technology giants have completely integrated themselves into the campaign for internet censorship and surveillance by the US intelligence agencies.

Under changes introduced in April 2017, Google has begun censoring left-wing, socialist and anti-war websites, principally the *World Socialist Web Site*, by removing and demoting links to these publications in its search engine results. Under the banner of combating Russian-backed "fake news," Google and Facebook have hired thousands of content censors, largely drawn from the intelligence agencies, to monitor content that is posted online, assisted by a rapidly expanding network of artificial intelligence algorithms.

There is no doubt that the coordinated decisions by Google and Amazon, which have vast foreign-policy implications for Washington, were made in close consultation with the State Department and CIA in order to assist their allies in repressing their populations. The change also assists the censorship efforts of the Russian government, which in mid-April, after Google announced it was ending domain fronting, ordered the shutting down of the Telegram secure messaging service, and sought to prevent it from using domain fronting.

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