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**COMMERCE, TRADE AND  
CONSUMER PROTECTION  
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TELECOMMUNICATIONS  
AND THE INTERNET**



**Mary Bono Mack**  
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July 8, 2009

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Ranking Member Cliff Stearns  
Subcommittee on Communications,  
Technology and the Internet  
2322-A Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

**Re: Hearing Request - Internet Censorship and the Threat to Free Expression Posed  
by Repressive Governments**

Dear Chairman Waxman, Ranking Member Barton, Chairman Boucher, and Ranking  
Member Stearns:

As a Member serving on the Committee on Energy and Commerce, I would like to re-affirm my willingness to work towards achieving bipartisan solutions that allow America to reach its potential and live up to its promise. It is with that thrust that I contact you requesting a suggested hearing topic.

It is becoming increasingly evident that communications technologies and applications that are developed in the United States are becoming a growing part of the lives of peoples beyond our borders. These technologies are having profound social and political effects.

In light of recent events in Iran, I write to respectfully request that you hold a committee hearing on Internet censorship and the threat to free expression posed by repressive governments. Freedom of expression is a critical element in putting more power in the hands of individuals by providing more information, more choice and more control over their lives. These basic values and beliefs have shaped our country from its inception, and it is imperative that the U.S. government do more to uphold and promote basic human rights, free expression, and the economic activity generated and supported by the Internet. A hearing held by your committee will help shed light on government-sponsored censorship around the world and its serious implications for trade and human rights that cannot be ignored.

The Internet is often used as a vehicle for free expression in countries that restrict speech through other media. This has been most recently and starkly apparent in Iran following last month's disputed election. During the "Twitter Revolution," Iranians relied heavily on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube to broadcast firsthand accounts and on-the-scene footage of the protests and violence in Tehran. At a time when the Ahmadinejad government was doing everything in its power to control messages and images leaving Iran, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube became unfiltered, citizen-fueled news bureaus of reports filed straight from the streets of Tehran. With YouTube views at only 10% of normal levels in Iran due to government censorship, Iranians continued to upload videos that document demonstrations, violent clashes between police and protesters, and other scenes of unrest. A graphic video of Neda Soltan's murder on YouTube became a testament to the vital role that technology played in giving a voice to the silenced.

Along those lines, China has continued to use its Great Firewall to block "illegal" content on a regular basis, at-will. Researchers in China have estimated that 30,000 or more "Internet police" monitor online traffic, websites and blogs for political and other offensive content. Even so, social networking and new media continue to be transformative forces in China. Most recently, to prevent rioters from organizing in Xinjiang province after the Uighur uprising, China cut off mobile phone service and attempted to block Internet access. While messages and images were deleted from Chinese social networks, several photos of the aftermath were posted to Twitter. Hundreds of comments in both Chinese and English appeared in response.

Internet censorship is a real challenge, and not one that any particular industry – much less any single company – can tackle on its own. Efforts to promote freedom of expression and to limit the impact of censorship require both private and public sector engagement. The U.S. State Department took commendable action by asking Twitter to delay a scheduled software update to protect Iranians who were using the service last month. Congress must follow suit and take steps to actively support groups that are establishing standards and methods for companies in the technology sector to protect and advance individuals' rights to freedom of expression and privacy, especially when faced with government demands for censorship.

The need for outspoken U.S. government support for free expression is more urgent than ever before. As new technology effectively dissolves borders and carries with it the potential for greater freedom for people around the globe, the U.S. government must now engage more strongly to protect basic human rights. I believe that a hearing will draw due attention to the roles that both companies and governments must play in combating censorship and finding viable solutions, which is essential to making real progress in the effort to promote free expression throughout the world.

It is my hope that you will use your leadership authority on the Committee on Energy and Commerce to call for a hearing on this important issue. I look forward to hearing your thoughts on this important matter. Additionally, if your staff should have any questions

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regarding this issue, please have them contact my Legislative Counsel, Paul Cancienne at  
225-5330.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration.

Respectfully,



MARY BONO MACK  
Member of Congress