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U.S. Urges Big Tech to Boost Anti-Censorship Tools for Russians – Reuters

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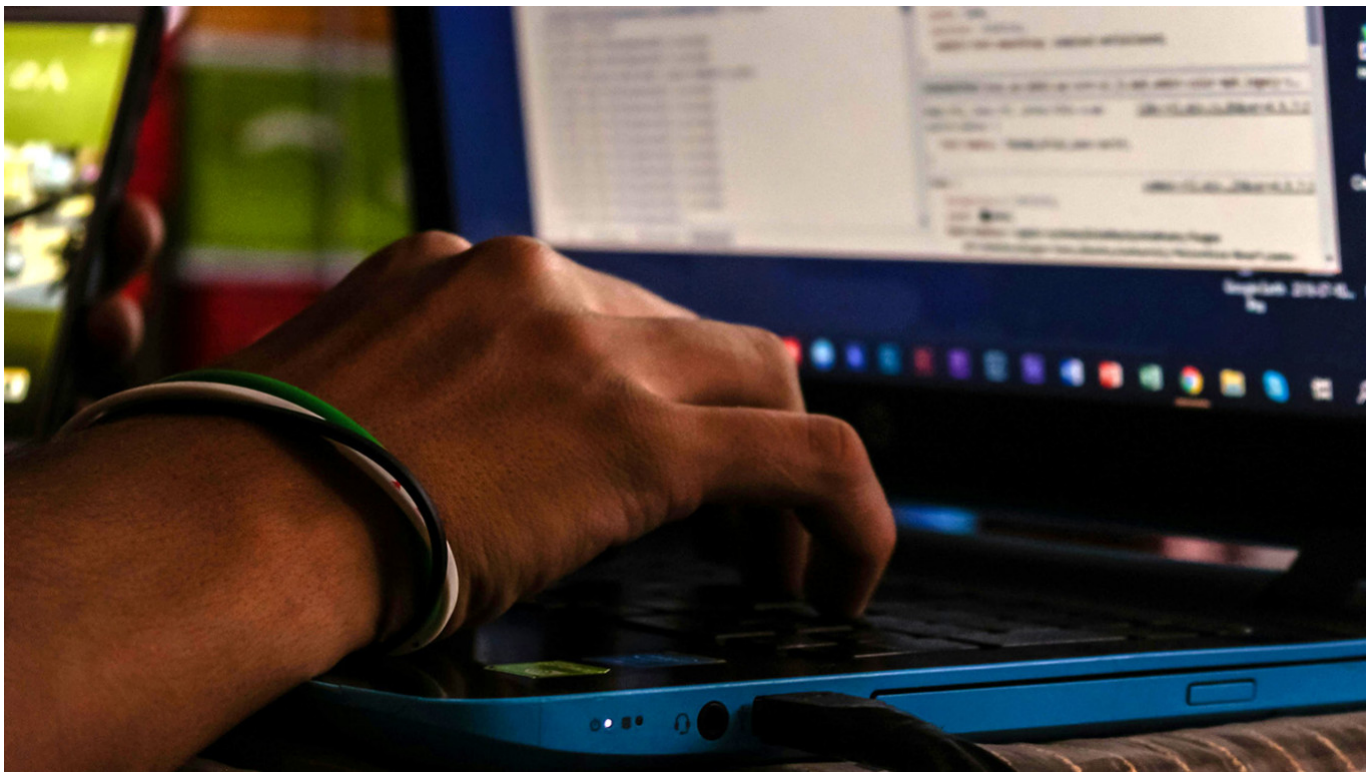

Samer Daboul / pexels

The White House urged Google, Microsoft and other major U.S. tech companies to increase access to state-funded software that helps Russians bypass online censorship, Reuters reported Thursday.

In response to Moscow's growing crackdown on wartime dissent, the U.S. government-backed Open Technology Fund (OTF) has been financing several American firms to offer free virtual private networks (VPNs) to Russians.

OTF president Laura Cunningham told Reuters that the demand for VPNs — used to access blocked websites by masking users' locations — has skyrocketed, driven primarily by users in Russia and Iran.

"For a decade, we routinely supported around nine million VPN users each month, and now that number has more than quadrupled," Cunningham said, estimating that 46 million people a month now rely on U.S.-backed VPNs.

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OTF met with representatives from Amazon Web Services, Google, Microsoft and Cloudflare to encourage them to provide discounted or subsidized server bandwidth for VPN services, according to the report.

“We want to support these additional users, but we don’t have the resources to keep up with this surging demand,” Cunningham said.

A Cloudflare spokesperson said the company was collaborating with researchers to “better document internet shutdowns and censorship,” while other companies did not respond to Reuters’ requests for comment.

U.S. government funding, provided through OTF, has become crucial for VPN providers operating in Russia, as sanctions have increased costs and reduced revenue. Demand for VPNs spiked again this summer as Russian users reported slowdowns on YouTube, seemingly due to state efforts to restrict access to the platform.

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