



Mr. Randy Boissonnault, M.P.  
Special Advisor to the Prime Minister on LGBTQ2 Issues  
Member of Parliament for Edmonton Centre  
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Via e-mail: [randy.boissonnault@parl.gc.ca](mailto:randy.boissonnault@parl.gc.ca)

3 May 2018

Dear Mr. Boissonnault:

I am writing to you in your capacity as Special Advisor to the Prime Minister on LGBTQ2 Issues on behalf of [Citizen Lab](#), an interdisciplinary research laboratory based at the University of Toronto's Munk School of Global Affairs.

Our team was encouraged to see your comments yesterday on Canada's critical role in advancing LGBTQ2 rights worldwide. We appreciate your statement that your "work with and for LGBTQ2 communities takes place within the government's broad commitment to make public policies that work for everyone," and that "[a]s Canada's government strives to promote diversity and inclusion here at home, it is only logical that we endorse these same values on the world stage." We agree on the importance of ensuring that Canada's diplomatic and international assistance efforts are aligned with our human rights values at home, particularly those expressed in the Canadian *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.

In this light, we are seeking your urgent response to a report released last week by the Citizen Lab called [Planet Netsweeper](#), which was covered in an extensive segment on CBC's [The National](#), in [print](#), and in various international publications. In summary:



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- Our report concerns Netsweeper Inc., a privately owned company based in Waterloo, Ontario that sells Internet filtering technology. Netsweeper's products are used both in private institutional settings as well as to block content by consumer-facing Internet Service Providers from the public at large. Our report concerns this latter form of systemic, state-wide censorship in authoritarian regimes and countries with problematic human rights records.
- Our research demonstrates that Netsweeper's technology is being used to systematically facilitate censorship of content protected under international human rights law in ten countries of interest (Afghanistan, Bahrain, India, Kuwait, Pakistan, Qatar, Somalia, Sudan, UAE, and Yemen).
- **In particular, we demonstrate that Netsweeper's technology is being used to censor expression and block access to information related to LGBTQ2 issues, with serious human rights implications.** In some countries, this includes blocking of Google searches for LGBTQ2-related keywords and several instances of miscategorization of non-pornographic LGBTQ2 content as "pornography." Additionally, Netsweeper offers a predefined filtering category to its users designated as "Alternative Lifestyles," which appears to block non-pornographic LGBTQ2 content, including the websites of civil rights and advocacy organizations, HIV/AIDS prevention organizations, and LGBTQ2 media and cultural groups.
- Our research also demonstrates that Netsweeper's technology is being used to block access in these ten countries to a wide range of other digital content protected by international legal frameworks, including religious content in Bahrain, political campaigns in the United Arab Emirates, and media websites in Yemen.
- These uses of Netsweeper filtering products implicate the internationally protected rights to freedom of opinion and expression ([UDHR Art. 19](#), [ICCPR Art. 19](#)), the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds ([ICCPR Art. 19\(2\)](#)), and non-discrimination ([UDHR Art. 7](#), [ICCPR Art. 26](#)), as well as minority rights ([ICCPR Art. 27](#)) protections. None of the filtering practices that we documented in our report appear permissible under [ICCPR Art. 19\(3\)](#). Such uses of Netsweeper's filtering technology are also inconsistent with Canadian [Charter](#) values based on freedom of opinion, expression, thought, conscience, religion, as well as freedom of the press and other media communication



protected under section 2; life, liberty, and security of the person protected under section 7; and broad equality protections under section 15.

Our report also details the various forms of support Netsweeper has received from Canadian government entities. For example, the company has been a direct recipient of financial support from the National Research Council and a participant in government-organized trade missions. Additionally, in July 2017, Export Development Canada [provided a guarantee](#) for the Royal Bank of Canada's financing of Netsweeper's sale to Bahrain.

In response to the report, a spokesperson for Global Affairs [stated](#) that Canada would "continue to engage with our partners on the review of this type of technology." Unfortunately, the statement made no concrete commitment regarding the presence of Netsweeper technology in the identified countries. Further, the statement did not address past government support for Netsweeper, nor did it commit to advancing human rights due diligence or corporate social responsibility practices in this area.

As Special Advisor to the Prime Minister on LGBTQ2 Issues, we believe that your voice can have a real impact on this issue. In your speech yesterday, you said that Canada "must commit to 'do no harm,'" but that we should not confuse doing no harm and doing nothing at all. In this case, Canada has done worse than nothing: it has been financially and politically complicit in the censorship of LGBTQ2 voices, essential health information, political speech, and journalistic expression abroad. In our report, we propose a series of [concrete steps](#) for how Canada's foreign policy can better align with our responsibility to affirm, protect, and respect human rights. Additionally, we suggest that Canada consider developing specific norms related to the impact of Internet filtering and other dual-use technologies at the Equal Rights Coalition Global Conference on LGBTQ2 Human Rights and Inclusive Development, which is co-chaired by Canada and taking place in Vancouver in August 2018.

Canada has taken concrete action in the past to protect the rights of LGBTQ2 individuals around the world, such as welcoming persecuted gay and bisexual men from Chechnya. The Government has also made an international [pledge](#) to "condemn violence and discrimination that target individuals based on their sexual orientation and gender identity." I hope you will act to maintain this commitment when it comes to Netsweeper and similar dual-use technologies that are used to silence LGBTQ2 individuals, put them at risk of harm, and denigrate their identities -- all of which contradict Canada's human rights commitments.



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I would welcome the opportunity to speak with you directly regarding the policy implications of our research findings, and our recommendations for better protecting the rights of LGBTQ2 persons in the digital age.

Sincerely,

Ronald J. Deibert, OOnt

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