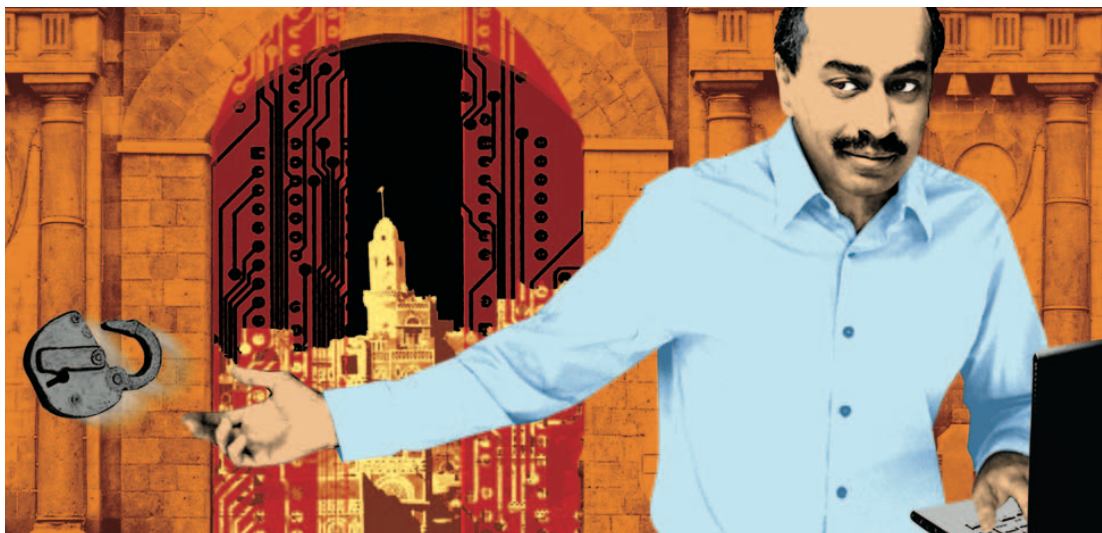


NAME: Walid Al-Saqaf

LOCATION: Örebro, Sweden.
Al-Saqaf is originally from Sana'a, Yemen.

BACKGROUND: A 2010 TEDGlobal Fellow and the former editor in chief of the *Yemen Times*, Al-Saqaf created Alkasir (alkasir.com), a free, downloadable software program that bypasses government censorship of Facebook in Syria, BBC News in China, and hundreds of other informational and social networking websites in 20 countries worldwide.



Cyber Superhero

Walid Al-Saqaf fights for truth, justice—and the right to use Facebook

About Alkasir: “I started Alkasir as a project for the Middle East after my own website, Yemen Portal [a news aggregator], was blocked in 2008. The Arab world is one of the areas where Internet freedom is most suppressed. So I gave the software an Arabic name that means ‘the circumventor.’ The idea behind Alkasir is to promote freedom of expression and access to information that’s crucial for democracy. Another major feature of the software is its ability to track and map when and where websites are censored. Travelers can use Alkasir by saving the software on their USB flash drive and taking it wherever they go.”

The inspiration: “My father [Dr. Abdulaziz Al-Saqaf, the founder and former editor in chief of the *Yemen Times*] was killed in a mysterious accident in 1999. He was one of the strongest advocates of freedom of the press and freedom of expression in Yemen. He exposed hidden stories—human rights violations, fraud, and issues of corruption—that most people don’t dare to reveal. His were big shoes to fill. I took over the newspaper just after he died. I had an IT [information technology] background, so I moved promotion of free speech from print to online. I believe we need more transparency and tolerance. One of the major necessities for lasting peace is to learn and understand the opinions of others. To simply disregard or ignore opposing ideas is often a recipe for violence or war.”

You should know: “Software products produced in Western countries are often to blame for censorship. That’s ironic, because we know the West promotes democracy. But SmartFilter and Websense are programs that—although they are intended to protect minors from accessing certain websites—actually have been utilized by authoritarian governments to suppress free speech. There’s a website called OpenNet Initiative (opennet.net) that has done extensive research about which software programs are used in this way around the world. Unless people understand what is being censored, how, and where, there will be little hope of fighting it.”

How to help: “First and foremost, know that freedom of expression and information is a universal human right. The next step is to understand that freedom is taken for granted in the West. That’s unfortunately not the case in Arab nations, China, and many other countries. So if you could try to reach out to activists to encourage them, even with an email saying, ‘We are with you, we support you,’ that would be quite helpful. Sometimes a small word of encouragement goes a long way.” **A**