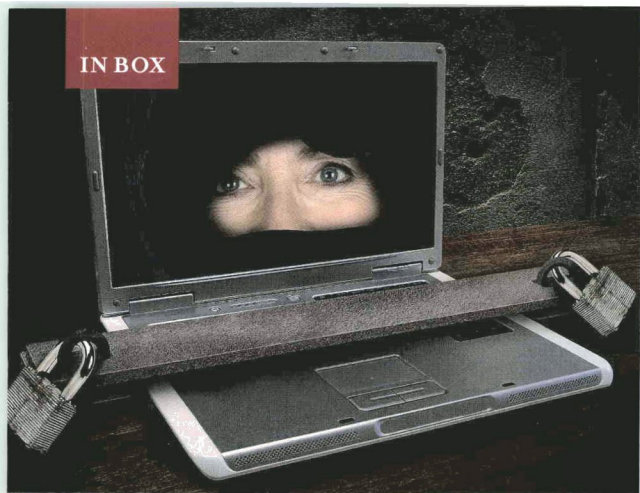


IN BOX



UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES DEPT.

## FREEDOM.GOV

WHY WASHINGTON'S SUPPORT FOR ONLINE DEMOCRACY IS  
THE WORST THING EVER TO HAPPEN TO THE INTERNET.

BY EVGENY MOROZOV

**A** YEAR AGO THIS JANUARY, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton took the stage at Washington's Newseum to tout an idea that her State Department had become very taken with: the Internet's ability to spread freedom and democracy. "We want to put these tools in the hands of people who will use them to advance democracy and human rights," she told the crowd, drawn from both the buttoned-up Beltway and chronically underdressed Silicon Valley.

Call it the Internet Freedom Agenda: the notion that technology can succeed in opening up the world where offline efforts have failed. That Barack Obama's administration would embrace such an idea was not surprising; the U.S. president was elected in part on the strength of his online organizing and fundraising juggernaut. The 2009 anti-government protests in Iran, Moldova, and China's Xinjiang region—all abetted to varying degrees by communications technology—further supported the notion that the Internet was, as Clinton said in her speech, "a critical tool for advancing democracy."

A year later, however, the Internet Freedom Agenda can boast of precious few real accomplishments; if anything, it looks more and more like George W. Bush's lower-tech "Freedom Agenda," his unrealized second-term push for democratization across the broader Middle East. Clinton's effort has certainly generated plenty of positive headlines and gimmicky online competitions, but not much else. In July, the *New York Times Magazine* lavished almost 5,000 words on a profile of Jared Cohen and Alec Ross, the State Department's digital-diplomacy wunderkinds. But it's hard to say what exactly they succeeded in doing, beyond getting in trouble for tweeting from Syria about how delicious the frappuccinos were. The only big move that the State Department did make was granting \$1.5 million to Falun Gong-affiliated technologists based in the United States to help circumvent censorship—a

step that instead angered Falun Gong's numerous supporters in Washington, who had originally asked for \$4 million.

Elsewhere, the State Department's enthusiasm for technology has surpassed its understanding of it. Early last year, in an effort to help Iranian dissidents, the U.S. government granted an export license to the company behind Haystack, a privacy-protecting and censorship-circumventing technology then being touted in the media as a revolutionary tool for Internet freedom. But Haystack proved to be poorly designed and massively insecure in its early tests in Iran, putting its users—the democracy advocates it was supposed to protect—in even greater danger. It was summarily shut down in September. Since October 2009, the State Department has been working to launch an anonymous SMS tip line to help law-abiding Mexicans share information about drug cartels. Like Haystack, it attracted plenty of laudatory coverage, but it succumbed to (still ongoing) delays when it ran into a predictable problem: Ensuring the anonymity of text messages is not easy anywhere, let alone when dealing with Ciudad Juárez's corrupt police force.

But the Internet Freedom Agenda's woes extend far beyond a few botched projects. The State Department's online democratizing efforts have fallen prey to the same problems that plagued Bush's Freedom Agenda. By aligning themselves with Internet companies and organizations, Clinton's digital diplomats have convinced their enemies abroad that Internet freedom is another Trojan horse for American imperialism.

Clinton went wrong from the outset by violating the first rule of promoting Internet freedom: Don't talk about promoting Internet freedom. Her Newseum speech was full of analogies to the Berlin Wall and praise for Twitter revolutions—vocabulary straight out of the Bush handbook. To governments already nervous about a wired citizenry, this sounded less like freedom of the Internet than freedom via the Internet: not just a call for free speech online, but a bid to overthrow them by way of cyberspace.

The lessons of the first Freedom Agenda should have been instructive. After youth-movement-driven "color revolutions" swept Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan from 2003 to 2005, Bush openly

ILLUSTRATION BY STEVE DUPLIN FOR FP

bragged about his support for such groups and vowed to help the new pro-democracy wave go global. The backlash was immediate. Countries like Russia, which had previously been relatively blasé about such activism, panicked, blocking foreign funding to civil society groups and NGOs and creating their own pro-government youth movements and civil society organizations. The end result in many countries was a net loss for democracy and freedom.

The Internet Freedom Agenda has similarly backfired. The state of web freedom in countries like China, Iran, and Russia was far from perfect before Clinton's initiative, but at least it was an issue independent of those countries' fraught relations with the United States. Google, Facebook, and Twitter were hardly unabashed defenders of free speech, but they were nevertheless emissaries, however accidentally, of a more open and democratic vision of the Internet. Authoritarian governments didn't treat them as a threat, viewing them largely as places where their citizens chose to check their email, post status updates, and share pasta recipes. Most governments, China being the obvious exception, did not bother to build any barriers to them.

But as the State Department forged closer ties with Silicon Valley, it vastly complicated the tech companies' inadvertent democracy promotion. The department organized private dinners for Internet CEOs and shuttled them around the world as part of "technology delegations." Cohen, who recently left Foggy Bottom to work for Google, called Facebook "one of the most organic tools for democracy promotion the world has ever seen" and famously asked Twitter to delay planned maintenance work to keep the service up and running during Iran's 2009 Green Revolution.

Today, foreign governments see the writing on the virtual wall. Democratic and authoritarian states alike are now seeking "information sovereignty" from American companies, especially those perceived as being in bed with the U.S. government. Internet search, social networking, and even email are increasingly seen as strategic industries that need to be protected from foreign control. Russia is toying with spending \$100 million to build a domestic alternative to Google. Iranian authorities are considering a similar idea after banning Gmail last February, and last summer launched their own Facebook clone called Velayatmadaran, named after followers of the *velayat*, or supreme leader. Even Turkey, a U.S. ally, has plans to provide a government-run email address to every Turkish citizen to lessen the population's dependence on U.S. providers.

Where the bureaucrats and diplomats who touted the Internet Freedom Agenda went wrong was in thinking that Washington could work with Silicon Valley without people thinking that Silicon Valley was a tool of Washington. They bought into the technologists' view of the Internet as an unbridled, limitless space that connects people without regard to borders or physical constraints. At its best, that remains true, but not when governments get involved.

The Internet is far too valuable to become an agent of Washington's digital diplomats. The idea that the U.S. government can advance the cause of Internet freedom by loudly affirming its commitment to it—especially when it hypocritically attempts to shut down projects like WikiLeaks—is delusional. The best way to promote the goals behind the Internet Freedom Agenda may be not to have an agenda at all.

**FOREIGN POLICY** contributing editor *Eugeny Morozov* is author of *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom*, from which this essay is adapted.

## THE LIST

## NEW KIDS ON THE BLOCK

MEET THE FOREIGN-POLICY POWERS  
FOR THE NEW GOP CONGRESS.

BY JOSH ROGIN



**SEN. MARK KIRK:** A Navy reservist from Illinois who once worked at the State Department, Kirk might have the best foreign-policy chops of any new senator. As a member of the House of Representatives, he co-sponsored several bills calling for harsh sanctions on Iran's petroleum sector, large parts of which eventually found their way into the bill signed into law by President Barack Obama last July.



**REP. ILEANA ROS-LEHTINEN:** The new chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee has expressed skepticism about U.S. funding for the United Nations and the Palestinian Authority. Hailing from southern Florida, she's even more hawkish on Cuba, having once called for the assassination of Fidel Castro. "She's no Dick Lugar," said one House aide, referring to her temperate Senate counterpart. "She and her staff often go for the jugular."



**REP. HOWARD "BUCK" MCKEON:** Even before taking over the House Armed Services Committee, the California congressman was pushing for higher defense budgets. And with a reportedly close relationship with Gen. David Petraeus, McKeon is well placed to be a wrench in the works as Obama tries to stick to his planned July drawdown of U.S. troops from Afghanistan.

**SEN. MARCO RUBIO:** Of all the freshman senators, the spotlight shines brightest on this ambitious young Cuban-American from Florida, a Tea Party icon. And he's no fan of the president's foreign policy.

"The Obama doctrine of appeasing our enemies, alienating our allies, and delegating our national security to the international community may have won President Obama a Nobel Peace Prize, but it has made the world a more volatile and dangerous place," he said during the campaign.

