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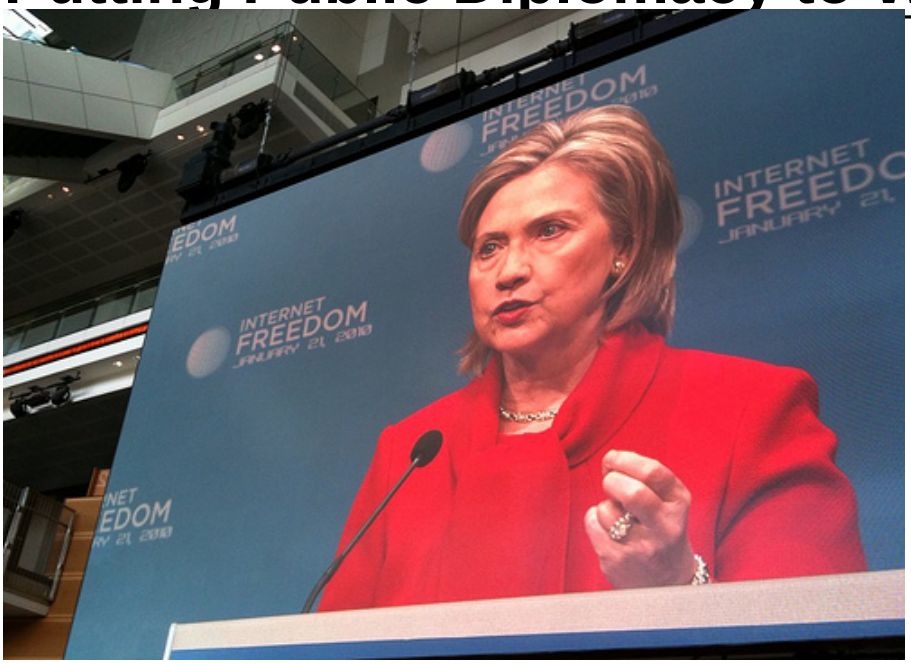
Putting Public Diplomacy to Work For



APDS Blogger: Melanie Ciolek

In her time as Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton has made supporting internet freedom a core tenet of U.S. foreign policy. Two major speeches, months of debate, and a wave of Middle East protests making use of online technologies later, it's clear that discussion about internet freedom as a U.S. foreign policy priority is here to stay. What has been a less frequent topic of discussion is how the internet freedom debate connects to U.S. public diplomacy.

In the most recent speech, Clinton made her most compelling case yet for why the U.S. should promote the "freedom to connect." By explicitly positioning the freedom to express oneself online as an extension of the right to do so offline, the emphasis on internet freedom fits squarely alongside long-standing U.S. foreign policy on promoting human rights.

Whether the U.S. should adopt such a strong position upholding internet freedom has been debated since Clinton's January 2010 speech. But the recent events in the Middle East and Clinton's dedication to the issue have only solidified the notion that internet freedom is "a big deal." As a result, the most prominent issue in the discourse about internet freedom and U.S. foreign policy has become the "how."

Most recently, the conversation about promoting internet freedom has focused on U.S. government support for the development of technologies that will protect users from online surveillance or enable them to access blocked websites—but as Clinton (and others) have quipped, "there is no app for that." The Washington Post recently reported that the State

Department supports approximately a dozen “Web circumvention technologies,” including The Tor Project and UltraReach. At the same time, some have said that the funds allocated to the State Department to facilitate the development of these tools have not been contracted out fast enough. Critics in Congress are calling for State to transfer some of the funds to the Broadcasting Board of Governors, arguing that their aims are more in line with those of the Voice of America and other U.S.-supported networks.

On the other hand, there are reports that some activists developing these technologies would be reluctant to accept funding from the State Department, citing concerns about how well the bureaucracy could cultivate the development of these tools. This is all aside from the considerable political complications U.S. diplomats face when they consider partnering with activists vs. governments that have been U.S. allies. The ongoing protests in Bahrain and Yemen create situations with far different implications for U.S. involvement than the one currently unfolding in Libya.

For the moment, the desire to develop the technologies to advance internet freedom seems greater than the State Department’s ability to facilitate their realization. But even as Clinton seeks to remind Congress and others that there are no easy solutions, State should consider the tools of public diplomacy at its disposal to promote the values of an open internet.

The State Department has frequently used its public diplomacy efforts to promote human rights-related issues, whether by bringing journalists to the U.S. to promote best practices, sending speakers abroad to discuss the struggles the U.S. has faced with civil rights, or recognizing the work of individuals who advocate on behalf of women’s rights. State should also invest in similar approaches for its efforts to cultivate respect for preserving online freedoms around the globe, and not just in tools that address a fraction of the issues at stake.

Perhaps most importantly, the State Department should be engaging in global and local dialogues about the ever-evolving issues related to internet freedom. In her most recent speech, Clinton called for a “serious conversation about the principles that will guide us, what rules exist and should not exist, and why, what behaviors should be encouraged or discouraged and how.” Clinton commended the work being done by the Global Network Initiative, but the U.S. should also consider using its diplomats on the ground to engage in these types of conversations on a more local level.

While it’s true that “monitoring and responding to threats to internet freedom,” has become part of the portfolio of U.S. diplomats, these threats sometimes come from parliaments and policies rather than domestic intelligence agents. As Leslie Harris and Cynthia Wong of the Center for Democracy & Technology have pointed out, the issues posed by countries like Iran and China “are not the beginning and the end of internet freedom.” They underscore that policy choices made by countries such as Brazil, India, and others will determine the kind of Internet that billions of users will have access to. When judicial rulings in democracies like Turkey continue to ban access to YouTube and other websites, what will be the result when similar debates arise elsewhere? If the U.S. does not make a concerted effort to engage with government officials, media, corporations, and other actors involved in the Internet policy discussions in these countries now, it will miss an opportunity to be a collaborative partner on these issues. Ideally, internet freedom would be part of every embassy’s integrated public diplomacy strategy, from the places where it is most threatened to where there are initial signs of concern.

Effectively leveraging public diplomacy approaches in the efforts to promote policies that

protect a free and open internet will be challenging and finding ways to involve U.S. private sector actors will be critical. As Internet analyst Evgeny Morozov and others have pointed out, U.S. companies that help restrict internet freedom put Clinton and the State Department in an awkward position. In order for these efforts to have any hope of succeeding, the U.S. must pay close attention to how its own government respects the values it promotes abroad. As Morozov has noted "the inherent contractions between aspiring to export internet freedom abroad while limiting it at home," including efforts to access the Twitter accounts of individuals associated with Wikileaks and increasing domestic surveillance, pose a major issue for U.S. government credibility on internet freedom. Domestic U.S. government actions related to internet freedom must look to be an asset to its public diplomacy, rather than a liability.

Public diplomacy should be a greater part of the conversation about promoting internet freedom because of its potential to cultivate environments where it will flourish rather than be stymied. In fact, public diplomacy approaches that are focused on medium and long-term outcomes are appropriate for these issues, which Clinton herself has said, "will be measured in years, not seconds." This is not to suggest that public diplomacy alone will be sufficient to realize the ambitious goals Secretary Clinton has laid out for internet freedom, but the conversation about how to achieve these ends (and the corresponding budget appropriations) needs to encompass more than the latest technology that might buy activists more time.

Image: U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton delivers remarks on Internet Freedom at the Newseum in Washington, DC, January 21, 2010. Courtesy U.S. Dept. of State.

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