

Nov 04, 2016 by [Tori Horton](#)

United States Wages 21st Century Statecraft Part I: What Does This Actually Mean? ^[1]

Since 2008, under the leadership of the Obama Administration and direction of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the United States has actively advocated for a more networked society. The U.S. Department of State has coined this initiative, 21st Century Statecraft. It is defined as “complementing traditional foreign policy tools with newly innovated and adapted instruments of statecraft that fully leverage the networks, technologies, and demographics of our interconnected world.” In other words, the State Department has declared the intent to use Internet and the opportunities created from this new open communication platform, to leverage U.S. national interests on a global scale.

On the U.S. Department of State website, 21st Century Statecraft is now listed among the twenty-seven highlighted policy issues. Part of this initiative includes a commitment to freedom of expression, not just for the citizens of the United States, but for people everywhere. By publicly disclosing this objective, the State Department has clearly signaled intent to focus political pressure on countries currently pursuing censorship policies.

In addition, the State Department has opened the door to support activists and public diplomacy endeavors focused on open online communication. Through these public statements, the State Department is able to help activists without being compromised by clandestine support of an open Internet and therefore losing trust with other nations through secret activities. A clear policy articulation allows the United States to outline policy decisions while maintaining a level of transparency when pursuing open communication internationally.

The following is part one of a two-part blog post examining the high-level implications of declaring U.S. policy to make the Internet open, noting where these aspirations compete with security. Part two will further explore specific initiatives undertaken by the State Department to use the Internet as a means to further its democratic agenda.

Part I

During the George W. Bush Administration, the State Department began to experiment with new technology and certainly recognized the need to rapidly respond to world events online as well as monitor and participate in public forum conversations. However, Secretary Clinton has dramatically expanded the role of new technology in the State Department and, although not termed 21st Century Statecraft from the start, Clinton has championed the idea to harness new technology in favor of U.S. policies. Her leadership, along with the countless individual “new media advocates” from within the State Department, has led to significant policy changes and on-the-ground international involvement by the department.

In addition to high-level commitments, the United States is providing support for activists writing about democracy in closed nations. Details of these programs will be highlighted in the following article, although it is sufficient at this point to say that by assisting advocates working within censored nations, the United States is applying multiple pressure points to an already sensitive issue.

Back in 2010, Clinton highlighted Four Freedoms outlined by Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1941, and added to them a fifth one: the freedom to connect. From this speech, Clinton acknowledged that pursuing the “freedom to connect” through online technology as a U.S. policy priority may politicize the access to information. However, she likewise noted that failure to do so may limit the access of information available in repressive countries. As Clinton stated, “On their own, new technologies do not take sides in the struggle for freedom and progress, but the United States does. [...] And we recognize that the world’s information infrastructure will become what we and others make of it.” To this end, the U.S. is stepping up, regardless of the way it may put closed governments on edge, for the purpose of being first in the space and shaping global online conversations. The use of technology to promote an open space for dialogue and collaboration, with the ability to connect people from around the world fosters a robust aspect for global civil society. The State Department further backs this theory, with its website noting that “A robust civil society sector supports the pursuit of many of America’s foreign policy goals.”

Combining internal and external pressure points clearly has the ability to influence change as was perhaps best demonstrated in the Middle East earlier this spring. While the United States was by no means responsible for the political unrest that eventually brought about demonstrations for change, many of the Egyptian bloggers and activist leaders had at least some education and training paid for by the United States.

Unfortunately, along with liberation from long-standing dictators in Egypt and Tunisia, this push for change through open communication prompted even tighter controls from within closed regimes such as Yemen, Syria, China, Iran, and North Korea to prevent similar protests. By making “the freedom to connect” a political calling card, the United States provides other nations the opportunity to justify closing national access to yet another Western form of cultural imperialism, thus further isolating citizens.

Of course, in addition to dealing with the complexities of pushing policy objectives for other nations through formal and informal networks, the United States is likewise forced to reconcile these issues internally when values such as freedom of expression conflict with other values such as privacy, corporate enterprise, and intellectual property rights.

As Rebecca MacKinnon notes in a July 2011 Global TED Talk, *Let’s Take Back the Internet*, “We have this situation where private companies are applying censorship standards that are often quite arbitrary.” She supports her theory with three positions: 1) censorship is being applied in ways that are more narrow than democratic free speech standards, 2) censorship standards are being placed in response to censorship regimes that do not reflect the consensus of those governed, or 3) the standards being imposed are by those who don’t have government authority over those to whom the content most applies.

It’s clearly messy now that major communication platforms are large enough to legitimately police information in ways that nations were only previously capable; and yet private corporations clearly have different motivational factors at work when dictating what content is

made available online and by whom.

MacKinnon summarizes, “Even in democratic societies today, we do not have good answers for how you balance the need for security and law enforcement on one hand and protection of civil liberties and free speech on the other in our digital networks.”

In truth, for the 21st Century Statecraft to be successful, it is not enough to declare a commitment to freedom of expression as has been previously defined in our open democratic society. The United States needs a better articulated vision of 21st Century Statecraft that includes *how* decisions around transparency and censorship are made, as well as *who* is able to make those decisions.

If the United States really does wish to lead in this campaign, these criteria must be set with the consent from multiple stakeholders, including its own citizens, other nations, and private global communication corporations. It is a dialogue that needs citizen participation and activism the world over to actually build legitimacy and respect. In short, 21st Century Statecraft must become a truly global public diplomacy campaign.
