THE TANGLED WEB OF "INTERNET FREEDOM"
A reflection on the 2012 Milton Wolf Seminar by Roy Revie

Recognition of the powerful and disruptive roles which Internet-based communication (particularly social and new media) play in the contemporary social and political environment underlay the 2012 Milton Wolf Seminar discussions. New information flows and ways of communicating and organizing challenge accepted political practices, the tenability of old norms, and the power of state actors who rely on a privileged role in the information-space. Yet there is a concern that the novelty of changing information flows eclipses traditional realpolitik issues of power and sovereignty. Discourse risks being swept up in a whirlwind of the “New.” Policy is driven by hype; and analysis, by going along for the ride, is impoverished.

This risk is especially strong in the area of foreign policy. The focus of the seminar on political change and the new media environment can be seen as an attempt to find some analytical solid ground on which to build new understandings of the dynamics of political change in the Internet Age. In this respect, it was discussions on the role of Internet in international relations that I found most intriguing, particularly the Web’s role in contemporary US foreign policy towards authoritarian states. In this essay, I would like to tackle some issues raised in discussion on the State Department’s “Internet Freedom” program, as outlined at the Seminar led by Sarah Labowitz, policy advisor to the Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. Specifically, I would like to problematize some of the assertions made from the US-perspective during the seminar and elsewhere, argue that they inhibit satisfactory international debate on the issues, and discuss how they relate to the fear of a “soft war” being waged via the Internet. I maintain that a more nuanced and honest understanding of the challenges posed by the Internet to international relations is required, and that this understanding must be based on a more robust analysis of state power online.

Under Secretary of State Hilary Clinton’s leadership, the US State Department’s "Internet Freedom" agenda has taken center stage in US foreign policy. While the US uses the Internet as a tool to pursue many different foreign policy goals, Labowitz explained that Internet Freedom should be seen as a distinct policy priority. Internet Freedom, as distinct from the use of the Web for public diplomacy or public affairs, refers to a "principled defense of the Internet as an open public space" and the support of the idea of "a single Internet." The policy asserts the "freedom to connect," defined as "the freedom of expression, association, and assembly online, rooted in existing human rights norms." The Internet Freedom strand of State Department policy sees the Internet as a space, not as a tool, and argues that this space must be protected and promoted. Unfortunately, this conception of the Internet as a space is highly problematic. It systematically ignores the contradictions and challenges of new online communication and presents a simplistic conception of the debate. This precludes serious engagement and international debate on a
number of important issues. The problematic assertion of a *distinct* Internet Freedom policy, the notion of “a single Internet,” and the application of existing norms to new situations impoverish debate about the politics of the Internet at the international level.

Most immediate is the problem of attempting to section off the Internet Freedom Program from other elements of State Department activity. An understanding of Internet Freedom as a policy of space preservation distinct from the use of the Internet as a tool for foreign policy is simply not tenable. In her speeches on the subject, Secretary Clinton mentions a number of “hard” foreign policy priorities. For example, her [2010 speech](https://www.state.gov/secretary/2010s/2010/201012/166597.htm) was prefaced with a mention of the "Voice Act" which authorized funding of Farsi language propaganda channels and granted $20 million for the development and distribution of anti-censorship tools for Iranians and "internet-based education programs and other exchanges with Americans online." Under these circumstances, it is simply not realistic to expect analysts (let alone foreign states!) to accept this distinction. As a policy priority, internet freedom may represent a dispassionate concern with the space alone, but, as an institution, the US State Department routinely uses the Internet as a tool to achieve foreign policy priorities. This point should hardly need to be argued; the purpose of the State Department is to spend American money to achieve foreign policy goals. We should not expect it to do otherwise.

In order to talk properly about the Internet and foreign policy we must understand how it is currently used, to base debate in fact rather than in rhetoric. Internet Freedom is not simply a debating position for the State Department. It is something State attempts to facilitate through the provision of circumvention and other anti-censorship and digital security tools. They also provide training to foreign citizens in more-repressive Internet environments, particularly to activists (over 7,500 undefined ‘activists’ had received such training as of [March 2012](https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/rlsdo/2012/23012.htm)). State also works with American tech companies to leverage Internet tools for foreign policy goals. We can see this alliance developing through in the increasingly revolving door between Foggy Bottom and Silicon Valley and through the partnership with Google, YouTube, Facebook, and others in the [Alliance for Youth Movements](https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/rlsdo/2012/23012.htm). AYM (now rebranded as Movements.org) is a networking group for global youth activist groups that has received State Department funding. It is complemented by events like "Tech Camp," which trains activists and civil society groups in the use of online tools for organizing and protest. Given this multiplicity of ways in which the State Department is using the Internet for foreign policy goals, the notion of a separate Internet Freedom policy is a deceit that renders the debate about the role of the Internet in international relations impossible.

The second problematic issue is the concept of the "single internet." The Internet is *notionally* an open, free, and equal space. Yet, an analysis of traffic, content, and ownership suggests that hierarchies of power and influence have developed on top of this framework, such that it has been said that the Internet forms part of the *American* political space.\(^1\) This

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is underlined by the British academic Daniel McCarthy, who illustrates how US discourse on the development of the Internet has consistently used the naturalized idea of the “single Internet” and human rights rhetoric to subjugate concerns about national sovereignty or cultural sensitivity. In this light, ideas of the Internet as “the public space of the 21 Century – the world’s town square, classroom, marketplace” (Clinton’s 2011 speech) must be critically challenged: the world may come to congregate, learn, and trade but it is within a system where the US exerts disproportionate power. From the pressure placed on WikiLeaks through US-based internet giants like PayPal, to the potential extradition to the US for copyright offenses of UK citizen Richard Dwyer, who has never been to the US or even used a server based there, a political-economy of the Internet demonstrates that the US maintains a powerful grip on the Web’s future role in international relations. The call for a “single Internet” on these terms, again, masks a refusal to recognize serious issues of power and sovereignty, and conduct the debate about the future of the Internet in a productive and open manner.

The third way in which the Internet Freedom agenda masks live political issues can be seen in the assertion that we do not need new norms to govern online communication, that the "existing ones apply equally online as they do offline," and that we should not allow authoritarian governments the "opportunity to re-litigate these norms." I wholeheartedly agree with the later point; yet we cannot simply transpose old norms to, in a sense, pre-litigate communication online. Norms are a function of the architecture of the system in which they are practiced and are firmly rooted in the political, moral, and structural contingencies of their conception. To simply posit the applicability of existing norms to a new situation is insufficient. It seems uncontroversial to say that the existing freedoms of expression, of assembly, and association apply to the Internet. From a purely ethical standpoint, I would agree; but the American state does not operate in the domain of ethics. To assert the applicability of old norms in new situations is problematic both practically and politically. How, for example, do we reconcile freedom of expression with other norms such as the right to a fair trial when the free flow of vast quantities of information can quickly prejudice potential jurors? New situations and new capabilities demand a re-evaluation of norms as they produce new situations and new dilemmas. To treat the debate as settled is analytically sloppy; and to expect rival nations to do so is fantasy.

This look at State Department policy (and we haven’t even touched upon US Military policy or the role of US-based companies in mediating Web experiences) places in its proper context Professor Monroe Price’s account of the Iranian regime’s claim that it is a victim of a "soft war" waged through the Internet. It is easy to shrug off these accusations as paranoia on the part of the Islamic Republic; but when looked at holistically, the US Government’s leveraging of internet technology for foreign policy goals is understandably threatening to foreign governments. During the Seminar, Price described the Iranian view

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2 McCarthy, Daniel. (2011) "Open Networks and the Open Door: American Foreign Policy and the Narration of the Internet." Foreign Policy Analysis. (7): 89-111

3 This quote is an excerpt from a presentation made during the 2012 Milton Wolf Seminar by Sarah Labowitz, policy advisor to Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. March 26, 2012.

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of “soft war” as a fear of "psychological warfare...regime change without military force," the main aim being to "force the system to disintegrate from within" through challenging the ideas, identity, and culture of a foreign country.

There are two levels on which the Iranian regime can hold a "cultural NATO" responsible for undermining Iranian sovereignty and promoting destabilization, and thus justify crackdowns and limitations on internet freedom. At the most obvious level, they can point to direct attempts by the US to interfere in the political situation in Iran via the Internet. These attempts range from engagement with youth activists to direct intervention by the State Department in keeping Twitter online during the 2009 post-election protests. An act that, as an Iranian activist told me, "killed social media in Iran." The immediate response to such an accusation seems to be "stop interfering." Interference undermines internet users in repressive countries; activists do not want it; and it creates an Internet arms spending-race on repressive (and frequently Western-made) technology. Furthermore, as I have argued throughout, recognition is needed that these activities are—correctly, I might add—perceived as a part of the way the Internet is used for foreign policy purposes.

The second level on which repressive regimes can justify a backlash against the Internet is by arguing that the Internet, through its very essence, undermines cultural, social, and political sovereignty and order. Notably, this concern is not exclusive to repressive regimes. In Western liberal democracies the Internet has had such effects; and the ways that these governments have dealt with it also remains a matter of concern. The Internet's ability to bring people together, to let them share information and ideas is its greatest power, where it is had the most impact. This is exactly how Sarah Labowitz defined the power of the distinct "Internet Freedom" program. The problems come when states attempts to wield this power—when the Internet is used as a tool, no matter what the accompanying rhetoric says. During the opening session of the Seminar, Iranian academic, Babak Rahimi argued that the Internet's greatest influence takes place through its role as a “social space.” In Iran, it has already created new tastes, new ways of acting. He underlined the need to "enable social spaces to grow and perhaps lead to political participation and new ways of looking at politics in authoritarian contexts." Rahimi's statement emphasizes that the Internet's greatest ability to enact change rests upon its organic nature.

The Internet creates opportunities for new communicative forms, new ways of doing politics that lie outside of politico-economic determinism. In order to temper the ad hoc claiming of regulatory space by governments, the assertion of power on the fly, and the fear of the Internet being used as a tool of foreign intervention (which is perhaps one of the biggest threats to its use for domestic change), what is needed is an honest assessment of where power lies on the Web. In short, we need to recognize that the Internet throws up many problems for notions of freedom, rights, and sovereignty. This year's Seminar provided a great place from which to get started on producing a discourse aimed at working through these issues rather than foreclosing debate.
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About the 2012 Milton Wolf Seminar

Launched in 2001, the Milton Wolf Seminar Series aims to deal with developing issues in diplomacy and journalism – both broadly defined. Using case studies such as Hungary, Iran, Syria, Egypt, and Tunisia, the 2012 Milton Wolf Seminar, Transitions Transformed: Ideas of Information and Democracy Post-2011 explored the evolving relationship between media and democratic transition in light of rapid technological change and the shifting structure and dynamics of the international communication system. The seminar was jointly organized by the Center for Global Communication Studies (CGCS) at the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg School for Communication, The American Austrian Foundation (AAF), and the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna (DA).

More information about this and previous seminars is available on the Milton Wolf Seminar website [http://global.asc.upenn.edu] and our Facebook Page [https://www.facebook.com/MiltonWolfSeminar].