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Sent: Wednesday, July 21, 2010 8:50 AM
To: H
Subject: Fw: editorial in today's WaPost

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Sent: Wed Jul 21 08:43:23 2010
Subject: Fw: editorial in today's WaPost

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To: Innovation
Sent: Wed Jul 21 08:38:13 2010
Subject: editorial in today's WaPost

The Washington Post

State Department is taking right steps to foster Internet freedom

Wednesday, July 21, 2010; A18

BILLIONS OF people live in countries where the Internet is not free. Confined behind the elaborate firewalls of authoritarian regimes such as China and Iran, they find their rights to expression threatened online and off -- by elaborate systems of monitoring and censorship and by harsh laws that punish bloggers with imprisonment or even death.

In January, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton spoke powerfully in support of Internet freedom, saying, "We stand for a single Internet where all of humanity has equal access to knowledge and ideas. And we recognize that the world's information infrastructure will become what we and others make of it."

Since then, the State Department has brought the issue of online freedom to the table in its diplomacy around the world and joined with Internet providers and social media companies to foster public-private partnership in Internet freedom. Such collaboration is key, since authoritarian regimes so often contract out the daily work of censorship to private companies.

Congress, too, has showed commitment to openness online, allocating \$35 million in funding between the 2009 and 2010 budgets for work that promotes Internet freedom. This money has yet to be spent, but the State Department finally has sent the names of designated recipients of the 2009 budget's \$5 million in Internet freedom funding to Congress for its approval and soon will begin the process for distributing this year's grants.

As it moves forward on this vital issue, the State Department must carefully determine how best to spend its limited resources. Yes, there is no silver bullet to guarantee freedom on the Internet. But it is possible to do

great good with available funds. Investing in censorship-circumvention techniques like those that powered Tehran's "Twitter revolution" in June 2009 could have a tremendous, measurable impact.

Although this solution is not without its problems -- the best-known provider of this software is the Falun Gong-affiliated Global Internet Freedom consortium, and users behind China's Great Firewall may mistrust the technology of a group their government has banned -- the State Department must seriously consider channeling funds to organizations that have demonstrated great potential to make a difference.

The State Department is attempting a more holistic approach to Internet freedom, spreading funds across a variety of projects. Monitoring the efficacy of chosen solutions and rewarding those that produce results will be essential as this program continues.

A cyberspace without walls or barriers, where people can assemble and express themselves freely, without fear of censorship or imprisonment, will make the world safer for the United States and for democracies everywhere. Continued public-private partnership, prioritization of Internet freedom in diplomacy and the wise deployment of allocated funds will move this ideal closer to reality.

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