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**Sent:** Tuesday, February 15, 2011 2:57 PM  
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<http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2011/02/clinton-on-internet-freedom-living-by-the-standards-we-hold-the-world-to/71297/#>

### **Clinton on Internet Freedom: Living by the Standards We Hold the World To**

**By Bruce Gottlieb**

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has delivered a bold and -- given the context -- important speech today about freedom on the Web (available [here](#)).

It connects the dots between an open Internet, on the one hand, and political liberty, economic prosperity, and the crisis in Egypt and the Middle East, on the other.

Her major premise is that political liberty begets economic prosperity. Her minor premise is that, in the 21st century, protecting Internet openness is essential to maintaining a free society -- and thus is crucial to achieving economic well-being, as well.

The Internet is infinitely adaptable; many countries are betting that it can support a uniquely modern half-open, half-closed hybrid.

For decades, the major premise was up for debate. The dilemma was posed most sharply by the (apparent) flourishing of the Soviet Empire. Was freedom a luxury we could not afford? (Just ask Senator McCarthy.) Even after the Wall fell, there was still great hand-wringing over the rise of Asian city-states like Singapore, which married eye-popping export growth with canings for spitting gum on the street.

The good news is that the bloom is off the rose, on both scores. We live in an era when the social benefits of openness, even with an occasional challenge, seem more persuasive than ever. (See [here](#) for more.)

But for Secretary Clinton to make this point right now -- and center it around the Internet -- takes some chutzpah. Not least because hers is war of choice and not necessity.

To begin with, there is her take on WikiLeaks. It is, at bottom, that whoever stole the cables should be thrown in the brig. But everything else that happened should be regarded as the price of living in a free society. This is entirely fair -- and utterly refreshing, coming from the government official fourth in the line of succession to the President (not to mention the head of the agency most roiled by the cables' release).

More broadly, against a backdrop of overwhelming diplomatic tension about civil protests, she urges the international community to embrace the semi-anarchy of the Internet and social media. Yes, on balance, it looks like things are headed in a good direction, for Egyptians as well as Americans. But given the current climate, one could certainly forgive a sitting Secretary of State for letting the dust settle a bit before kicking up even more.

When it comes to communications technology, however, she does have the advantage of being on the right side of history.

To take one example -- not discussed in her speech -- consider the state of the Soviet telephone system just before the collapse of the USSR. Compared to Western Europe, the Soviet Union had far fewer phones per capita. Which was one reason (among many) for the sorry state of its economy.

Why?

Because in 1917, Soviet leadership decided to invest not in telephones, but in a system of loudspeakers all across the country: the quintessential one-way, centrally-controlled technology. And when they got around to building a phone system, all long distance lines had to go through Moscow, so they could be appropriately monitored.

Is Internet any different? Well, yes and no.

In a bricks-and-mortar world, the choice between open and closed, law versus tyranny, is pretty stark. If you half-nationalize a sugar refinery, don't be surprised if foreign direct investment dries up. All the way. Just as if you sometimes (but not always) disappear intellectuals for expressing dangerous political options, it should come as little shock that promising young engineers in your country view it as yet another reason to head to Menlo Park.

But the Internet is infinitely adaptable, and many countries are betting that it can support a uniquely modern half-open, half-closed hybrid -- the economic benefit without the civil liberty.

China is the obvious example -- but remember that even North Korea, without any home-grown tech to speak of, is reported to have a fairly advanced 3G wireless data network. (Built by an Egyptian contractor, no less.)

Still, while the Internet does not represent the end of history, it is certainly a deeply discomfiting new chapter. If telephones, airplanes, radio and TV have made the world much smaller, the lesson of the last few weeks is that the Internet, Facebook, Youtube and Twitter have made it immeasurably younger.

More than any other media in history, the Internet is the playground of the rising generation. Just as the toddler in my house will one day evade (with ease) any measures I take to control her access to the Internet, the hero-activists in the Middle East found ways to shock the gray men of Cairo, Tunisia, and elsewhere.

In the end, a simple lack of understanding of technology by those in power may prove as important as anything else. One certainly hopes this is true -- even if the jury is still out. (See [here](#) for more.)

But it would also be a mistake to read the Secretary's speech as being purely about Egypt, China, and other lands half a world far away.

It is a speech about America, too.

Today there is broad domestic consensus against outright censorship on the Internet. But as recently as 15 years ago, it was the policy of the United States -- thanks to a statute signed by the Secretary of State's husband himself, in a prior life -- to limit expressive freedom online as compared to newspapers and books. It is to the eternal credit of the Supreme Court that it struck down the attempt.

And even now -- as government lawyers appear in court five miles away from where Secretary Clinton is speaking, to [argue for access to the Twitter records of alleged WikiLeaks collaborators](#) -- there are scores of unanswered questions about domestic surveillance of Internet traffic. Many in domestic law enforcement and the military-industrial complex would jump at the chance to build back doors and surveillance opportunities into the basic architecture of broadband networks.

So Clinton's speech is, as much as anything, a warning that if America is going to talk the talk about censorship abroad, we have to walk the walk at home, as well. This is the sense in which her speech is a genuine (and almost certainly self-conscious) act of courage -- reminding us that, as always, the most important political choices we can make begin at home.

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