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“Subversive” isn’t the preferred adjective for our work, but this article in upcoming Foreign Policy Magazine is worth reading

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Open Door Policy

Can the State Department's ambitious new plan to subvert autocratic regimes online actually succeed?

Last year, when Internet users in 12 authoritarian states tried to navigate to the social networking sites we take for granted in the West, they encountered the usual government firewall blocking their access. But there was a twist. Many of them also saw an advertisement alerting them to the fact they could download free tools to circumvent this censorship. Almost half a million users did just that.

It wasn't the work of the hacking group Anonymous or a tech-savvy democracy activist; instead, the organization funding the campaign was none other than the U.S. Department of State. And it was being rolled out in a string of countries, like Bahrain, Egypt, and Vietnam, that are usually regarded as U.S. partners.

This was not an isolated incident. The rapid growth of online activity has opened up a whole new world of possibilities for subtly undermining repressive regimes -- without boots on the ground and, so far, with only a reasonably modest financial commitment. And the State Department has dived head first into this new frontier.

This online activism is not as narrowly targeted as subversive measures from years past, such as Western radio broadcasts beamed into countries under repressive rule. Whereas these broadcasts only offered the opportunity to passively receive another government's perspective on the world, a free Internet allows people everywhere to read whatever they want and express their views without fear of harassment ... theoretically.

U.S. policymakers have put great stock in the transformative power of Internet freedom. As Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said, these tools will be used "to advance democracy and human rights, to fight climate change

and epidemics, to build global support for President Obama's goal of a world without nuclear weapons, [and] to encourage sustainable economic development that lifts the people at the bottom up."

This new tech-savvy approach to democracy promotion has been taken up by the U.S. government with characteristic American zeal. Alec Ross, Clinton's senior advisor for innovation, framed the great conflict of the 21st century as between open and closed systems. The United States, he said, stood "for openness, with an open Internet at its core." Congress has also lent its support, allocating the State Department and USAID a total of \$76 million from 2008 to 2011 for Internet freedom activities.

Not everyone, however, is convinced. Evgeny Morozov offers one blistering critique: In his book, *The Net Delusion*, he points to the overwhelming costs of truly freeing the web, and the risks to activists who put too much faith in circumvention tools that can never be made failsafe. Moreover, he argues that the Western focus on freeing the Internet could have the perverse effect of driving even more restrictive policies from authoritarian regimes.

Before settling on a position though, consider what the State Department is actually doing. The department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL) is at the vanguard of this effort. Funding for DRL's more subversive work was originally a Republican initiative, with strong backing from Falun Gong-linked groups like the Global Internet Freedom Consortium. Not surprisingly, its initial focus was on China. It has since been substantially expanded to other authoritarian regimes, particularly in the wake of the Arab Spring and the subsequent attempts by governments in the region to both squelch and monitor Internet activism.

As a happy example of bipartisan consensus in Washington, the State Department has managed to secure a steady stream of congressional funding. About half of these funds have been spent on developing technologies to help activists circumvent direct government Internet censorship, and the other half on protecting websites and blogs under attack. Most of DRL's work is outsourced to non-governmental organizations that prefer to keep their funding on the down-low, due to the sensitive nature of their work. However, there are several projects that have been made public.

The so-called "Internet in a suitcase," which was developed by the New America Foundation's Open Technology Initiative, is one prominent example. It is a type of mesh network that aims to allow activists to continue communicating -- ideally anonymously -- even when a government tries to shut down the Internet, as happened in several Arab Spring countries during the recent uprisings.

Another interesting project is a "panic button" called InTheClear, which is in early Beta release. This mobile application aims to allow individuals to instantly and comprehensively erase the contents of their phone, as well as send out pre-written text messages to trusted contacts. That's a handy tool for an activist suddenly arrested by security forces, or a journalist with confidential information recorded on his or her phone.

These programs are explicitly aimed at undermining other governments' censorship efforts, raising a series of complex legal and diplomatic questions. However, the State Department has pushed full-steam ahead, focusing on the loftier justifications for its actions. "Some countries have erected electronic barriers that prevent their people from accessing portions of the world's networks," Clinton said in a January 2010 speech on Internet freedom. "These actions contravene the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, which tells us that all people have the right, 'to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.'"

Iran, in particular, is a hot spot for subversive diplomacy at the State Department. Given the long history of animosity between the two countries, the subversion is fairly blatant. When the State Department opened its new "Virtual Embassy Tehran" -- which was aimed at "bringing information and alternative viewpoints to the Iranian people" according to State Department spokesperson Victoria Nuland -- in December 2011, it was blocked from view in Iran almost immediately. The State Department, when asked about this obstacle, said it believed Iranians would still be able to access the website through other means, presumably using the tools promoted by the State's circumvention campaign.

The Iran desk at the State Department also has two full-time bloggers working in Farsi who manage its three main Farsi social media sites (Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter) that try to push critical messages of the regime to Iranians online, like President Barack Obama's recent statement upon the Iranian holiday of Nowruz. These and other more traditional democracy promotion efforts were the bread and butter of the Iran desk's engagement activities until 2010, when its direction was significantly altered by a \$10 million congressional earmark that had to be spent on Internet freedom in Iran. In addition to the old approaches, it is now involved in three types of activities: circumvention tool development; secure communications and platforms (for example, hosting websites that are victims of Denial of Service attacks); and digital safety training for Iranian activists. In other words, it's moving away from simple messaging to efforts to directly empower Iranian activists.

Subversive diplomacy is also not only aimed at undermining authoritarian regimes. State's Digital Outreach Team has been targeting individuals and organizations online since 2006. What began as an effort to promote soft messages about the United States among the Arabic blogosphere soon morphed into a much more tightly focused outfit dedicated to countering the rhetoric spewed by extremists online.

This is a small shop compared to the sprawling U.S. government agencies that work to gather intelligence online. The team of 11 bloggers and one manager -- who openly acknowledge they are employed by the State Department -- work in Arabic, Urdu, and Somali as a sort of counter propaganda unit, posting in comment threads on sites like Al Jazeera and the BBC, and disproving conspiracy theories. For example, they have shot down rumors circulating in Pakistan that Vice President Dick Cheney had ordered the assassination of Benazir Bhutto. They also work to highlight the most negative and hypocritical sides of extremists -- such as Taliban bomb attacks on girls' schools, and reports that the Yemeni-American terrorist Anwar al-Awlaki had solicited prostitutes. It has also been involved in the production of videos such as this one, which ridicules Osama bin Laden for being nowhere to be found during the Arab Spring.

Reviews on its effectiveness have so far been mixed. A Stanford University study analyzing its work concluded that "the evidence points to a lack of impact" for the Digital Outreach Team's work. However, the study also noted that the program's intended audience "is among the lurkers on blogs and Websites, who leave no evidence of their reactions," hampering attempts to accurately gauge the initiative's influence.

While the State Department will certainly tweak its efforts at subversive diplomacy for maximum effect, the epic dimensions that officials have used to frame this agenda suggest that it will be more than a fleeting diplomatic objective. The struggle will be a long one: The State Department's \$76 million is always going to be a drop in the ocean compared to the mighty censorship resources of a country like China, and the cat and mouse game between Internet freedom activists and repressive regimes will have mostly imperfect markers of success.

But despite the inevitable setbacks, the State Department has taken the first step to addressing the new realities of activism through its subversive diplomacy program. Pro-democracy activists in authoritarian states are going to continue their move online, and repressive regimes are going to use every available means to monitor, censor, and harass them. Extremists will also continue to spout drivel online and do their best to bring in vulnerable new recruits. But it's the American way to give those working for freedom -- whether on the ground or online -- a fighting chance.

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