

Opening Remarks



The Fallacy of Facebook Diplomacy

Why "21st Century Statecraft"—the idea that America can use the Internet to influence global events—is more dream than reality. **By Brendan Greeley**

Mediocre ideas survive longest in government. In business, at least, competition tends to cull the lame and the halt. But in the public sector, theories, particularly when enlivened by events, can linger for decades. All of which explains why, now that Tunisia's dictator has left his country and Egypt's is weighing his options, we may be stuck for a good long while with what the State Dept. calls "21st Century Statecraft."

In January 2010, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton delivered an address in Washington that laid out a way to use the

Internet to serve America's foreign policy goals. Protesters in Iran the summer before had gotten news out to the world using the microblogging site Twitter, and Clinton told the story of a seven-year-old girl in Haiti, freed that week from earthquake rubble with the help of a text message. "New technologies do not take sides in the struggle for freedom and progress," she said, "but the United States does."

America would take sides by building tools to route around censorship. A country that would deprive its citizens of information, the Secretary of State argued, would deprive them of a market advantage. And she called on U.S. companies to act on principle, to make access to information part of America's national brand.

Clinton was right that the Internet has a profound effect on the struggle for democracy, and there is a great deal of valuable local work being done online. But the

Web is not a uniformly positive force. The dissident who organizes on Facebook, for example, leaves behind a map for security forces to follow. The real question at the heart of 21st Century Statecraft is this: Is America remotely capable of using the Internet to direct events in its favor?

Activists in Tunisia organized on Facebook, and the country's now-deposed dictator, Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, saw the site as a threat; Al Jazeera has published evidence that the government had been using its domestic control of the Internet to pocket its citizens' Facebook passwords. Last year, however, Sami Ben Gharbia, a Tunisian blogger and activist, questioned the support, through travel and training, that American foundations and companies had begun offering to local activists. He called it "the kiss of death" and wrote that it would erode local relevance and legitimacy, and would replace domestic

ties among groups with bridges abroad. He worried that America would favor activists in sexy countries such as China and Iran. And he predicted something that today, watching the Obama Administration's daily hedge on Egypt, seems obvious: "This Internet freedom policy won't be applied in a vacuum," he wrote. "It will continue projecting the same Western priorities." America's instinctive support for the right to speak and assemble can be hard to square with its need for stability. That's as true online as it is in the street.

This is difficult for Americans to hear. We like to make the world a better place, to mold it in our image. (As the British author Graham Greene pointed out more than a half-century ago in *The Quiet American*, this makes Americans abroad both charming and enraging.) Now, Tunisia has a transitional government and Egypt has a teetering one, owing to upheavals aided by Facebook and Twitter. This is a victory for American ideas and American entrepreneurs. It is a victory for the resilient network America designed. But it is not necessarily a victory for the American government.

There's no telling whether successor regimes will be to Washington's liking. Nor can it be said that all American companies are on the right side of the barricades. According to a 2009 study by Harvard University's Berkman Center, the technology for Tunisia's network filtering—that is, its censorship—was provided by Secure Computing, a U.S. company that has since been acquired by McAfee (which is now to be purchased by Intel). This is not unusual; many governments in the Middle East use American tools to filter. An American company makes Egypt's tear gas, so it seems unfair to single out Secure Computing for undemocratic behavior. But it certainly makes Clinton's job more complicated.

Facebook hasn't completely adhered to the Secretary's national branding guidelines, either. Jillian York, an Internet freedom researcher at Berkman, tells the story of one of Egypt's more popular Facebook protest groups, We Are All Khaled Said, named for a young Egyptian allegedly killed by police in Alexandria last year. Before parliamentary elections in December, Facebook disabled the group. When asked to explain its decision, the company pointed out that the group's administrators were using pseudonyms, which can keep an activist safe but vio-

lates Facebook's terms of service. Facebook restored the group when a new administrator volunteered a real name. The same thing happened to a group that supported Mohamed ElBaradei, the opposition leader. York has similar stories from Hong Kong, Tunisia, Syria, and Morocco.

The problem is not that Facebook bows to autocrats, but that it's not staffed up to fulfill its new accidental mission. People in crisis don't find new platforms; they reach out to the ones they have, the ones they already use to share pictures of babies and picnics. Facebook was designed for the pursuit of happiness; it's not vital despite its frivolity but because of it. Its decisions on so-called takedowns (removing a group or an account) follow an opaque process, with no consistent way to appeal for redress. The company often lacks even the language skills to make moral and political judgments in other countries. Nor does it offer basic constitutional protections such as habeas corpus or the right to face your accuser. Brett Solomon, the executive director of Access, a nonprofit that focuses on Internet freedom, suggests Facebook provide a "concierge service" for activists, a single point of access to help resolve tricky takedown issues. Google's YouTube, according to several activists, is already exemplary in this regard.

To its credit, Facebook has begun offering an encryption method called "https" to users in Tunisia and now Sudan. Gmail offers this, too, worldwide; Yahoo! has dragged its feet. This is a classic problem in diplomacy, as old as the East India Company: States and businesses have different goals. It has never been easy to compel a CEO to spend money in



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pursuit of state policy, and 21st Century Statecraft hasn't made any of it easier.

As Indira Lakshmanan of Bloomberg News reported on Jan. 27, it's hard to tell whether Clinton's Internet policy is working, because to work it must happen in secret. The State Dept. says diplomats are pressing for free speech behind closed doors, but it's hard to prove this is making a difference. Such is the unfortunate nature of diplomacy. On one point, however, Clinton was demonstrably wrong: Censorship can be very, very good for business.

Last year the China social media team at Ogilvy & Mather, the advertising firm, created a graphic that compared social media services in the U.S. and China. There was little overlap. One could argue that different cultures ask different things of their social media, but Facebook has seen success in Indonesia and Brazil; it is growing in South Korea. Japan has taken to Twitter. It's far more likely that China's blocks on Twitter, Facebook, and Blogger (and its restrictions on Google) have acted as a kind of import tariff, creating space for domestic companies to thrive. As Bloomberg has also reported, the CEO of Baidu, China's premier search engine, sees commercial value in social media. Baidu has expanded since Google's departure. Clinton might do better taking her concerns about Internet freedom to the World Trade Organization.

It has been stirring to watch ever more Egyptians pour into Tahrir Square. And it's genuinely inspiring to think that the Internet helped a little, right up until Hosni Mubarak turned it off. The Internet is American in origin and spirit; it is one of the best expressions of what the nation's economy—and, yes, its government—can accomplish. But events in other countries, online or off, are largely beyond U.S. control. Evgeny Morozov, a Belarussian academic, had the bad timing to publish a book this month on the futility of Web-based protest. In *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom*, he lays out America's obsession with Radio Free Europe and samizdat-information that, we would like to believe, led to revolution. This dream, like 21st Century Statecraft, springs from the fond belief that Americans can be the authors of world history. As revolution spreads, it's worth remembering that even if we're reading about it on Facebook, we're still just reading.