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Conference on Internet Freedom

Remarks

Hillary Rodham Clinton
Secretary of State
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SECRETARY CLINTON Well, good evening, and it's wonderful to be back in The Hague. I want to thank my colleague and friend, Foreign Minister Rosenthal, a longtime friend, and co-conspirator from time to time, Eric Schmidt. Also, thanks to Leon Willems, the director of the Free Press Unlimited, and to those of my colleagues whom I know are here, namely Carl Bildt, an incredibly connected foreign minister, along with other ministers, ambassadors, the diplomatic community, and ladies and gentlemen.

It's a pleasure to join you here today to discuss this issue, because we think it is vitally important to every nation represented and every nation in the world; namely, internet freedom. And I want to thank Uri and the Netherlands for hosting this conference, which is a reflection of your long tradition of defending and advancing people's human rights and fundamental freedoms everywhere, including online. And thanks as well to the representatives of nearly two dozen other governments here, all of whom I know will be working to get real solutions and recommendations agreed to tomorrow. I'm pleased we also have representatives from the private sector and civil society. So it all adds up to a multi-stakeholder event.

Now, in two days, on December 10th, we'll celebrate Human Rights Day, which is the anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. And in the 63 years since that achievement, the world has been implementing a global commitment around the rights and freedoms of people everywhere, no matter where they live or who they are. And today, as people increasingly turn to the internet to conduct important aspects of their lives, we have to make sure that human rights are as respected online as offline. After all, the right to express one's views, practice one's faith, peacefully assemble with others to pursue political or social change – these are all rights to which all human beings are entitled, whether they choose to exercise them in a city square or an internet chat room. And just as we have worked together since the last century to secure these rights in the material world, we must work together in this century to secure them in cyberspace.

This is an urgent task. It is most urgent, of course, for those around the world whose words are now censored, who are imprisoned because of what they or others have written online, who are blocked from accessing entire categories of internet content, or who are being tracked by governments seeking to keep them from connecting with one another.

In Syria, a blogger named Anas Maarawi was arrested on July 1st after demanding that President Asad leave. He's not been charged with anything, but he remains in detention. In both Syria and Iran, many other online activists – actually too many to name – have been detained, imprisoned, beaten, and even killed for expressing their views and organizing their fellow citizens. And perhaps the most well known blogger in Russia, Alexei Navalny, was sentenced on Tuesday to 15 days in jail after he took part in protests over the Russian elections.

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In China, several dozen companies signed a pledge in October, committing to strengthen their – quote – “self-management, self-restraint, and strict self-discipline.” Now, if they were talking about fiscal responsibility, we might all agree. But they were talking about offering web-based services to the Chinese people, which is code for getting in line with the government’s tight control over the internet.

Now, these and many other incidents worldwide remind us of the stakes in this struggle. And the struggle does not belong only to those on the front lines and who are suffering. It belongs to all of us: first, because we all have a responsibility to support human rights and fundamental freedoms everywhere. Second, because the benefits of the network grow as the number of users grow. The internet is not exhaustible or competitive. My use of the internet doesn’t diminish yours. On the contrary, the more people that are online and contributing ideas, the more valuable the entire network becomes to all the other users. In this way, all users, through the billions of individual choices we make about what information to seek or share, fuel innovation, enliven public debates, quench a thirst for knowledge, and connect people in ways that distance and cost made impossible just a generation ago.

But when ideas are blocked, information deleted, conversations stifled, and people constrained in their choices, the internet is diminished for all of us. What we do today to preserve fundamental freedoms online will have a profound effect on the next generation of users. More than two billion people are now connected to the internet, but in the next 20 years, that number will more than double. And we are quickly approaching the day when more than a billion people are using the internet in repressive countries. The pledges we make and the actions we take today can help us determine whether that number grows or shrinks, or whether the meaning of being on the internet is totally distorted.

Delivering on internet freedom requires cooperative actions, and we have to foster a global conversation based on shared principles and with the right partners to navigate the practical challenges of maintaining an internet that is open and free while also interoperable, secure, and reliable. Now, this enterprise isn’t a matter of negotiating a single document and calling the job done. It requires an ongoing effort to reckon with the new reality that we live in, in a digital world, and doing so in a way that maximizes its promise.

Because the advent of cyberspace creates new challenges and opportunities in terms of security, the digital economy, and human rights, we have to be constantly evolving in our responses. And though they are distinct, they are practically inseparable, because there isn’t an economic internet, a social internet, and a political internet. There is just the internet, and we’re here to protect what makes it great.

Tomorrow’s sessions provide the opportunity for us to make concrete progress. At this kickoff event, I’d like to briefly discuss three specific challenges that defenders of the internet must confront.

The first challenge is for the private sector to embrace its role in protecting internet freedom, because whether you like it or not, the choices that private companies make have an impact on how information flows or doesn’t flow on the internet and mobile networks. They also have an impact on what governments can and can’t do, and they have an impact on people on the ground.

In recent months, we’ve seen cases where companies, products, and services were used as tools of oppression. Now, in some instances, this cannot be foreseen, but in others, yes, it can. A few years ago, the headlines were about companies turning over sensitive information about political dissidents. Earlier this year, they were about a company shutting down the social networking accounts of activists in the midst of a political debate. Today’s news stories are about companies selling the hardware and software of repression to authoritarian governments. When companies sell surveillance equipment to the security agency of Syria or Iran or, in past times, Qadhafi, there can be no doubt it will be used to violate rights.

Now, there are some who would say that in order to compel good behavior by businesses, responsible governments should simply impose broad sanctions, and that will take care of the problem. Well, it’s true that sanctions and export controls are useful tools, and the United States makes vigorous use of them when appropriate; and if they are broken, we investigate and pursue violators. And we’re always seeking to work with our partners, such as the European Union, to make them as smart and effective as possible. Just last week, for example, we were glad to see our EU partners impose new sanctions on technology going to Syria.

So sanctions are part of the solution, but they are not the entire solution. Dual-use technologies and third-party sales make it impossible to have a sanctions regime that perfectly prevents bad actors from using technologies in bad ways. Now, sometimes companies say to us at the State Department, “Just tell us what to do, and we’ll do it.” But the fact is, you can’t wait for instructions. In the 21st century, smart companies have to act before they find themselves in the crosshairs of controversy.

I wish there were, but there isn’t, an easy formula for this. Making good decisions about how and whether to do business in various parts of the world, particularly where the laws are applied haphazardly or they are opaque, takes critical thinking and deliberation and asking hard questions. So what kind of business should you do in a country where it has a history of violating internet freedom? Is there something you can do to prevent governments from using your products to spy on their own citizens? Should you include warnings to consumers? How will you handle requests for information from security authorities when those requests come without a warrant? Are you working to prevent post-purchase modifications of your products or resale through middlemen to authoritarian regimes?

Now, these and others are difficult questions, but companies must ask them. And the rest of us stand ready to work with you to find answers and to hold those who ignore or dismiss or deny the importance of this issue accountable. A range of

resources emerged in recent years to help companies work through these issues. The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, which were adopted in June, and the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises both advise companies on how to meet responsibilities and carry out due diligence. And the Global Network Initiative, which is represented here tonight, is a growing forum where companies can work through challenges with other industry partners, as well as academics, investors, and activists.

And of course, companies can always learn from users. The Silicon Valley Human Rights Conference in October brought together companies, activists, and experts to discuss real life problems and identify solutions. And some participants issued what they called the Silicon Valley Standard for stakeholders to aspire to.

Working through these difficult questions by corporate executives and board members should help shape your practices.

Part of the job of responsible corporate management in the 21st century is doing human rights due diligence on new markets, instituting internal review procedures, identifying principles by which decisions are to be made in tough situations, because we cannot let the short-term gains that all of us think are legitimate and worth seeking jeopardize the openness of the internet and human rights of individuals who use it without it coming back to haunt us all in the future. Because a free and open internet is important not just to technology companies but to all companies. Whether it's run with a single mobile phone or an extensive corporate network, it's hard to find any business today that doesn't depend in some way on the internet and doesn't suffer when networks are constrained.

And also I would add that, in this day, brand and reputation are precious corporate assets. Companies that put them at risk when they are careless about freedom of the internet can often pay a price.

So I think it's particularly appropriate and important that the private sector is strongly represented at this meeting and that Google is co-hosting tonight's event. In both securing the promise of a free and open internet and managing the risks that new technologies raise, the private sector is a crucial partner.

But even as companies must step up, governments must resist the urge to clamp down, and that is the second challenge we face. If we're not careful, governments could upend the current internet governance framework in a quest to increase their own control. Some governments use internet governance issues as a cover for pushing an agenda that would justify restricting human rights online. We must be wary of such agendas and united in our shared conviction that human rights apply online.

So right now, in various international forums, some countries are working to change how the internet is governed. They want to replace the current multi-stakeholder approach, which includes governments, the private sector, and citizens, and supports the free flow of information, in a single global network. In its place, they aim to impose a system cemented in a global code that expands control over internet resources, institutions, and content, and centralizes that control in the hands of governments.

Now, in a way, that isn't surprising, because governments have never met a voice or public sphere they didn't want to control at some point or another. They want to control what gets printed in newspapers, who gets into universities, what companies get oil contracts, what churches and NGOs get registered, where citizens can gather, so why not the internet? But it's actually worse than that. It's not just that they want governments to have all the control by cutting out civil society and the private sector; they also want to empower each individual government to make their own rules for the internet that not only undermine human rights and the free flow of information but also the interoperability of the network.

In effect, the governments pushing this agenda want to create national barriers in cyberspace. This approach would be disastrous for internet freedom. More government control will further constrict what people in repressive environments can do online. It would also be disastrous for the internet as a whole, because it would reduce the dynamism of the internet for everyone. Fragmenting the global internet by erecting barriers around national internets would change the landscape of cyberspace. In this scenario, the internet would contain people in a series of digital bubbles, rather than connecting them in a global network. Breaking the internet into pieces would give you echo chambers rather than an innovative global marketplace of ideas.

The United States wants the internet to remain a space where economic, political, and social exchanges flourish. To do that, we need to protect people who exercise their rights online, and we also need to protect the internet itself from plans that would undermine its fundamental characteristics.

Now, those who push these plans often do so in the name of security. And let me be clear: The challenge of maintaining security and of combating cyber crime, such as the theft of intellectual property, are real – a point I underscore whenever I discuss these issues. There are predators, terrorists, traffickers on the internet, malign actors plotting cyber attacks, and they all need to be stopped. We can do that by working together without compromising the global network, its dynamism, or our principles.

Now, there's a lot to be said about cyber security. I won't go into that tonight. I'll be talking about it more, but my basic point is that the United States supports the public-private collaboration that now exists to manage the technical evolution of the internet in real time. We support the principles of multi-stakeholder internet governance developed by more than 30 nations in the OECD earlier this year. A multi-stakeholder system brings together the best of governments, the private sector, and civil society. And most importantly, it works. It has kept the internet up and running for years all over the world. So to use an American phrase, our position is, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." And there's no good reason to replace an effective system with an oppressive one.

The third and final challenge is that all of us – governments, private, sector, civil society, must do more to build a truly global coalition to preserve an open internet. And that's where all of you here today come in, because internet freedom cannot be defended by one country or one region alone. Building this global coalition is hard, partly because for people in many countries the potential of the internet is still unrealized. While it's easy for us in the United States or in the Netherlands to imagine what we would lose if the internet became less free, it is harder for those who have yet to see the benefit of the internet in their day to day lives. So we have to work harder to make the case that an open internet is and will be in everyone's best interests. And we have to keep that in mind as we work to build this global coalition and make the case to leaders of those countries where the next generation of internet users live. These leaders have an opportunity today to help ensure that the full benefits are available to their people tomorrow, and in so doing, they will help us ensure an open internet for everyone.

So the United States will be making the case for an open internet in our work worldwide, and we welcome other countries to join us. As our coalition expands, countries like Ghana and Kenya, represented here tonight, Mongolia, Chile, also represented, I saw, Indonesia and others are sure to be effective at bringing other potential partners on board who have perspectives that can help us confront and answer difficult questions. And new players from governments, the private sector, and civil society will be participating in managing the internet in coming decades as billions more people from all different regions go online.

So let's lay the groundwork now for these partnerships that will support an open internet in the future. And in that spirit, I want to call attention to two important items on your agenda for tomorrow. The first will be to build support for a new cross-regional group that will work together in exactly the way that I've just discussed, based on shared principles, providing a platform for governments to engage creatively and energetically with the private sector, civil society, and other governments.

Several countries have already signaled their intention to join. I hope others here will do the same, and going forward, others will endorse the declaration that our Dutch hosts have prepared. It's excellent work, Uri, and we thank you for your leadership.

The second item I want to highlight is a practical effort to do more to support cyber activists and bloggers who are threatened by their repressive governments. The Committee to Protect Journalists recently reported that of all the writers, editors, and photojournalists now imprisoned around the world, nearly half are online journalists. The threat is very real. Now, several of us already provide support, including financial support, to activists and bloggers, and I was pleased that the EU recently announced new funding for that purpose. And I know that other governments, including the Netherlands, are also looking for ways to help out.

By coordinating our efforts, we can make them go further and help more people. Earlier, I heard what the foreign minister here is proposing. And we have talked about creating a digital defenders partnership to be part of this global effort. We hope tomorrow's meetings will give us a chance to discuss with other potential partners how such a partnership could work.

So while we meet here in the Netherlands in this beautiful city to talk about how to keep the internet open, unfortunately some countries are pulling very hard in the opposite direction. They're trying to erect walls between different activities online, economic exchanges, political discussions, religious expression, social interaction, and so on. They want to keep what they like and which doesn't threaten them and suppress what they don't. But there are opportunity costs for trying to be open for business but closed for free expression, costs to a nation's education system, political stability, social mobility, and economic potential.

And walls that divide the internet are easier to erect than to maintain. Our government will continue to work very hard to get around every barrier that repressive governments put up, because governments that have erected barriers will eventually find themselves boxed in, and they will face the dictator's dilemma. They will have to choose between letting the walls fall or paying the price for keeping them standing by resorting to greater repression and to escalating the opportunity cost of missing out on the ideas that have been blocked and the people who have disappeared.

I urge countries everywhere, instead of that alternative dark vision, join us here today in the bet that we are making, a bet that an open internet will lead to stronger, more prosperous countries. This is not a bet on computers or mobile phones. It's a bet on the human spirit. It's a bet on people. And we're confident that together, with our partners and government, the private sector, and civil society around the world, who have made this same bet like all of you here tonight, we will preserve the internet as open and secure for all.

On the eve of Human Rights Day, this meeting reminds us of the timeless principles that should be our north star. And a look at the world around us and the way it is changing reminds us there is no auto-pilot steering us forward. We have to work in good faith and engage in honest debate, and we have to join together to solve the challenges and seize the opportunities of this exciting digital age. Thank you all for being committed to that goal and that vision. The United States pledges our support and our partnership going forward.

Thank you all very much.

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