

The Medium versus the Message: U.S. Government Funding for Media in an Age of Disruption

A Report to the Center for International Media Assistance

By Anne Nelson

June 11, 2012



**National Endowment
for Democracy**
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The Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA), at the National Endowment for Democracy, works to strengthen the support, raise the visibility, and improve the effectiveness of independent media development throughout the world. The Center provides information, builds networks, conducts research, and highlights the indispensable role independent media play in the creation and development of sustainable democracies. An important aspect of CIMA's work is to research ways to attract additional U.S. private sector interest in and support for international media development. The Center was one of the of the main nongovernmental organizers of World Press Freedom Day 2011 in Washington, DC.

CIMA convenes working groups, discussions, and panels on a variety of topics in the field of media development and assistance. The center also issues reports and recommendations based on working group discussions and other investigations. These reports aim to provide policymakers, as well as donors and practitioners, with ideas for bolstering the effectiveness of media assistance.

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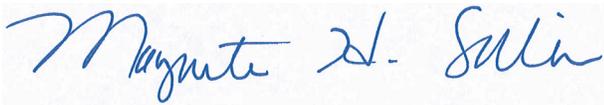
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Preface

The Center for International Media Assistance at the National Endowment for Democracy is pleased to publish *The Medium Versus the Message: U.S. Government Funding for Media in an Age of Disruption*. The report examines the level of U.S. government funding for international media development, focusing in particular on digital media programs and projects.

CIMA is grateful to Anne Nelson, a former journalist and a media consultant who teaches at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs, for her research and insights on this topic. We hope that this report will become an important reference for international media assistance efforts.



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Executive Summary

Digital media are disrupting every aspect of modern society, rebooting traditional practices and jumpstarting new disciplines ranging from telemedicine to robotic assembly lines. Along the way, they are rattling hierarchies, making blunders, and fomenting miracles.

U.S. foreign aid has been a prime candidate for disruption. Over the past four years, digital media have been transforming both the premises and the practices of U.S. government funding in media development. While Congress is cutting back on foreign aid budgets, resources to launch new digital media programs continue to grow.¹ In one critical sub-sector of media development, media freedom and freedom of information, State Department and USAID funding totaled \$96 million in FY 2009, \$127 million in FY 2010, and nearly \$107 million in FY 2011. (The spike in 2010 funding reflected the one-time \$29 million funding package for USAID's Afghanistan Media Development and Empowerment Project, or AMDEP, the largest in history.² Much of the package, including sizable funding for digital projects, was awarded to the media development organization Internews.³)

Media development professionals agree that some aspect of digital technology is now embedded in virtually every government-funded media project. Many highly technical programs, such as those addressing Internet security and circumvention, have proliferated. At the same time, traditional media development programs, including some that stress creation of quality content, face new challenges. These include geopolitical controversies and growing pressure to create metrics to prove quantitative results for qualitative missions.

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U.S. government agencies are far from alone in this arena. Their counterparts among Western European aid agencies and U.S. private foundations have joined them in a major push to address a growing array of international demands in the digital media space.

The new priorities include:

1. Expanding the access in developing countries to digital platforms.
2. Devising and promoting uses for new platforms (especially mobile) for functions that occupy a new, poorly defined space between traditional journalism and other modes of information
3. Contesting online censorship and filtering from governments (most, but not all, of which are authoritarian regimes).

4. Safeguarding Internet security for citizens of other countries, especially for activists and human rights advocates.
5. Stemming a growing tide of threats to global Internet security—affecting U.S. as well as international entities—from a broad array of international forces, both private and state-sponsored.

These urgent concerns have shifted the areas of operations for the State Department, USAID, and the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), and had created rivalries among them. They have also ushered a new cohort of NGOs into the media development arena, and appointed a new cast of characters to design and implement projects that would have been technologically impossible only a few years ago.

Responding to Online Protests

It's difficult to pin precise dates on the digital revolution, but the explosion in user-created content began in the mid-1990s with the advent of the blog. For several years the U.S. government and other large American institutions hesitated in their response. But over the next decade, digital media spread rapidly across the globe; Internet penetration, bandwidth, and mobility expanded at lightning speeds; and digital media began to serve as an undeniable catalyst for critical social and political events. This process accelerated with the expansion of popular interactive platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. One early chapter—and in many ways, still the most compelling one—began in response to Chinese government harassment of the spiritual movement Falun Gong. In 2002 a group of Falun Gong members working in Silicon Valley created a digital program called UltraSurf to combat Chinese government surveillance and formed the Global Internet Freedom Consortium in 2006. They won influential allies in Washington in the form of former Reagan administration officials Mark Palmer and Michael Horowitz, who took their case to Congress. Although Congress declined to offer direct support to the Falun Gong efforts, it appropriated \$15 million in 2008 to combat firewalls in “dictatorships and autocracies.”⁴

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The 2007 protests in Burma, disseminated by cellphone, were another watershed. In 2009 the Iranian electoral protests illustrated the potential of mobile phones to leverage organization, and the ability of Twitter to advance publicity. These events also gave rise to widespread concern about the human rights abuses that were committed against both protesters and those who documented their actions (categories that frequently overlapped).

The U.S. government also began to respond to a new rival on the public diplomacy front, as a contending information system approach began to emerge from China. Over the past few decades, the Chinese government has invested in digital media as a powerful tool for development and commerce, but rigidly restrained it as a vehicle for personal expression. China built out a parallel universe of consumer platforms that mimicked their U.S. counterparts, with a heavy overlay of filtering and censorship to prevent their use for political dissent. This was not unusual among authoritarian regimes; what set it apart was China's robust economic growth and its interest in entering the international media development sphere, especially in the Asia-Pacific region, Latin America, and Sub-Saharan Africa. In recent years China has rapidly been building out communications infrastructure in these regions, and in some cases, providing programming as well.⁵

China also moved energetically into the field of international broadcasting, long dominated by BBC World Service and the U.S. Voice of America group. In the late 1990s China Central Television, or CCTV, began to launch new services in English, French, Spanish, Arabic, and Russian.⁶ The Chinese supplied their operations with large budgets, lavish offices, high production values, and fully integrated online platforms—over the same period that resources began to shrink for their Western counterparts.⁷ Their journalists were attractive and urbane (some of them Western journalists squeezed out of their own job markets) but subject to reprisals if their reporting stepped too far over the party line.⁸

From Washington, the phenomenon was hard to miss: In February 2012 CCTV launched its CCTV America from its new state-of-the-art studios on New York Avenue in Washington, DC. Its staff included journalists recruited from Bloomberg News, the BBC, and CBS—reportedly at 20 percent salary increases. Although CCTV America’s director stated that the service would place a priority on “good journalism,” the network’s home office in Beijing informed the Associated Press that the aim of the expansion was to “counter negative images of China, especially over issues such as human rights, one-party communist rule, and Beijing’s policies in the restive western regions of Xinjiang and Tibet.”⁹

CCTV planned to expand its Washington staff to 100 before the U.S. elections (compared to ABC’s Washington bureau of 32.)¹⁰ Like other global broadcasters, CCTV has been investing heavily in online extensions of its content. Suddenly the Western model of media development, seeking to shape media as a tool for democratization, had a well-financed rival promoting a radically different value system. This promised to have a major effect on public diplomacy as well as media development.

Concerns over Internet security risks have grown rapidly as well. Cyberattacks, such as those launched against Estonia’s government and media organizations in 2007 and similarly against Georgia in 2008, began to emerge from shadowy online forces, which may have included Russian government employees, individual hackers, or a new cohort of organized crime. As an increasing amount of vital U.S. information and activity moved online—from both the government and the private sector—it became vulnerable to attacks from a bewildering number of sources with a broad range of motivations.

By 2009, the digital disruption was affecting multiple areas of U.S. foreign policy, including human rights, commerce, and security, and the government had few established agencies and protocols with the agility to respond. In the realm of foreign assistance, the pressure was on for the government to squeeze vast new digital initiatives into the confines of the old media development agenda.

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The old forms of media development had served some highly specific purposes in helping transitional societies construct a responsible “Fourth Estate.” Many of them taught multi-sourced reporting, fact-checking, careful editing, press law and ethics, and strategies to assure access to legal defense. (Yet another common component was training in advertising and business management to assure that everyone could be paid to devote their time to these pursuits.)

The new digital paradigm has stressed the “medium” over the “message,” assuming that the central challenge was to expand global access to digital media, with the tacit assumption that legal infrastructure would evolve to offer rights to individuals that had not yet been cemented by news organizations. Over the past decade, access to both the production and the consumption of content has expanded geometrically. The jurisdiction to mediate between censors and producers of content was transferred from the courtroom to the murky backrooms of digital filtering and circumvention. This phenomenon helped to expand the public participation in the freedom of expression discourse, since the legal principles now affected a broad range of citizens beyond the professional news media.

Confusion of the Realms

U.S. government agencies have taken various actions to address all of these issues, but at this point there is no evidence of a coordinated response. A 2010 CIMA report recorded that the U.S. Department of State and USAID had “spent more than a half billion dollars to support international media development.” But the report cautioned that exact spending comparisons were difficult, in part because “U.S. government media development projects are often embedded in larger civil society and international development projects.”¹¹ Over the past two years the task of quantifying such funding has become even more difficult.

There are three principal reasons for this:

1. Media projects continue to be embedded within larger civil society projects, rendering them less visible and their scope impossible to measure. For example, a project to support law schools may include a component to address digital media regulation, whose proportions within the whole are impossible to ascertain from the outside.
2. In the move to digital and mobile platforms, there is a blurring of the boundaries between “media development” (with the goal of promoting democratic development) and “media for development” (to promote social goals). For example, one of the fastest-growing areas of media support in the developing world involves “mHealth,” or the use of mobile technology to gather medical data and improve the efficiency of health delivery systems. But it would be a stretch to suggest that raw individual medical data constitutes “news.” However, training programs to help journalists cover health issues may well include such content. The distinctions are difficult to make.
3. Political and security concerns encourage secrecy. Media projects to support activists working under regimes that are unfriendly to the United States may not be publicized out of concern for the safety of implementers and participants. But others may not be published because the implementers want to obscure their efforts from their digital adversaries.

All in all, while U.S. government media development depends on U.S. taxpayer money, transparency is not its strong suit. Project expenditures are not commonly available online. One of the few means to track the projects is through gathering the Requests for Proposals (RFPs, for contracts or, in some cases, grants) and Requests for Applications (RFAs, for one-time grants) published online by the federal agencies as part of the bidding process. Between October 2010 and January 2012, CIMA staff collected 44 media-related RFPs and RFAs, 20 from USAID and 24 from the State Department. The size of the proposed projects ranged from a modest \$250,000 (to promote human rights, civil society, and media freedom in North Korea) to an offering in

March 2011 of \$65 million, which included funding for “innovative strategies in the use of print, broadcast and electronic media” as well as a range of other civil society initiatives in Egypt.

A few of the projects are clearly designed to support the advancement of free and independent press practices. But many others describe their beneficiaries in broader terms. For example, one \$3 million program provides “technical assistance to and building the capacity of civil society activists/organizations, media actors, and new and opposition political parties: developing public advocacy and civic education campaigns, documenting human rights abuses, and improving access to justice and legal aid.”

Journalism rarely reaches the levels of professionalism exemplified by leading U.S. news organizations, and many civil society organizations have proven their capacity for more reliable newsgathering than local news media.

Many other proposals seek to improve the competence of information and communications technology (ICT) professionals, and to stimulate online networking. Common target audiences include journalists, youth, and “civil society activists.”

Does the distinction between support for journalists and support for activists matter, especially when the space is bridged by a category called “citizen journalists?” This is a debate that is simmering across the media community. In the United States, the stories produced by ProPublica, the *New York Times*, and National Public Radio are identified as “media content”—and so are the advocacy messages emitted by groups ranging from Occupy Wall Street to the Tea Party.

Any and all of these organizations and the platforms they utilize may be acceptable, useful, or even important, but the role of watchdog journalism is vastly different from the role of advocate. In the field of media development as applied to distant and turbulent societies, it can be difficult to know what exactly a given activist is trying to leverage through media tools. At the same time, it must also be recognized that journalism rarely reaches the levels of professionalism exemplified by leading U.S. news organizations, and many civil society organizations have proven their capacity for more reliable, and even more independent newsgathering than their local news media.

The Big Bang in Internet Freedom Programs

Some of the most hotly debated U.S. media funding initiatives are hardly visible on the “media development” grid. These are the projects that address the underlying architecture of the Internet, including efforts to support free access to the Internet in various countries.

This topic has sparked heated exchanges between Congress and the State Department. Between 2008 and 2010, Congress assigned \$50 million to the State Department for “programs to promote Internet access and circumvent government censorship around the world.”¹² Over this period, the State Department was engaged in a large-scale examination of how it should integrate digital media into various areas of operation.

In 2009, the State Department appointed Alec Ross, an advisor to President Obama’s 2008 Presidential campaign, to the position of senior advisor for innovation. Ross and a team of young technologists set out to modernize the State Department’s use of digital technology, based on a four-year plan. Ross has essentially served as an in-house technological evangelist for the State Department. (In September 2011 he reported, “I have personally trained over 5,000 ambassadors over the last 15 months” in the use of social media.¹³) He has been active in promoting the use of new applications both within the department and in programs abroad. In May 2010, Ross was joined by Ben Scott who was named policy advisor for innovation. Scott, a communications policy expert, had previously focused his work on U.S. media and communications policy at Free Press.

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Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made a declaration of intent in a speech in January 2010 at the Newseum in Washington, entitled “Remarks on Internet Freedom.” In it, she called for the U.S. government to take a bold stand against Internet censorship in countries such as China, Vietnam, and Iran. But the body of the speech mixed many elements of media funding; when Clinton laid out a list of specific digital projects, many of them (SMS earthquake response in Haiti, mobile education in Bangladesh, and mobile banking in Kenya) fell under the definition of media for development rather than “Internet freedom” concerns.

But Congress had its own ideas about the issue, many of them prompted by a recent Chinese state visit and a perceived “public diplomacy deficit” in America’s global rivalry. In February 2011, Senator Richard Lugar of Indiana, ranking Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, issued a sternly worded statement noting the State Department’s tardiness in addressing Internet freedom. His committee staff report, called *Another U.S. Deficit*, stated, “The Secretary of State’s January 2010 speech on Internet Freedom received scant follow-up as twelve months elapsed before the State department moved to disburse some \$30 million in funds specifically appropriated for Internet freedom promotion, including the development of Internet Censorship Circumvention Technology.”

The report added that “recent delays in allocating pre-existing funding” and the “inept handling of an untested technology have strengthened the hands of those governments, including China’s, who seek to restrict their citizens’ access to information. The State Department is poorly placed to handle this issue due to its reliance on daily bilateral interaction with these very same governments, particularly China.” The report concluded that the Broadcasting Board of Governors, the body that oversees the Voice of America and related foreign broadcasting, “was more properly poised to become a leader in the field for the U.S. Government.”¹⁴

The State Department took measures to bolster its position, hiring a number of new staff members to work on the issue. In February 2011 it appointed Ian Schuler, the information and communications technology manager for the National Democratic Institute, to serve as the senior manager for Internet freedom programs at State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL).¹⁵

The following month Clinton testified before the Senate Appropriations Committee, openly admitting that her department was struggling to come up with new approaches to an unprecedented media landscape. She reported that State had recently awarded more than “\$20 million in competitive grants through an open process, including evaluation by technical and policy experts” and expected to award more than \$25 million in 2011. “We’re taking what you might call a venture-capital approach. We are supporting a portfolio of technologies, tools and training, because, frankly, we don’t know what will work best. This is a pretty new field ... I have all these young tech experts who are doing this. So I’m just repeating what they tell me, but we are moving as fast as we can to deal with situations that are totally unprecedented.”¹⁶

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Clinton’s remarks highlighted the conflicts her department faced in the digital universe, where freedom of expression initiatives for little-known local actors might bump up against public diplomacy imperatives to transmit American values, culture, and inspiration. From this perspective, Clinton suggested, the current international distribution of U.S. commercial media was part of the problem:

“We are in an information war, and we cannot assume that this huge youth bulge that exists, not just in the Middle East, but in so many parts, knows much about it. I mean, we think they know us and reject us. I would argue they really don’t know very much about who we are ... And what we send out though our commercial media is often not very helpful to America’s story ... I remember ... right after the Afghan war started meeting an Afghan general who said he was so surprised because all he knew about America was that men were wrestlers and women wore bikinis, because all he ever saw from American television was World Wide Wrestling and Bay Watch.”¹⁷

By now, Congress was mixing public diplomacy concerns with demands regarding Internet freedom, and there was mounting pressure to take a portion of media funding away from the State Department and reassign it to the BBG. The State Department continued to support programs in Internet freedom and circumvention issues, media for development, and public diplomacy access to new platforms—as well as traditional media development projects. In March 2011, an influential group of U.S. Internet freedom activists weighed in, including representatives of Harvard’s Berkman Institute and the NGO MobileActive, both recipients of State Department media funding. The letter supported State’s claim to Internet freedom funding against the BBG’s, arguing in part that the core purpose of such funding was to serve a platform for local content, not to further U.S.-generated content (public diplomacy).

Nevertheless, in April 2011, in a move described by the *Washington Post* as a “rebuke,” Congress cut the State Department’s budget for promoting Internet freedom by a third, awarding it \$20 million and assigning the other \$10 million to the BBG.¹⁸ A Senate staff member told the *Post* that “using the broadcasting board to provide access to the Internet was a ‘double bonus,’ because the technology would take users first to a particular website, perhaps the Voice of America’s. If the State Department provides the technology, ‘it’s just going to take them straight to Google. That’s kind of stupid, given all the money we put into international broadcasting.’”

The new funding for BBG coincided with an organizational makeover for the agency, which had been widely criticized for falling behind the times, and whose overall funding has fluctuated.¹⁹ Under chairman Walter Isaacson (who served from 2009 to January 2012), the agency undertook a series of new approaches designed to modernize operations and restore the confidence of Congress. Isaacson sought to replace the reporting functions of the different regional services through a “single professional newsroom that feeds all the broadcast services” and the BBG explored new quasi-entertainment formats, reportedly lobbying Congress by “highlighting the success of such VOA television programs as *Parazit*, a Persian-language political satire modeled after *The Daily Show* in Iran.”²⁰

Members of Congress presume that open platforms may work against American interests. Internet freedom activists question whether U.S. government information services add value to the news and information diets of people living under authoritarian regimes.

The \$10 million in question represents an iota of the federal government’s 2012 \$3.8 trillion total budget. Nonetheless, the nature of the debate indicates some of the challenges ahead, in the form of conflicting definitions and values of the interested parties. Members of Congress presume that open platforms may work against American interests. Internet freedom activists question whether U.S. government information services add value to the news and information diets of people living under authoritarian regimes. Practical distinctions between the functions of “news,” “individual expression,” “political activism,” and “propaganda” may be lost in the debate, conflated and confused.

Implementers fear that impatient lawmakers often judge programs by the speed of their execution rather than the thoughtfulness of their design. The headlong rush has led to some embarrassments, most notably the “Haystack” incident, in which a little-known developer announced he had created the “magic bullet” program to protect Iranian digital activists from government harassment and surveillance. The State Department and the news media were quick to embrace the project without scrutiny, and were chagrined to find that few of its extravagant claims could be supported.²¹ As the Washington tech community’s new version of “trust but verify” goes: “You don’t want to get Haystacked.”

Programs and Projects

The shifts in media development towards digital projects do not mean that legacy media development programs have disappeared; far from it. Granted, most projects now include digital components, and training engages populations far beyond the journalists and journalism students of the past. But the creation of content remains a concern, and a large array of U.S. government-funded programs address it.

Based on the partial evidence of the RFPs and RFAs collected in the freedom of expression portfolio, government media programs are heavily concentrated in a few areas of the world: Afghanistan, the Middle East and North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, and the former Soviet Union.

In some places, political tensions create a serious impediment to working with participants in their own countries. In China, for example, U.S. journalism professors have become familiar figures at leading universities, but at the invitation of the Chinese institutions, not as a form of government media assistance. In Cuba, U.S. government programs exist to support online media, but they have had to proceed with great caution.

Geopolitical tensions can threaten media development projects in areas of the world where support is most needed.

Geopolitical tensions can threaten media development projects in areas of the world where support is most needed. Consider, for example, a USAID program to create a curriculum for Palestinian journalism education in universities on the West Bank. In October 2011, reacting to Palestine's bids for membership in the United Nations, Congress put the aid package that included the program's funding on hold.²² The program, administered by Internews, was cut back sharply. While much of the funding was reinstated later, it was with a heavier emphasis on digital media skills and cybersecurity. The incident illustrated how media development in unstable regions can be vulnerable to political considerations.

An initial phase of the program had been implemented by Roger Gafke, professor emeritus from the University of Missouri School of Journalism, and Wally Dean, a veteran CBS News producer with extensive experience in media development. According to Dean, he and Gafke worked with faculty from several universities on the West Bank to write new curricula for courses that would teach students new media skills, using the framework described in *The Elements of Journalism*, the book by Tom Rosenstiel and Bill Kovach that has been widely used in for training in the United States over the past decade. The need in the area is acute, given that there is no tradition of an independent news media, and political conflict is often fueled by rumor.

Dean believes that professional training in fact-based reporting and newsgathering techniques benefits the broader media environment.²³

Journalism training has traditionally been about replication, doing things the way they've always been done. Now it's more about re-invention, especially how news and information will be gathered, processed, and distributed using new technologies. What I fear may be lost in the emphasis on new technology is an understanding of what separates journalism (whether "professional" or "citizen") from all the other "stuff" in the new media universe. It is one thing to provide content but quite another to gather, assess, and distribute information using a journalistic discipline of verification.

The debate over the Palestinian program coincided with unprecedented funding for digital media in Arab countries, where they had been used to promote regime change. Policymakers now face the question of how Arab societies can construct the complex building blocks for democracy once the protesters leave the square, should they come up against larger geopolitical issues. Dean asks:

If one believes, as many of us do, that journalism is about the best tool yet invented to help people make better decisions about their lives and governments, what should be the "elements of journalism"—online and legacy—in a particular place at this point in time? ... I believe that guideposts are more important than ever because contributors, whether "professionals" or "citizens," increasingly work independently or, more precisely, in isolation. There is less editing that provided a second set of eyes or the conversation in which assumptions could be reality-checked among friends before "publishing." Absent an institutional safety net, the on-line contributor will create personal rules of the road. In terms of media development, the question is: What role do values have in the new media marketplace and how should this discussion be managed?

Media assistance from the U.S. government and other donors have made a major impact in Afghanistan, transforming a landscape that was once entirely dominated by the Taliban into an environment that now boasts hundreds of media outlets with diverse points of view.

Afghanistan has served as the most ambitious incubator for the various approaches to media development. The massive \$29 million Afghan Media Development and Empowerment Project (AMDEP), launched in August 2010, featured an unprecedented array of new and old approaches, in a country where very little legacy media stood in the way. In 2010 the U.S. Embassy in Kabul announced grants ranging from \$500 to \$10 million from the State Department's public diplomacy funds to "build communication capacity of the Afghan people and government...[or] counter extremist voices that recruit, mislead, and exploit."²⁴ The package included technical assistance to Afghan media-related ministries to promote "business-friendly government regulation of the airwaves and licensing procedures."

Media assistance from the U.S. government and other donors have made a major impact in Afghanistan, transforming a landscape that was once entirely dominated by the Taliban into an environment that now boasts hundreds of media outlets with diverse points of view. But a 2012 CIMA report found that after a decade of support, tens of millions of media development funding, and a geometric growth in access to digital platforms, the broader social goals of an informed society were still unmet. “Despite the rapid and widespread development of the Afghan media, the industry overall gets low grades for its independence and its lack of an investigative reporting ethic.”²⁵ It is too early to ascertain whether the greatest problems lie in individual project design or the lack of a long-term, sustained plan for media development, or both. However, if the United States is indeed in the midst of an “information war,” simply walking away from the problematic media landscape in Afghanistan and other precarious states would constitute a risk in itself.

Internet Freedom and Circumvention

U.S. government-funded media development is experiencing its own brand of “digital divide.” If one were to compare the implementers of in-country media development today with a list from five years ago, familiar organizations would reappear, starting with Internews and IREX. But the new field of Internet freedom and circumvention has brought a rapidly expanding list of new organizations, new job descriptions, a new culture—and a daunting list of new acronyms.

Moreover, while traditional media development projects often sent experienced U.S. journalists to work in-country with members of the local news media and journalism schools, funding for Internet freedom and circumvention may be spent entirely with the elite academic institutions and Washington think tanks. The implementers tend to be young with strong technological backgrounds. They typically have little experience (and sometimes little confidence) in traditional journalism. Some have considerable field experience, often in an economic development or advocacy context, rather than journalistic experience. Both forms of experience are valuable, but may lead to different paths. The premise of the old model was, “Teach them how to craft a solid story, and they’ll find a platform.” The new model’s premise is closer to the idea of “Establish a secure platform, and the content will come.” Today’s world increasingly requires both approaches, and wherever possible, they should inform each other.

Implementers of Internet freedom and circumvention projects tend to be young with strong technological backgrounds. They typically have little experience (and sometimes little confidence) in traditional journalism.

All of the U.S. government agencies named in this report—the State Department, USAID, and the Broadcasting Board of Governors—have been supporting programs connected to Internet security over the past few years. The State Department’s support is administered out of DRL, regional bureaus, and individual embassies.

It is impossible to name all of the organizations that have received funding to implement these projects; not even their fellow implementers know who they all are. An early beneficiary of the State Department grants in the field was Harvard’s Berkman Center for Internet and Society, which began a series of influential studies on Internet censorship with State Department funding in 2007. Berkman’s Rob Faris’s characterization of the work echoed Hillary Clinton: “You are engaging in cyberwarfare, on the side of the good guys.”²⁶ The funding generated some controversy. Berkman did not receive further government funding²⁷ for a period afterward, but there have been discussions of further government-funded research.

One major new player is the New America Foundation, founded in 1999, with seed money from Bill Moyers’s Florence and John Schuman Foundation; Google executive chairman Eric Schmidt serves as chairman of the board of directors. The foundation’s Open Technology Institute, headed

by Sascha Meinrath, has become one of the most influential think tanks and laboratories for digital policy in Washington, as well as the generator of highly regarded projects in digital media development. Meinrath, who has been working in circumvention technology since 2000, entered the field after he learned of a State Department RFP at a dinner party. He applied for it and was awarded the contract, which began this year.

Meinrath's \$2 million Commotion Wireless project, which the *New York Times* dubbed "Internet in a suitcase," uses mesh network technology to connect individual mobile phones and laptops into a wireless web without a central hub.²⁸ This would allow users to continue to communicate locally despite government measures to disconnect them, and could also support access in underserved communities.²⁹

Commotion is built on the Ubiquiti Nanostation, a wireless device the size of a steam iron that sells for about \$80, that is mounted on anchor institutions such as homes and churches.³⁰

According to Meinrath, "We're adding security mechanisms and encryption to software and integrating the best features from various projects from around the globe." Meinrath is committed to a "user-friendly front end. We want our grandmothers to be able to use this technology."

In some cases, the lack of public disclosure regarding projects is a matter of security concerns for foreign partners working under dangerous conditions.

One measure of the success of the project came in the wake of a *New York Times* article about it last year. Iranian intelligence minister Heidar Moslehi claimed that Iran found means to defeat it, which had the effect of flooding Meinrath's office with requests from Iran for downloads. "He did more to spread word about our technology than we ever could have done," Meinrath reported.³¹

And once a cluster of downloads occur in a given location, the project can easily go viral. As the London *Guardian* pointed out in a recent article, "Used in conjunction with a 'delay-tolerant' Twitter application, it could let people continue to use the social network despite censorship. Then, as soon as any node on the network managed to connect to the wider internet, it could push out all backlogged tweets for the word to see."³²

Meinrath said that DRL has created a portfolio of a dozen groups doing similar work in Washington, but "I still don't know who all of them are." In some cases, the lack of public disclosure is a matter of security concerns for foreign partners working under dangerous conditions. But for others based in Washington, Meinrath believes "It's a habit—'Security through obscurity.'"³³

The foundation's project is "radically transparent," Meinrath said. Its partners include GSM cellular in Moscow, Serval in Australia, the Guardian Project in New York, and Funkfeuer in Vienna, all contributing to the package of new online tools. He anticipates that Western European

state donors will be funding similar efforts, since a number of them share DRL’s concerns. According to Meinrath, “The European Community has put 5 million euros into a project called Confine, for next-generation wireless, community network testbeds.”³⁴ (Confine is a collaboration between a number of universities and community wireless projects.)

Meinrath has several reservations about the direction his field is taking. One is the proliferation of funder-driven projects, which may not correspond to the needs in the field and leads to poorly conceived, aborted projects. “This funding leaves lots of road-kill,” he noted. Another problem is the lack of coordination among the leading donors. “The [Open Society Foundations and] State and USAID don’t compare notes, and that results in more wasted resources.” He sees another problem with fragmentation. “There’s a need for general use solutions—not just the Iranian solution and the Chinese solution—because it’s obsolete before it’s done.”

Meinrath has worked extensively with independent media organizations Indymedia and Free Press. (Free Press’s Washington office was headed by Ben Scott before he became Hillary Clinton’s digital policy advisor). Meinrath is perturbed by the lack of dialogue between those who stress content and those who focus on technology. Who are the thought leaders in the new media development landscape? “There aren’t any. You need someone who understands journalism and tech, geopolitics and economies.”

Clinton advisor Ben Scott is one of the people trying to put those pieces together. He bases his theoretical framework on the idea that Internet freedom is critical to advancing international trade, drawing from a Clinton speech on the “Dictator’s Dilemma”: “If you put your hand on the scale of mass media, you disrupt trade and personal communications.”³⁵

This was one of the lessons of Egypt’s Tahrir Square: When the Mubarak regime attempted to cut off access to digital media to thwart protesters, it also frustrated myriad other non-political business and interpersonal interchanges. The action disrupted the national economy to an unsustainable level, and hastened the fall of the regime. According to Scott, “Free flow of information and freedom of expression are the same thing.” The looming question is “How do you keep this amorphous network going? As you see the next two billion people coming on to the Internet—and they’re not in North America or Europe—there will be new challenges.”³⁶

Scott believes that new hybrid programs funded by USAID can assist in the transition. “USAID programs have been brought under the Internet freedom umbrella, helping people learn how to use the Internet. [These include] journalism training—anyone with a smart phone can become a

“USAID programs have been brought under the Internet freedom umbrella, helping people learn how to use the Internet. [These include] journalism training—anyone with a smart phone can become a reporter. How do you manage that in journalism?”

— Ben Scott,
U.S. Department of State

reporter, participate in crowdsourcing. How do you manage that in journalism? A lot is about digital literacy. The key development is the smart phone—3G and 4G [third- and fourth-generation bandwidth] are being brought to the new markets for the first time. This raises the stakes for opportunities and vulnerability at the same time.”³⁷

While the public rhetoric tends to focus on repressive regimes such as Iran and China, the debate over what constitutes Internet freedom is less black and white. Bob Boorstin, director of corporate and policy communications at Google, believes that the world can be divided into three types of regimes: first, the grouping that includes Sweden, the Netherlands and the United States, for the most part committed to Internet freedom. The second grouping includes China, Russia, Iran, and Syria, “a miserable crew, committed to controlling the Internet.”³⁸

“I’m most interested in the countries in the middle—Brazil, India, Argentina, Chile, Southeast Asia, the Philippines,” he said. “Which way will they go?” It should be noted that few of the “countries in the middle” are candidates for U.S. media assistance—but all of them will be affected by the borderless Internet freedom technology and initiatives developed to address the “miserable crew.”

The divide between traditional and digital media development is sure to lead to spirited policy debates for a long time to come. Some of the government’s most vocal critics claim that in the cat-and-mouse game of Internet censorship, the U.S. government takes the side of the Chinese and Iranian mice—until its own interests are involved, at which point it develops cat-like characteristics. “It’s time to stop quoting Clinton’s speech,” says Internet security expert and Open Society Fellow Chris Soghoian. “The U.S. has shut down tens of thousands of websites.”³⁹

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For those working on the front lines of media development, where freedom of expression can be a life-and-death matter, such arguments may seem secondary. One media development specialist stressed the importance of providing technical assistance to individuals and organizations in the field who would be targets of malware. “If they can scare people away from online activity, they can silence dissent. If you empower communities working on Internet security to function as more of a community, you bring them together.”⁴⁰

The importance of digital media development can only grow with time, he said. “In today’s world of good hackers, writing code can be a pure form of free speech.”

A U.S. government official with long experience in media development said he sees two major challenges in the current digital media development arena.⁴¹

The first, he said, is the tendency to misjudge the speed of technological adaptation in developing countries. This can lead to an overemphasis on the newest technologies when much of the

target population is still relying on traditional media. The problem arises, he said, when “you’re anticipating the market too far ahead. You get involved in big projects and then it ends.” The question is not whether to invest in new technologies, but rather how to analyze, sequence, pace, and distribute their introduction for the maximum benefit to the public.

The second issue he sees is the difficulty in managing the growing demand, in a rapidly evolving technological landscape and an expanding field. In May, Thomas Melia, deputy assistant secretary of state at DRL, told a Washington audience, “We’re not going to see expanding [federal] budgets, but the proposition for media may grow ... You can expect that the part that goes for media, Internet freedom and digital in particular will remain.”⁴² This will require a considerable effort on the part of the government experts charged with shaping the programs.

Recommendations

Only a decade ago, it was still difficult to anticipate the nature of digital revolution to come in the U.S. and Western Europe. Now it is having an undeniable impact on every aspect of society.

Over the next decade, that impact will spread to massive populations around the globe who do not currently have access to digital media. Mobile platforms operating at increasing speed will offer potential uses that are currently unimagined. These in turn will transform education and public health delivery systems, as well as journalism, political discourse, and international relations.

It is natural for the initial response to such an era to be improvised, uncoordinated, and dependent on the resources that come to hand; this has been the case with many Western governments' approach to media development. But given the scale, the dynamism and the complexity of the global media landscape, this response is critically out of date.

The U.S. government should take steps to:

1. Increase transparency in the funding of digital initiatives, with the exception of information that would endanger the security of vulnerable populations.
2. Create stronger connections between implementers working on technological platforms and those supporting the creation of content. Both sides have much to learn from each other, and the media development culture would benefit from less of an “either/or” approach.
3. Expand the staffs within USAID, the State Department and the BBG who are working on media development, and create flexible teams that can combine personnel with regional, cultural, and reporting expertise with technologists.
4. Promote more extensive research partnerships with more U.S. universities that can serve as incubators for thought leadership in media development, and help to shape the underlying inter-disciplinary principles for the future.
5. Maintain support for both the news and information needs of broader civil society and the outlets for digital dissent.
6. Increase communications and coordination with Western European government donors and other major donors, especially the Open Society Foundations, to share research and best practices in digital media development.

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