



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement at the Closing Plenary of the OSCE Internet 2013 Conference

As delivered by Deputy Assistant Secretary Daniel Baer
Vienna, February 15, 2013

I am pleased to join you in addressing a defining challenge of the 21st century: upholding Internet Freedom. I commend the RFOM for convening this Conference and note that the OSCE has a long tradition of promoting and defending human rights and fundamental freedoms everywhere. These human rights and fundamental freedoms include freedoms we exercise online.

The United States champions Internet freedom because it recognizes the applicability online of longstanding, universal and cherished rights—the fundamental freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly, and association, as well as the freedom of Religion or belief. An open Internet gives people a neutral space in which to know and act upon their rights and help to shape the future of their communities, their countries and the world. Men and women in every country deserve to be able to take part in building a more peaceful, prosperous, and free international community. In the 21st century, technology is an empowering platform that ordinary citizens can use to exercise and demand respect for their rights. In turn, ensuring that the Internet itself remains a free medium helps create the space for people to use this technology to pursue their aspirations for dignity and freedom.

As former Secretary Clinton emphasized: “The rights of individuals to express their views freely, petition their leaders, worship according to their beliefs – these rights are universal, whether they are exercised in a public square or on an individual blog. The freedoms to assemble and associate also apply in cyberspace. In our time, people are as likely to come together to pursue common interests online as in a church or a labor hall.”

As we all know, the Internet and other new technologies are having a profound effect on the ability of citizens across the globe to become informed about their societies and the world, to form networks and organize civic movements. And because repressive regimes understand the power of this technology to empower their citizens, they are redoubling their attempts to control it. It is no coincidence that authorities who try to restrict the exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms by their people, who impede the work of human rights defenders and civil society organizations, who control the press and obstruct the flow of information, tend to be the same authorities who try to restrict, impede, control and obstruct their citizens’ peaceful use of these new connective technologies. (And, incidentally, the same ones who appear too afraid to join in reaffirming the applicability of timeless principles in this digital age.)

Today, two billion people are on line -- nearly a third of humankind -- and in the next 20 years that number will more than double. Connection technologies will profoundly affect every

sphere of our lives –including the content and conduct of domestic political discussions and international relations.

Connection technologies strengthen the capacity of people everywhere to contribute to the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, and to the democratic development, modernization, cultural enrichment, economic prosperity and security of their countries.

By now, governments understand that both they and their citizens can harness the power of new technologies, which can act as accelerants – or inhibitors -- of innovation and political, social and economic change. Many governments have embraced these new technologies as a way to connect with and serve their citizens, and they are reaping the common benefits. Other governments welcome these technologies only selectively. With one hand, they endeavor to use them in a restricted fashion as tools of innovation, commerce and scientific advancement. With the other, they wield them as tools of repression.

When Internet freedom is challenged, a range of human rights and fundamental freedoms are often at stake, not solely freedom of expression. Indeed, the interconnections among fundamental freedoms become more apparent as new technologies converge – for example, unlike traditional media, social media are capable of facilitating actual and virtual conversations, associations and assemblies in real time.

Today, governments within the OSCE are: filtering and censoring content; creating ‘blacklists’ of forbidden Internet sites; taking down sites posting content with which they disagree; targeting independent sites with distributed denial of service attacks; perpetrating localized shutdowns of Internet and SMS messaging capabilities; trying to create so-called national Internets – national barriers in cyberspace -- that would prevent their citizens from accessing the global Internet. They are using terms like, quote “information security” and “internet management” to try to justify repression. They are persecuting bloggers who criticize their own governments, targeting social media and stealing identifying information about their own people in order to target them for persecution.

States cannot wall off the Internet – at least not for long and not without detriment to the very characteristics that make the Internet an enabler of creativity and success. So, too, as Europe’s recent past teaches us, you cannot wall off freedom -- not by slabs of concrete and not by blocking online content.

We must push back against Internet repression and make a principled stand for openness and safe access to the Internet, even as we work together and grapple with age-old challenges on the new digital terrain. We commend our partners in the EU, and applaud the efforts of the recent Lithuanian and Irish Chairmanships, for making Media Freedom and Safety of Journalists online and offline priorities, and we urge that these compelling concerns remain priorities under the Ukrainian Chairmanship. As part of our global effort to counter online repression, the United States has joined likeminded democracies in launching the Digital Defenders partnership, an unprecedented collaboration among governments to provide support for digital activists under threat. The Digital Defenders Partnership aims to keep the Internet open and free from emerging threats specifically in repressive and transitional environments. As an initial investment, The Netherlands, The United States, The United Kingdom and the Government of Estonia, have dedicated over 2.5 million Euros to the Digital Defenders Partnership.

The US fully recognizes that the Internet is being used by malevolent and irresponsible actors in the conduct of terrorist activities and other crimes, to foment violent extremism, to propagate anti-Semitism and other forms of intolerance and to purvey child pornography. We condemn and are determined to combat all of these appalling endeavors online and off line.

Some argue that extensive government controls of the Internet are necessary to be effective against these vile phenomena. But, it is possible to keep people safe in a way that preserves their rights. The responsibility to thwart terrorism and crime and act against hatred in all its ugly forms should not be used by governments as a justification for restricting the exercise of fundamental freedoms online and offline. We will continue to resist efforts by some governments to rationalize their repression of fundamental freedoms exercised online and offline in the guise of regulations to address these real-world dangers.

The Internet is home to every kind of speech – false, truthful, offensive, beautiful, incendiary, uplifting, trite and transformative. What we say and post and tweet has consequences. Hateful words can inflame hostilities and deepen divisions. New connection technologies can amplify intolerant speech, and once it is out on the web, it is impossible to retract. At the same time, the Internet also provides a space for people to debate and bridge their differences and build understanding.

The way to combat hate speech, online or off, is not to criminalize it, but to contest it. Governments in particular should lead by example. We should protect the exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms on line and off with the force of law, reject the propagators of hate with the force of conscience, and project our voices online and off in defense of human dignity, confident that, in the long run, the force of reason will win out over hate. Governments that respect their citizens have no reason to fear when citizens exercise their rights. And governments that respect the rights of their citizens have no reason to fear a free Internet. As President Obama has said: “suppressing ideas never succeeds in making them go away.”

But just as we support individuals who are targeted every day for exercising their rights online, we are conscious of a broader threat to the future of Internet openness. Right now, in various international forums, including OSCE, some countries are working to change how the Internet is governed. They want to replace the current multi-stakeholder approach, which supports the free flow of information in a global network, and includes governments, the private sector, and citizens. In its place, they aim to impose a system that expands control over Internet resources, institutions, and content, and centralizes that control in the hands of governments. These debates will play out in international forums over the next few months and years.

The United States supports preserving and deepening the current multi-stakeholder approach because it brings together the best of governments, the private sector and civil society to manage the network, and it works. The multi-stakeholder system has kept the Internet up and running for years, all over the world. We want the next generation of Internet users -- whether individual citizens, small business owners or independent journalists - to be involved in shaping the future of the platform.

We also welcome contributions that would strengthen international efforts to ensure Internet Freedom. The distinguished Dutch representative already spoke about the Freedom Online

Coalition, of which we are proud to be a part. The Coalition will hold its third conference in June, and issued a joint statement today.

What we do now to ensure a global, open and free Internet and the rights of those who use it, will have a profound effect on how billions of men and women on the planet exercise their human rights and fundamental freedoms in the decades to come.

Of course, the work of building a democracy and protecting human rights is never done, and one of the strengths of the OSCE has been that it provides a forum for discussing this challenge and making progress together. To date, forty-eight OSCE participating States, including the United States, have cosponsored the draft Declaration on Fundamental Freedoms in the Digital Age. We urge those that have not yet done so to do the same, and join the growing global consensus that human rights and fundamental freedoms do not change with new technologies, and to reaffirm that all countries have the obligation to respect and ensure the free exercise of these rights and freedoms online and off.

Again, we champion Internet Freedom because we champion human rights and fundamental freedoms. Human rights and fundamental freedoms inhere in people, not in technologies. The Internet is just a new venue for their exercise. We do not need a new set of international treaties or rules governing the exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms in online space. We have them already – they are embodied in international law and enshrined in the Helsinki Final Act and other OSCE documents.