Freedom Abroad, Repression at Home: The Clinton Paradox

The London Conference on Cyberspace, attended by top government leaders and corporate actors, was set against a backdrop of increasing concerns about cyberwarfare and the risks (to governments and businesses) of the open internet. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was meant to deliver a keynote address. Clinton's expected participation and the event's focus on the threats to intellectual property and national security of open networks suggest that a worrying feature of US internet policy may be coming to the UK. This feature – what I call the Clinton Paradox – consists of stressing internet freedom abroad while controlling or limiting networks in ways that could constrain the same freedoms at home. The UK government's concern with the risks of an open internet, and its stress on policing and 'protection from threat' suggest that this same strategy may be repeated here. Already, we can see the roots of the "Clinton Paradox" in the response of leaders to recent events like the so-called "Facebook" or "Twitter revolutions" of the Arab Spring.

Both Prime Minister David Cameron and Hillary Clinton initially come out in support of these movements and of the importance of open communication networks in general. In February 2011 Cameron gave a speech in Kuwait, saying "[The movement] belongs to a new generation for whom technology – the internet and social media – is a powerful tool in the hands of citizens, not a means of repression." Similarly, Clinton's 2011 Internet Freedom Agenda states, "the internet has become the public space of the 21st century – the world's town square, classroom, marketplace, coffeehouse, and nightclub. . . The value of these spaces derives from the variety of activities people can pursue in them, from holding a rally to selling their vegetables, to having a private conversation. These spaces provide an open platform, and so does the internet. It does not serve any particular agenda, and it never should."

At home though, leaders took a different tack. When WikiLeaks, founded to release publicly significant information not published elsewhere, published information embarrassing to the US government, Clinton helped to co-ordinate action by government, banks and internet service providers to withdraw support from the organization and (unsuccessfully) remove it from the web. Other domestic policies likewise tend away from freedom and towards control. For example, the US Federal Communications Commission has now ruled that mobile devices are not subject to the net neutrality rules that prohibit discrimination of media content based on its source or destination. Instead, mobile operators, who now control the means through which an increasing number of people go online, can block, throttle, or degrade any kind of content they like. Most recently, the ominously named E-PARASITE bill was introduced into the US Congress. It stipulates that an internet service provider can be liable for any content or site that it delivers that has a "high probability" of being used for copyright infringement. Critics of the bill claim that this provision could extend to almost any site that hosts user-generated content.

Cameron's recent actions suggest that his government could also be pursuing a harder line on control of internet and social media. After the riots in August, Cameron's advisors for a time seriously considered censoring Twitter and other messaging systems. Net neutrality is less important than the opportunities provided to internet service providers to differentiate their service and develop new markets. Although no equivalent of the E-PARASITE bill has been proposed, the

UK internet registrar, Nominet, is investigating ways of dealing with imminent criminality online, including the trade of illegal goods. These could include removal of websites. For the moment this endeavour is narrowly focused on crime, but it raises the question of whether government or law enforcement would like more control over what appears online.

The rhetoric of control and security suggests that an open internet brings risks of terrorism, crime and theft. Speaking in advance of the London Conference on Cyberspace, UK Foreign Secretary William Hague stressed the risks of cyber-attacks to government and business, noting that banking and taxation systems were 'liable to attack'. He stated, ""Countries that cannot maintain cybersecurity of their banking system, of the intellectual property of their companies, will be at a serious disadvantage in the world." In his speech at the conference itself, he broadly supported the ideals of the open internet, while tempering his enthusiasm with renewed commitments to security and an end to the 'cyber free-for-all'. He mentioned the "heightened risk of exposure to crime as efforts to clamp down on crimes such as child pornography in one part of the world are rendered ineffective by illegal practices on networks in other countries" as well as the financial and social risks of terrorism online.

The UK government may be at risk of making policies that fit into the Clinton Paradox: praising the importance of an open internet but continuing to support policies and enforcement strategies that concentrate control of the internet and social media into the hands of a few. This is not a call to return to naïve cyber-utopianism. A global, networked communication and data transfer platform certainly carries risks. The question is whether those risks should be replaced with repression.

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