chapter two

Texting Like It's 1989

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The history of cyber-utopianism is not very eventful, but the date January 21, 2010, has a guaranteed place in its annals—probably right next to Andrew Sullivan's blog posts about Twitter's role in Tehran. For this was the day when the sitting U.S. secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, went to the Newseum, America's finest museum of news and journalism, to deliver a seminal speech about Internet freedom and thus acknowledge the Internet's prominent role in foreign affairs.

The timing of Clinton's speech could not have been better. Just a week earlier, Google announced it was considering pulling out of China—hinting that the Chinese government may have had something to do with it—so everyone was left guessing if the issue would get a mention (it did). One could feel palpable excitement all over Washington: An American commitment to promoting Internet freedom promised a new line of work for entire families in this town. All the usual suspects—policy analysts, lobbyists, consultants—were eagerly anticipating the opening salvo of this soon-to-be-lavishly-funded "war for Internet freedom." For Washington, it was the kind of universally admired quest for global justice that could allow think tanks to churn out

a slew of in-depth research studies, defense contractors to design a number of cutting-edge censorship-breaking technologies, and NGOs to conduct a series of risky trainings in the most exotic locales on Earth. This is why Washington beats any other city in the world, including Iran and Beijing, in terms of how often and how many of its residents search for the term "Internet freedom" on Google. A campaign to promote Internet freedom is a genuinely Washingtonian phenomenon.

But there was also something distinctively unique about this gathering. It's not very often that the Beltway's BlackBerry mafia—the buttoned-up think-tankers and policy wonks—get to share a room with the iPhone fanboys—the unkempt and chronically underdressed entrepreneurs from Silicon Valley. Few other events could bring together Larry Diamond, a senior research fellow at the conservative Hoover Institution and a former senior adviser to the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq, and Chris "FactoryJoe" Messina, the twenty-nine-year-old cheerleader of Web 2.0 and Google's "Open Web Advocate" (that's his official job title!). It was a "geeks + wonks" feast.

The speech itself did not offer many surprises; its objective was to establish "Internet freedom" as a new priority for American foreign policy, and judging by the buzz that Clinton's performance generated in the media, that objective was accomplished, even if specific details were never divulged. The generalizations drawn by Clinton were rather upbeat—"information freedom supports the peace and security that provide a foundation for global progress"—and so were her prescriptions: "We need to put these tools in the hands of people around the world who will use them to advance democracy and human rights." There were too many buzzwords—"deficiencies in the current market for innovation," "harnessing the power of connection technologies," "long-term dividends from modest investments in innovation"—but such, perhaps, was the cost of trying to look cool in front of the Silicon Valley audience.

Excessive optimism and empty McKinsey-speak aside, it was Clinton's creative use of recent history that really stood out. Clinton drew a parallel between the challenges of promoting Internet freedom and the experiences of supporting dissidents during the Cold War. Speak-

ing of her recent visit to Germany to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, Clinton mentioned "the courageous men and women" who "made the case against oppression by circulating small pamphlets called samizdat," which "helped pierce the concrete and concertina wire of the Iron Curtain." (Newseum was a very appropriate venue to give in to Cold War nostalgia. It happens to house the largest display of sections of the Berlin Wall outside of Germany).

Something very similar is happening today, argued Clinton, adding that "as networks spread to nations around the globe, virtual walls are cropping up in place of visible walls." And as "a new information curtain is descending across much of the world . . . viral videos and blog posts are becoming the samizdat of our day." Even though Clinton did not articulate many policy objectives, they were not hard to guess from her chosen analogy. Virtual walls are to be pierced, information curtains are to be raised, digital samizdat is to be supported and disseminated, and bloggers are to be celebrated as dissidents.

As far as Washington was concerned, having Clinton utter that highly seductive phrase—"a new information curtain"—in the same breath as the Berlin Wall was tantamount to announcing a sequel to the Cold War in 3D. She tapped into the secret desires of many policymakers, who had been pining for an enemy they understood, someone unlike that bunch of bearded and cave-bound men from Waziristan who showed little appreciation for balance-of-power theorizing and seemed to occupy so much of the present agenda.

It was Ronald Reagan's lieutenants who must have felt particularly excited. Having claimed victory in the analog Cold War, they felt well-prepared to enlist—nay, triumph—in its digital equivalent. But it was certainly not the word "Internet" that made Internet freedom such an exciting issue for this group. As such, the quest for destroying the world's cyber-walls has given this aging generation of cold warriors, increasingly out of touch with a world beset by problems like climate change or the lack of financial regulation, something of a lifeline. Not that those other modern problems are unimportant—they are simply not existential enough, compared to the fight against communism. For

many members of this rapidly shrinking Cold War lobby, the battle for Internet freedom is their last shot at staging a major intellectual comeback. After all, whom else would the public call on but them, the tireless and self-deprecating statesmen who helped rid the world of all those other walls and curtains?

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It only took a few months for one such peculiar group of Washington insiders to convene a high-profile conference to discuss how a host of Cold War policies—and particularly Western support for Soviet dissidents—could be recovered from the dustbin of history and applied to the current situation. Spearheaded by George W. Bush, who, by then, had mostly retreated from the public arena, the gathering attracted a number of hawkish neoconservatives. Perhaps out of sheer disgust with the lackluster foreign policy record of the Obama administration, they had decided to wage their own fight for freedom on the Internet.

There was, of course, something surreal about George W. Bush, who was rather dismissive of the "Internets" while in office, presiding over this Internet-worship club. But then, for Bush at least, this meeting had little to do with the Web per se. Rather, its goal was to push the "freedom agenda" into new, digital territories. Seeing the internet as an ally, Bush, always keen to flaunt his credentials as the dissidents' best friend—he met more than a hundred of them while in office—agreed to host a gathering of what he called "global cyber-dissidents" in, of all places, Texas. Featuring half a dozen political bloggers from countries like Syria, Cuba, Colombia, and Iran, the conference was one of the first major public events organized by the newly inaugurated George W. Bush Institute. The pomposity of its lineup, with panels like "Freedom Stories from the Front Lines" and "Global Lessons in eFreedom," suggested that even two decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, its veterans are still fluent in Manichean rhetoric.

But the Texas conference was not just a gathering of disgruntled and unemployed neoconservatives; respected Internet experts, like Ethan Zuckerman and Hal Roberts of Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet

and Society, were in attendance as well. A senior official from the State Department—technically an Obama man—was also dispatched to Texas. "This conference highlights the work of a new generation of dissidents in the hope that it will become a beacon to others," said James Glassman, a former high-profile official in the Bush administration and the president of the George W. Bush Institute, on opening the event. According to Glassman, the conference aimed "to identify trends in effective cyber communication that spread human freedom and advance human rights." (Glassman, it must be said, is to cyber-utopianism what Thoreau is to civil disobedience; he famously coauthored a book called *Dow 36,000,* predicting that the Dow Jones was on its way toward a new height; it came out a few months before the dot-com bubble burst in 2000.)

David Keyes, a director of a project called Cyberdissidents.org, was one of the keynote speakers at the Bush event, serving as a kind of bridge to the world of the old Soviet dissidents. He used to work with Natan Sharansky, a prominent Soviet dissident whose thinking shaped much of the Bush administration's global quest for freedom. (Sharansky's *The Case for Democracy: The Power of Freedom to Overcome Tyranny and Terror* was one of the few books Bush read during his time in office; it exerted a significant influence, as Bush himself acknowledged: "If you want a glimpse of how I think about foreign policy read Natan Sharansky's book. . . . Read it. It's a great book.") According to Keyes, the mission of Cyberdissidents.org is to "make the Middle East's pro-democracy Internet activists famous and beloved in the West"—that is, to bring them to Sharansky's level of fame (the man himself sits on Cyberdissidents's board of advisers).

But one shouldn't jump to conclusions too hastily. The "cyber-cons" that attended the Texas meeting are not starry-eyed utopians, who think that the Internet will magically rid the world of dictators. On the contrary, they eagerly acknowledge—much more so than the liberals in the Obama administration—that authoritarian governments are also active on the Internet. "Democracy is not just a tweet away," writes Jeffrey Gedmin, the president of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and another high-profile attendee at the event (a Bush appointee, he enjoys stellar

conservative credentials, including a senior position at the American Enterprise Institute). That the cyber-cons happen to believe in the power of bloggers to topple those governments is not a sign of cyber-utopianism; rather it's the result of the general neoconservative outlook on how authoritarian societies function and on the role that dissidents—both online and offline varieties—play in transforming them. Granted, shades of utopianism are easily discernible in their vision, but this is not utopianism about technology; this is utopianism about politics in general.

The Iraqi experience may have somewhat curbed their enthusiasm, but the neoconservative belief that all societies aspire to democracy and would inevitably head in its direction—if only all the obstacles were removed—is as strong as ever. The cyber-cons may have been too slow to realize the immense potential of the Internet in accomplishing their agenda; in less than two decades it removed more such obstacles than all neocon policies combined. But now that authoritarian governments were also actively moving into this space, it was important to stop them. For most attendees at the Bush gathering, the struggle for Internet freedom was quickly emerging as the quintessential issue of the new century, the one that could help them finish the project that Ronald Reagan began in the 1980s and that Bush did his best to advance in the first decade of the new century. It seems that in the enigma of Internet freedom, neoconservatism, once widely believed to be on the wane, has found a new raison d'être—and a new lease on life to go along with it.

Few exemplify the complex intellectual connections between Cold War history, neoconservatism, and the brave new world of Internet freedom better than Mark Palmer. Cofounder of the National Endowment for Democracy, the Congress-funded leading democracy-promoting organization in the world, Palmer served as Ronald Reagan's ambassador to Hungary during the last years of communism. He is thus well-informed about the struggles of the Eastern European dissidents; he is equally knowledgeable about the ways in which the West nurtured them, for a lot of that support passed through the U.S. embassy. Today Palmer, a member of the uber-hawkish Committee on the Present Danger, has emerged as a leading advocate of Internet freedom, mostly on

behalf of Falun Gong, a persecuted spiritual group from China, which is one of the most important behind-the-scenes players in the burgeoning industry of Internet freedom. Falun Gong runs several websites that were banned once the group fell out with the Chinese government in 1999. Hence its practitioners have built an impressive fleet of technologies to bypass China's numerous firewalls, making the banned sites accessible from within the country. Palmer has penned passionate pleas—including congressional testimonies—demanding that the U.S. government allocate more funding to Falun Gong's sprawling technology operation to boost their capacity and make their technology available in other repressive countries. (The U.S. State Department turned down at least one such request, but then in May 2010, under growing pressure from Falun Gong's numerous supporters, including conservative outfits like the Hudson Institute and the editorial pages of the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal*, it relented, granting $1.5 million to the group.)

Palmer's views about the promise of the Internet epitomize the cyber-con position at its hawkish extreme. In his 2003 book *Breaking the Real Axis of Evil: How to Oust the World's Last Dictators by 2025*, his guide to overthrowing forty-five of the world's authoritarian leaders, a book that makes Dick Cheney look like a dove, Palmer lauded the emancipatory power of the Internet, calling it "a force multiplier for democracy and an expense multiplier for dictators." For him, the Internet is an excellent way to foster civil unrest that can eventually result in a revolution: "Internet skills are readily taught, and should be, by the outside democracies. Few undertakings are more cost effective than 'training the trainers' for Internet organizing." The Web is thus a powerful tool for regime change; pro-democracy activists in authoritarian states should be taught how to blog and tweet in more or less the same fashion that they are taught to practice civil disobedience and street protest—the two favorite themes of U.S.-funded trainings whose agendas are heavily influenced by the work of the American activist-academic Gene Sharp, the so-called Machiavelli of nonviolence.

With regard to Iran, for example, one of Palmer's proposed solutions is to turn diplomatic missions of "democratic states" into "freedom

houses, providing to Iranians cybercafés with access to the Internet and other communications equipment, as well as safe rooms for meetings." But Palmer's love for freedom houses goes well beyond Iran. He is a board member and a former vice chair of Freedom House, another mostly conservative outfit that specializes in tracking democratization across the world and, when an opportune moment comes along, helping to spread it. (Because of their supposed role in fomenting Ukraine's Orange Revolution, Freedom House and George Soros's Open Society Foundations are two of the Kremlin's favorite Western bogeymen.) Perhaps in part thanks to pressure from Palmer, Freedom House has recently expanded its studies of democratization into the digital domain, publishing a report on the Internet freedom situation in fifteen countries and, with some financial backing by the U.S. government, has even set up a dedicated Internet Freedom Initiative. Whatever its emancipatory potential, the Internet will remain Washington's favorite growth industry for years to come.

Cyber Cold War

But it would be disingenuous to suggest that it's only neoconservatives who like delving into their former glory to grapple with the digital world. That the intellectual legacy of the Cold War can be repurposed to better understand the growing host of Internet-related emerging problems is an assumption widely shared across the American political spectrum. "To win the cyber-war, look to the Cold War," writes Mike McConnell, America's former intelligence chief. "[The fight for Internet freedom] is a lot like the problem we had during the Cold War," concurs Ted Kaufman, a Democratic senator from Delaware. Freud would have had a good laugh on seeing how the Internet, a highly resilient network designed by the U.S. military to secure communications in case of an attack by the Soviet Union, is at pains to get over its Cold War parentage. Such intellectual recycling is hardly surprising. The fight against communism has supplied the foreign policy establishment with so many buzzwords and metaphors—the Iron Curtain, the Evil Empire, Star Wars, the Missile Gap—that many of them could be raised from

the dead today—simply by adding the annoying qualifiers like "cyber-," "digital," and "2.0."

By the virtue of sharing part of its name with the word "firewall," the Berlin Wall is by far the most abused term from the vocabulary of the Cold War. Senators are particularly fond of the metaphorical thinking that it inspires. Arlen Specter, a Democrat from Pennsylvania, has urged the American government to "fight fire with fire in finding ways to breach these firewalls, which dictatorships use to control their people and keep themselves in power." Why? Because "tearing down these walls can match the effect of what happened when the Berlin Wall was torn down." Speaking in October 2009 Sam Brownback, a Republican senator from Kansas, argued that "as we approach the 20th anniversary of the breaking of the Berlin Wall, we must . . . commit ourselves to finding ways to tear down . . . the cyber-walls." It feels as if Ronald Reagan's speech-writers are back in town, churning out speeches about the Internet.

European politicians are equally poetic. Carl Bildt, a former prime minister of Sweden, believes that dictatorships are fighting a losing battle because "cyber walls are as certain to fall as the walls of concrete once did." And even members of predominantly liberal NGOs cannot resist the temptation. "As in the cold war [when] you had an Iron Curtain, there is concern that authoritarian governments . . . are developing a Virtual Curtain," says Arvind Ganesan of Human Rights Watch.

Journalists, always keen to sacrifice nuance in the name of supposed clarity, are the worst abusers of Cold War history for the purpose of explaining the imperative to promote Internet freedom to their audience. Roger Cohen, a foreign affairs columnist for the *International Herald Tribune*, writes that while "Tear down this wall!" was a twentieth-century cry, the proper cry for the twenty-first century is "Tear down this firewall!" *Foreign Affairs*' David Feith argues that "just as East Germans diminished Soviet legitimacy by escaping across Checkpoint Charlie, 'hacktivists' today do the same by breaching Internet cyberwalls." And to dispel any suspicions that such linguistic promiscuity could be a mere coincidence, Eli Lake, a contributing editor for the *New Republic*, opines that "during the cold war, the dominant metaphor for describing the repression of totalitarian regimes was The Berlin Wall. To update

that metaphor, we should talk about The Firewall," as if the similarity between the two cases was nothing but self-evident.

Things get worse once observers begin to develop what they think are informative and insightful parallels that go beyond the mere pairing of the Berlin Wall with the Firewall, attempting to establish a nearly functional identity between some of the activities and phenomena of the Cold War era and those of today's Internet. This is how blogging becomes samizdat (Columbia University's Lee Bollinger proclaims that "like the underground samizdat . . . the Web has allowed free speech to avoid the reach of the most authoritarian regimes"); bloggers become dissidents (Alec Ross, Hillary Clinton's senior adviser for innovation, says that "bloggers are a form of 21st century dissident"); and the Internet itself becomes a new and improved platform for Western broadcasting (New York University's Clay Shirky argues that what the Internet allows in authoritarian states "is way more threatening than Voice of America"). Since the Cold War vocabulary so profoundly affects how Western policymakers conceptualize the Internet and measure its effectiveness as a policy instrument, it's little wonder that so many of them are impressed. Blogs are, indeed, more efficient at spreading banned information than photocopiers.

The origins of the highly ambitious cyber-con agenda are thus easy to pin down; anyone who takes all these metaphors seriously, whatever the ideology, would inevitably be led to believe that the Internet is a new battleground for freedom and that, as long as Western policymakers could ensure that the old cyber-walls are destroyed and no new ones are erected in their place, authoritarianism is doomed.

Nostalgia's Lethal Metaphors

But perhaps there is no need to be so dismissive of the Cold War experience. After all, it's a relatively recent battle, still fresh in the minds of many people working on issues of Internet freedom today. Plenty of information-related aspects of the Cold War—think radio-jamming—bear at least some minor technical resemblance to today's concerns

about Internet censorship. Besides, it's inevitable that decision makers in any field, not just politics, would draw on their prior experiences to understand any new problems they confront, even if they might adjust some of their previous conclusions in light of new facts. The world of foreign policy is simply too complex to be understood without borrowing concepts and ideas that originate elsewhere; it's inevitable that decision makers will use metaphors in explaining or justifying their actions. That said, it's important to ensure that the chosen metaphors actually introduce—rather than reduce—conceptual clarity. Otherwise, these are not metaphors but highly deceptive sound bites.

All metaphors come with costs, for the only way in which they can help us grasp a complex issue is by downplaying some other, seemingly less important, aspects of that issue. Thus, the theory of the "domino effect," so popular during the Cold War, predicted that once a country goes communist, other countries would soon follow—until the entire set of dominoes (countries) has fallen. While this may have helped people grasp the urgent need to respond to communism, this metaphor overemphasized interdependence between countries while paying little attention to internal causes of instability. It downplayed the possibility that democratic governments can fall on their own, without external influence. But that, of course, only became obvious in hindsight. One major problem with metaphors, no matter how creative they are, is that once they enter into wider circulation, few people pay attention to other aspects of the problem that were not captured by the original metaphor. (Ironically, it was in Eastern Europe, as communist governments began collapsing one after another, that a "domino effect" actually seemed to occur.) "The pitfall of metaphorical reasoning is that people often move from the identification of similarities to the assumption of identity— that is, they move from the realization that something is *like* something else to assuming that something is *exactly like* something else. The problem stems from using metaphors as a substitute for new thought rather than a spur to creative thought," writes Keith Shimko, a scholar of political psychology at Purdue University. Not surprisingly, metaphors often create an illusion of complete intellectual mastery of an

issue, giving decision makers a false sense of similarity where there is none.

The carefree way in which Western policymakers are beginning to throw around metaphors like "virtual walls" or "information curtains" is disturbing. Not only do such metaphors play up only certain aspects of the "Internet freedom" challenge (for example, the difficulty of sending critical messages into the target country), they also downplay other aspects (the fact that the Web can be used by the very government of the target country for the purposes of surveillance or propaganda). Such metaphors also politicize anyone on the receiving end of the information coming from the other side of the "wall" or "curtain"; such recipients are almost automatically presumed to be pro-Western or, at least, to have some serious criticisms of their governments. Why would they be surreptitiously lifting the curtain otherwise?

Having previously expended so much time and effort on trying to break the Iron Curtain, Western policymakers would likely miss more effective methods to break the Information Curtain; their previous experience makes them see everything in terms of curtains that need to be lifted rather than, say, fields that need to be watered. Anyone tackling the issue unburdened by that misleading analogy would have spotted that it's a "field" not a "wall" that they are looking at. Policymakers' previous experiences with solving similar problems, however, block them from seeking more effective solutions to new problems. This is a well-known phenomenon that psychologists call the Einstellung Effect.

Many of the Cold War metaphors suggest solutions of their own. Walls need to be destroyed and curtains raised before democracy can take root. That democracy may still fail to take root even if the virtual walls are crushed is not a scenario that naturally follows from such metaphors, if only because the peaceful history of postcommunist Eastern Europe suggests otherwise. By infusing policymakers with excessive optimism, the Cold War metaphors thus result in a certain illusory sense of finality and irreversibility. Breaching a powerful firewall is in no way similar to the breaching of the Berlin Wall or the lifting of passport controls at Checkpoint Charlie, simply because patching firewalls,

unlike rebuilding monumental walls, takes hours. Physical walls are cheaper to destroy than to build; their digital equivalents work the other way around. Likewise, the "cyber-wall" metaphor falsely suggests that once digital barriers are removed, new and completely different barriers won't spring up in their place—a proposition that is extremely misleading when Internet control takes on multiple forms and goes far beyond the mere blocking of websites.

Once such language creeps into policy analysis, it can result in a severe misallocation of resources. Thus, when an editorial in the *Washington Post* argues that "once there are enough holes in a firewall, it crumbles. The technology for this exists. What is needed is more capacity," it's a statement that, while technically true, is extremely deceptive. More capacity may, indeed, temporarily pierce the firewalls, but it is no guarantee that other, firewall-free approaches won't do the same job more effectively. To continue using the cyber-wall metaphor is to fall victim to extreme Internet-centrism, unable to see the sociopolitical nature of the problem of Internet control and focus only on its technological side.

Nowhere is the language problem more evident than in the popular discourse about China's draconian system of Internet control. Ever since a 1997 article in *Wired* magazine dubbed this system "the Great Firewall of China," most Western observers have relied on such mental imagery to conceptualize both the problem and the potential solutions. In the meantime, other important aspects of Internet control in the country—particularly the growing self-policing of China's own Internet companies and the rise of a sophisticated online propaganda apparatus—did not receive as much attention. According to Lokman Tsui, an Internet scholar at the University of Pennsylvania, "[the metaphor of] the 'Great Firewall' . . . limits our understanding and subsequent policy design on China's internet. . . . If we want to make a start at understanding the internet in China in all its complexity, the first step we need to take is to think beyond the Great Firewall that still has its roots in the Cold War." Tsui's advice is worth heeding, but as long as policymakers continue their collective exercise in Cold War nostalgia, it is not going to happen.

Why Photocopiers Don't Blog

Anachronistic language skewers public understanding of many other domains of Internet culture, resulting in ineffective and even counterproductive policies. The similarities between the Internet and technologies used for samizdat—fax machines and photocopiers—are fewer than one might imagine. A piece of samizdat literature copied on a smuggled photocopier had only two uses: to be read and to be passed on. But the Internet is, by definition, a much more complex medium that can serve an infinite number of purposes. Yes, it can be used to pass on antigovernment information, but it can also be used to spy on citizens, satisfy their hunger for entertainment, subject them to subtle propaganda, and even launch cyber-attacks on the Pentagon. No decisions made about the regulation of faxes or photocopiers in Washington had much impact on their users in Hungary or Poland; in contrast, plenty of decisions about blogs and social networking sites—made in Brussels, Washington, or Silicon Valley—have an impact on all the users in China and Iran.

Similarly, the problem with understanding blogging through the lens of samizdat is that it obfuscates many of the regime-strengthening features and entrenches the utopian myth of the Internet as a liberator. There was hardly any pro-government samizdat in the Soviet Union (even though there was plenty of samizdat accusing the government of violating the core principles of Marxism-Leninism). If someone wanted to express a position in favor of the government, they could write a letter to the local newspapers or raise it at the next meeting of their party cell. Blogs, on the other hand, come in all shapes and ideologies; there are plenty of pro-government blogs in Iran, China, and Russia, many of them run by people who are genuinely supportive of the regime (or at least some of its features, like foreign policy). To equate blogging with samizdat and bloggers with dissidents is to close one's eyes to what's going on in the extremely diverse world of new media across the globe. Many bloggers are actually more extreme in their positions than the government itself. Susan Shirk, an expert on Asian politics and former deputy assistant secretary of state in the Clinton administration, writes that "Chinese officials . . . describe themselves as feeling under

increasing pressure from nationalist public opinion. 'How do you know,' I ask, 'what public opinion actually is?' 'That's easy,' they say, 'I find out from Global Times [a nationalistic state-controlled tabloid about global affairs] and the Internet." And that public opinion may create an enabling environment for a more assertive government policy, even if the government is not particularly keen on it. "China's popular media and Internet websites sizzle with anti-Japanese vitriol. Stories related to Japan attract more hits than any other news on Internet sites and anti-Japanese petitions are a focal point for organizing on-line collective action," writes Shirk. Nor is the Iranian blogosphere any more tolerant; in late 2006 a conservative blog attacked Ahmadinejad for watching women dancers perform at a sports event abroad.

While it was possible to argue that there was some kind of linear relationship between the amount of samizdat literature in circulation or even the number of dissidents and the prospects for democratization, it's hard to make that argument about blogging and bloggers. By itself, the fact that the number of Chinese or Iranian blogs is increasing does not suggest that democratization is more likely to take root. This is where many analysts fall into the trap of equating liberalization with democratization; the latter, unlike the former, is a process with a clear end result. "Political liberalization entails a widening public sphere and a greater, but not irreversible, degree of basic freedoms. It does not imply the introduction of contestation for positions of effective governing power," write Holger Albrecht and Oliver Schlumberger, two scholars of democratization specializing in the politics of the Middle East. That there are many more voices online may be important, but what really matters is whether those voices eventually lead to any more political participation and, eventually, any more votes. (And even if they do, not all such votes are equally meaningful, for many elections are rigged before they even start.)

Which Tweet Killed the Soviet Union?

But what's most problematic about today's Cold War–inspired conceptualization of Internet freedom is that they are rooted in a shallow and triumphalist reading of the end of the Cold War, a reading that has little

to do with the discipline of history as practiced by historians (as opposed to what is imagined by politicians). It's as if to understand the inner workings of our new and shiny iPads we turned to an obscure nineteenth-century manual of the telegraph written by a pseudoscientist who had never studied physics. To choose the Cold War as a source of guiding metaphors about the Internet is an invitation to conceptual stalemate, if only because the Cold War as a subject matter is so suffused with arguments, inconsistencies, and controversies—and those are growing by the year, as historians gain access to new archives—that it is completely ill-suited for any comparative inquiry, let alone the one that seeks to debate and draft effective policies for the future.

When defenders of Internet freedom fall back on Cold War rhetoric, they usually do it to show the causal connection between information and the fall of communism. The policy implications of such comparisons are easy to grasp as well: Technologies that provide for such increased information flows should be given priority and receive substantial public support.

Notice, for example, how Gordon Crovitz, a *Wall Street Journal* columnist, makes an exaggerated claim about the Cold War—"the Cold War was won by spreading information about the Free World"—before recommending a course of action—"in a world of tyrants scared of their own citizens, the new tools of the Web should be even more terrifying if the outside world makes sure that people have access to its tools." (Crovitz's was an argument in favor of giving more public money to Falun Gong-affiliated Internet groups.) Another 2009 column in the *Journal*, this time penned by former members of the Bush administration, pulls the same trick: "Just as providing photocopies and fax machines helped Solidarity dissidents in communist Poland in the 1980s"—here is the necessary qualifier without which the advice might seem less credible—"grants should be given to private groups to develop and field firewall-busting technology."

These may all be worthwhile policy recommendations, but they rest on a highly original—some historians might say suspicious—interpretation of the Cold War. Because of its unexpected and extremely fast-paced end, it begot all sorts of highly abstract theories about the power of information to transform power itself. That the end of communism

in the East coincided with the beginning of a new stage in the information revolution in the West convinced many people that a monocausal relationship was at work here. The advent of the Internet was only the most obvious breakthrough, but other technologies—above all, the radio—got a lion's share of the credit for the downfall of Soviet communism. "Why did the West win the Cold War?" asks Michael Nelson, former chairman of the Reuters Foundation in his 2003 book about the history of Western broadcasting to the Soviet bloc. "Not by use of arms. Weapons did not breach the Iron Curtain. The Western invasion was by radio, which was mightier than the sword." Autobiographies of radio journalists and executives who were commanding that "invasion" in outposts like Radio Free Europe or the Voice of America are full of such rhetorical bluster; they are clearly not the ones to downplay their own roles in bringing democracy to Eastern Europe.

The person to blame for popularizing such views happens to be the same hero many conservatives widely believe to have won the Cold War itself: Ronald Reagan. Since he was the man in charge of all those Western radio broadcasts and spearheaded the undercover support to samizdat-printing dissidents, any account that links the fall of communism to the role of technology would invariably glorify Reagan's own role in the process. Reagan, however, did not have to wait for future interpretations. Proclaiming that "breezes of electronic beams blow through the Iron Curtain as if it was lace," he started the conversation that eventually degenerated into the dreamy world of "virtual curtains" and "cyber-walls." Once Reagan announced that "information is the oxygen of the modern age" and that "it seeps through the walls topped by barbed wire, it wafts across the electrified borders," pundits, politicians, and think-tankers knew they had a metaphorical treasure trove while Reagan's numerous supporters saw this narrative as finally acknowledging their hero's own gigantic contribution to ushering in democracy into Europe. (China's microchip manufacturers must have been laughing all the way to the bank when Reagan predicted that "the Goliath of totalitarianism will be brought down by the David of the microchip.")

It just took a few months to add analytical luster to Reagan's pronouncements and turn it into something of a coherent history. In 1990, the RAND Corporation, a California-based think tank that, perhaps by

the sheer virtue of its propitious location, never passes up an opportunity to praise the powers of modern technology, reached a strikingly similar conclusion. "The communist bloc failed," it said in a timely published study, "not primarily or even fundamentally because of its centrally controlled economic policies or its excessive military burdens, but because its closed societies were too long denied the fruits of the information revolution." This view has proved remarkably sticky. As late as 2002, Francis Fukuyama, himself a RAND Corporation alumnus, would write that "totalitarian rule depended on a regime's ability to maintain a monopoly over information, and once modern information technology made that impossible, the regime's power was undermined."

By 1995 true believers in the power of information to crush authoritarianism were treated to a book-length treatise. *Dismantling Utopia: How Information Ended the Soviet Union*, a book by Scott Shane—who from 1988 to 1991 served as the *Baltimore Sun*'s Moscow correspondent—tried to make the best case for why information mattered, arguing that the "death of the Soviet illusion . . . [was] not by tanks and bombs but by facts and opinions, by the release of information bottled up for decades."

The crux of Shane's thesis was that as the information gates opened under glasnost, people discovered unpleasant facts about the KGB's atrocities while also being exposed to life in the West. He wasn't entirely incorrect: Increased access to previously suppressed information did expose the numerous lies advanced by the Soviet regime. (There were so many revisions to history textbooks in 1988 that a nationwide history examination had to be scrapped, as it wasn't clear if the old curriculum could actually count as "history" anymore.) It didn't take long until, to use one of Shane's memorable phrases, "ordinary information, mere facts, exploded like grenades, ripping the system and its legitimacy."

Hold On to Your Data Grenade, Comrade!

Facts exploding like grenades certainly make for a gripping journalistic narrative, but it's not the only reason why such accounts are so popular. Their wide acceptance also has to do with the fact that they always put

people, rather than some abstract force of history or economics, first. Any information-centric account of the end of the Cold War is bound to prioritize the role of its users—dissidents, ordinary protesters, NGOs—and downplay the role played by structural, historical factors— the unbearable foreign debt accumulated by many Central European countries, the slowing down of the Soviet economy, the inability of the Warsaw Pact to compete with NATO.

Those who reject the structural explanation and believe that 1989 was a popular revolution from below are poised to see the crowds that gathered in the streets of Leipzig, Berlin, and Prague as exerting enormous pressure on communist institutions and eventually suffocating them. "Structuralists," on the other hand, don't make much of the crowds. For them, by October 1989 the communist regimes were already dead, politically and economically; even if the crowds would not have been as numerous, the regimes would still be as dead. And if one assumes that the Eastern European governments were already dysfunctional, unable or reluctant to fight for their existence, the heroism of protesters matters much less than most information-centric accounts suggest. Posing on the body of a dead lion that was felled by indigestion makes for a far less impressive photo op.

This debate—whether it was the dissidents or some impersonal social force that brought down communism in Eastern Europe—has taken a new shape in the growing academic dispute about whether something like "civil society" (still a favorite buzzword of many foundations and development institutions) existed under communism and whether it played any significant role in precipitating the public protests. Debates over "civil society" have immense repercussions for the future of Internet freedom policy, in part because this fuzzy concept is often endowed with revolutionary potential and bloggers are presumed to be in its vanguard. But if it turns out that the dissidents—and civil society as a whole—did not play much of a role in toppling communism, then the popular expectations about the new generation of Internet revolutions may be overblown as well. Getting it right matters because the unchecked belief in the power of civil society, just like the

unchecked power in the ability of firewall-breaching tools, would ulti-
mately lead to bad policy and prioritize courses of action that may not
be particularly effective.

Stephen Kotkin, a noted expert of Soviet history at Princeton Uni-
versity, has argued that the myth of civil society as a driver of anticom-
munist change was mostly invented by Western academics, donors, and
journalists. "In 1989 'civil society' could not have shattered Soviet-style
socialism for the simple reason that civil society in Eastern Europe did
not then actually exist." And Kotkin has got the evidence to back it up:
In early 1989 the Czechoslovak intelligence apparatus estimated that
the country's active dissidents were no more than five hundred people,
with a core of about sixty (and even as the protests broke out in Prague,
the dissidents were calling for elections rather than a complete over-
throw of the communist regime). The late Tony Judt, another gifted
historian of Eastern European history, observed that Václav Havel's
Charter 77 attracted fewer than 2,000 signatures in a Czechoslovak
population of fifteen million. Similarly, the East German dissident
movement did not play a significant role in getting people onto the
streets of Leipzig and Berlin, and such movements almost did not exist
in Romania or Bulgaria. Something like civil society did exist in Poland,
but it was also one of the few countries with virtually no significant
protests in 1989. Kotkin is thus justified in concluding that "just like
the 'bourgeoisie' were mostly an outcome of 1789, so 'civil society' was
more a consequence than a primary cause of 1989."

But even if civil society didn't exist as such, people did come out to
Prague's Wenceslas Square, choosing to spend cold November days
chanting antigovernment slogans under the ubiquitous gaze of police
forces. Whatever their role, the crowds certainly didn't hurt the cause
of democratization. If one believes that the crowds matter, then a more
effective tool of getting them into the streets would be a welcome ad-
dition; thus, the introduction of a powerful new technology—a pho-
tocopier to copy the leaflets at rates ten times faster than before—is a
genuine improvement. So are any changes in the way by which people
can reveal their incentives to each other. If you know that twenty of
your friends will join a protest, you may be more likely to join as well.

Facebook is, thus, something of a godsend to protest movements. It would be silly to deny that new means of communications can alter the likelihood and the size of a protest.

Nevertheless, if the Eastern European regimes had not already been dead, they would have mounted a defense that would have prevented any "information cascades" (the preferred scholarly term for such snowball-like public participation) from forming in the first place. On this reading, the East German regime was simply unwilling to crack down on the first wave of protests in Leipzig, well aware that it was heading for a collective suicide. Furthermore, in 1989, unlike in 1956 or 1968, the Kremlin, ruled by a new generation of leaders who still had vivid memories of the brutality of their predecessors, didn't think that bloody crackdowns were a good idea, and East Germany's senior leaders were too weak and hesitant to do it alone. As Perry Anderson, one of the most insightful students of contemporary European history, once remarked, "nothing fundamental could change in Eastern Europe so long as the Red Army remained ready to fire. Everything was possible once fundamental change started in Russia itself." To argue that it was the photocopies that triggered change in Russia and then the rest of the region is to engage in such a grotesque simplification of history that one may as well abandon practicing history altogether. This is not to deny that they played a role, but only to deny the monocausal relationship that many want to establish.

When the Radio Waves Seemed Mightier Than the Tanks

If there is a genuine lesson to be drawn from Cold War history, it is that the increased effectiveness of information technology is still severely constrained by the internal and external politics of the regime at hand, and once those politics start changing, it may well be possible to take advantage of the new technologies. A strong government that has a will to live would do its utmost to deny Internet technology its power to mobilize. As long as the Internet is tied to physical infrastructure, this is not so hard to accomplish: In virtually all authoritarian states, governments

maintain control over communication networks and can turn them off at the first sign of protests. As the Chinese authorities began worrying about the growing unrest in Xinjiang in 2009, they simply turned off all Internet communications for ten months; it was a very thorough cleansing, but a few weeks would suffice in less threatening cases. Of course, they may incur significant economic losses because of such information blackouts, but when forced to choose between a blackout and a coup, many choose the former.

Even the strongest authoritarian governments are consistently challenged by protesters. It seems somewhat naïve to believe that strong authoritarian governments will balk at cracking down on protesters for fear of being accused of being too brutal, even if their every action is captured on camera; most likely, they will simply learn how to live with those accusations. The Soviet Union didn't hesitate to send tanks to Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968; the Chinese didn't pause before sending tanks to Tiananmen Square, despite a sophisticated network of fax machines that was sending the information to the West; the Burmese junta didn't balk at suppressing a march by the monks, despite the presence of foreign journalists documenting their actions. The most overlooked aspect of the 2009 protests in Tehran is that even though the government was well aware that many protesters were carrying mobile phones, it still dispatched snipers on building roofs and ordered them to shoot (one such sniper supposedly shot twenty-seven-year-old Neda Agha-Soltan; her death was captured on video, and she became one of the heroes of the Green Movement, with one Iranian factory even manufacturing statues of her). There is little evidence to suggest that, at least for the kind of leaders who are least likely to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, exposure results in less violence.

Most important, governments can also take advantage of decentralized information flows and misinform their population about how popular the protest movement really is. That decentralization and multiplication of digital information would somehow make it easier for the fence-sitters to infer what is really happening in the streets seems a rather unfounded assumption. In fact, history teaches us that media could as easily send false signals; many Hungarians still remember the utterly

irresponsible broadcasts by Radio Free Europe on the eve of the Soviet invasion in 1956, which suggested that American military aid would be forthcoming (it wasn't). Some of those broadcasts even offered tips on antitank warfare, urging the Hungarians to resist the Soviet occupation; they could be held at least partially responsible for the 3,000 deaths that followed the invasion. Such misinformation, whether deliberate or not, could flourish in the age of Twitter (the effort to spread fake videos purporting to show the burning of Ayatollah Khomeini's portrait in the aftermath of the Iranian protests is a case in point).

Nor is the decentralized nature of communications always good in itself, especially if the objective is to make as many people informed as fast as possible. In a 2009 interview with the *Globe and Mail*, the East German dissident Rainer Muller noted how beneficial it was that the nation's attention was not dispersed in the late 1980s: "You didn't have people looking at 200 different TV channels and 10,000 websites and e-mails from thousands of people. You could put something on a Western TV or radio station and you could be sure that half the country would know it." Few oppositional movements can boast such sizable audiences in the age of YouTube, especially when they are forced to compete with the much funnier videos of cats flushing the toilet.

While a definitive history of the Cold War remains to be written, the uniqueness of its end is not to be underestimated. Too many factors were stacked against the survival of the Soviet system: Gorbachev sent a number of cautionary signals to the communist leaders of Eastern Europe warning them against crackdowns and making it clear that the Kremlin wouldn't assist in suppressing popular uprisings; a number of Eastern European countries were running economies on the brink of bankruptcy and had a very dark future ahead of them, with or without the protests; East German police could have easily prevented the demonstrations in Leipzig, but its leaders did not exercise their authority; and a small technical change in Poland's electoral law could have prevented the Solidarity movement from forming a government that inspired other democratic movements in the region.

This is the great paradox of the Cold War's end: On the one hand, the structural conditions of countries of the Soviet bloc in late 1989

were so lethal that it seemed inevitable that communism would die. On the other hand, communist hard-liners had so much room to maneuver that absolutely nothing guaranteed that the end of the Cold War would be as bloodless as it turned out to be. Given how many things could have gone wrong in the process, it's still something of a miracle that the Soviet bloc—Romania notwithstanding—went under so peacefully. It takes a rather peculiar historical sense to look at this highly particularistic case and draw far-reaching conclusions about the role of technology in its demise and then assume that such conclusions would also hold in completely different contexts like China or Iran twenty years later. Western policymakers should rid themselves of the illusion that communism ended quickly—under the pressure of information or fax machines—or that it was guaranteed to end peacefully because the whole world was watching. The fall of communism was the result of a much longer process, and the popular protests were just its most visible, but not necessarily most important, component. Technology may have played a role, but it did so because of particular historical circumstances rather than because of technology's own qualities. Those circumstances were highly specific to Soviet communism and may no longer exist.

Western policymakers simply can't change modern Russia, China, or Iran using methods from the late 1980s. Simply opening up the information gates would not erode modern authoritarian regimes, in part because they have learned to function in an environment marked by the abundance of information. And it certainly doesn't hurt that, contrary to the expectations of many in the West, certain kinds of information could actually strengthen them.