U.S. Policy to Address Internet Freedom

WASHINGTON — Days after Facebook and Twitter added fuel to a revolt in Egypt, the Obama administration plans to announce a new policy on Internet freedom, designed to help people get around barriers in cyberspace while making it harder for autocratic governments to use the same technology to repress dissent.

The State Department's policy, a year in the making, has been bogged down by fierce debates over which projects it should support, and even more basically, whether to view the Internet primarily as a weapon to topple repressive regimes or as a tool that autocrats can use to root out and crush dissent.

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, who will lay out the policy in a speech on Tuesday, acknowledged the Internet's dual role in an address a year ago, and administration officials said she would touch on that theme again, noting how social networks were used by...
both protesters and governments in the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and other Arab countries.

The State Department plans to finance programs like circumvention services, which enable users to evade Internet firewalls, and training for human rights workers on how to secure their e-mail from surveillance or wipe incriminating data from cellphones if they are detained by the police.

Though the policy has been on the drawing board for months, it has new urgency in light of the turmoil in the Arab world, because it will be part of a larger debate over how the United States weighs its alliances with entrenched leaders against the young people inspired by the events in Tunisia and Egypt.

Administration officials say that the emphasis on a broad array of projects — hotly disputed by some technology experts and human rights activists — reflects their view that technology can be a force that leads to democratic change, but is not a “magic bullet” that brings down repressive regimes.

“People are so enamored of the technology,” said Michael H. Posner, the assistant secretary of state for democracy, human rights and labor. “People have a view that technology will make us free. No, people will make us free.”

Critics say the administration has dawdled for more than a year, holding back $30 million in Congressional financing that could have gone to circumvention technology, a proven method that allows Internet users to evade government firewalls by routing their traffic through proxy servers in other countries.

Some of these services have received modest financing from the government, but their backers say they need much more to install networks capable of handling millions of users in China, Iran and other countries.

A report by the Republican minority of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, to be released Tuesday, said the State Department’s performance was so inadequate that the job of financing Internet freedom initiatives — at least those related to China — should be moved to another agency, the Broadcasting Board of Governors, which oversees Voice of America and Radio Free Europe.

“Certainly, the State Department took an awfully long time to get this out,” said Rebecca MacKinnon, a former CNN correspondent and expert on Internet freedom issues who is now a senior fellow at the New America Foundation. “They got so besieged by the politics of what they should be funding.”

Still, Ms. MacKinnon said that she believed the State Department’s deliberations had been thoughtful and the plan “is going to be effective if it’s couched within a broader set of policies.”

There are other contradictions in the State Department’s agenda: it champions the free flow of information, except when it is in secret cables made public by WikiLeaks; it
wants to help Chinese citizens circumvent their government’s Internet firewall, but is leery of one of the most popular services for doing so, which is sponsored by Falun Gong, a religious group outlawed by Beijing as an evil cult.

In the long months the government has wrestled with these issues, critics said, the Iranian government was able to keep censoring the Internet, helping it muffle the protests that followed its disputed presidential election in 2009.

Mr. Posner, a longtime human rights advocate, acknowledges that the process has been long and occasionally messy. But he contends that over the past year, the administration has developed a coherent policy that takes account of the rapidly evolving role the Internet plays in closed societies.

The State Department has received 68 proposals for nearly six times the $30 million in available funds. The department said it would take at least two months to evaluate proposals before handing out money.

Among the kinds of things that excite officials are “circuit riders,” experts who tour Internet cafes in Myanmar teaching people how to set up secure e-mail accounts, and new ways of dealing with denial-of-service attacks.

This does not satisfy critics, who say the lawmakers intended the $30 million to be used quickly — and on circumvention.

“The department’s failure to follow Congressional intent created the false impression among Iranian demonstrators that the regime had the power to disrupt access to Facebook and Twitter,” said Michael J. Horowitz, a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, who lobbies on behalf of the Global Internet Freedom Consortium, a circumvention service with ties to Falun Gong.

Mr. Horowitz has organized demonstrations of the service for legislators, journalists and others. On Jan. 27, the day before the Egyptian government cut off access to the Internet, he said there were more than 7.8 million page views by Egyptians on UltraSurf, one of two consumer services under the umbrella of the Global Internet Freedom Consortium. That was a huge increase from only 76,000 on Jan. 22.

The trouble, Mr. Horowitz said, is that UltraSurf and its sister service, Freegate, do not have enough capacity to handle sudden spikes in usage during political crises. That causes the speed to slow to a crawl, which discourages users. The companies need tens of millions of dollars to install an adequate network, he said. Under a previous government grant, the group received $1.5 million.

But the experience in Egypt points up the limits of circumvention. By shutting down the entire Internet, the authorities were able to make such systems moot. Administration officials point out that circumvention is also of little value in countries like Russia, which does not block the Internet but dispatches the police to pursue bloggers, or in Myanmar, which has sophisticated ways to monitor e-mail accounts.

Ron Deibert, the director of the Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto, said that governments had been shifting from blocking the Internet to hacking and disabling it. Even in the United States, he noted, the Senate is considering a bill that would allow the president to switch off the Internet in the event of a catastrophic cyberattack.