Circulating Liberalism:

The Global Internet and Soft Power Internationalism, 1990-2015

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Introduction

In the introductory chapter, we suggest that the global internet is one of the defining features of soft power internationalism. As emerging hegemons have turned to cultural resources to exert influence in foreign affairs, the internet has become an essential conduit for communicating their messages. It has also become an area of significant investment to establish control over commercial and political networks across the world. While the interdependency between soft power internationalism and the global internet may now seem obvious, I suggest this was neither inevitable nor always visible. In what ways did the global internet help circulate a new kind of liberal internationalism undergirded by *soft* forms of power, while also attempting to keep the U.S. at helm? How did soft-power internationalism enable the expansion of an internet in service of ubiquitous surveillance and data extraction? Making their debut around the same time, and, each in their own way aiming to create a connected,

interdependent, and multilateral world, how did these projects intertwine and diverge in the years between 1990 and 2015? This essay documents the winding histories of these two projects in order to demonstrate the intentional efforts behind bringing them together, and, in some cases, concealing their intimate connections.

I should start by offering a definition of what I mean by the global internet. The network itself, the physical infrastructure that entangles many parts of the world is what immediately comes to mind, but throughout the essay, the global internet also refers to the companies and protocols that enable the flows of people, products, and ideas across borders. It includes the collection of entrepreneurs, policymakers, and citizens whose discourses and practices have enabled or constrained cyberspace – albeit not in equal measure. Most importantly, I use the global internet as an idea, an ideal even, that has promised to establish a new, decentralized and unprecedentedly speedy communication infrastructure animated by the seductive potential of innovation. If soft-power internationalism was an interregnum in search of a new kind of global liberal hegemony, the global internet provided the technical and symbolic capabilities undergirding the aspiration of building (or maintaining) empires. Such a broad definition of the global internet is not a lazy dismissal of precision, but instead a way to showcase the extensive entanglement between its materiality and its powerful imaginaries.

This chapter offers two interventions. First, a historical corrective to the recent discussions about a fragmented global internet – wherein the proliferation

of 5G networks is framed as an arms race between the U.S. and China; national governments pursue their own policies around data rights, free speech, privacy, and even financial transfer protocols, ostensibly to splinter the web; and tech companies increasingly act as political agents of their home countries (techno-nationalism). Despite the hyper-connectivity it has provided, the global internet has always been geo-political. There was a brief moment when a civilian cyberspace appeared – one that allowed people to easily share information and perspectives from different parts of the world – but it was never a post-national playing field immune to control from governments or tech companies. Rather than seeing nationalist approaches to internet governance as drastic departures, I suggest we focus on how the U.S. government and Silicon Valley companies manufactured a narrative of a borderless world in the era of soft-power internationalism, and how this narrative was unmade as emerging hegemons started challenging U.S.-dominated networks.

Second, I challenge the predominantly *soft* approach to studying soft power and the internet that narrowly examines the circulation of messages or threats by tweets as a means to changing hearts and minds. The global internet's imprint on soft-power internationalism is not limited to broadcasting narratives; it extends to the materiality of telecom and internet infrastructures and to governing issues around ownership, taxation, and control. Cold-War anxieties about identifying countries that supposedly presented a danger and threatened the U.S-led international order were already baked into the internet's design. After the Cold War, both soft power and the global internet originated to re-

establish U.S. hegemony under the guise of circulating liberal internationalism, and were then taken up by emerging hegemons to counter the U.S. It is critical to analyze the communicative infrastructure of soft-power internationalism to better see the sources of power asymmetries among these old and new hegemons. By revealing the political interventions, economic calculations, and conflicted values that underline the messiness and violence of the global internet and soft-power internationalism, this essay joins the recent calls for centering empire and its infrastructures in media and communications.[1]

As ambassadors of nascent yet seductive ideas at the nexus of various U.S. institutions (from Silicon Valley to academia and Washington, DC) in the early 1990s, soft-power proponents and the early architects of the internet crossed paths regularly, albeit not always purposefully. First, the Clinton administration mythologized the global internet as part of its larger project of economic globalization. U.S. policymakers actively glorified the information highways as a novel avenue for free speech while attempting to firm up sole control over their governance. The Bush administration's championship of the global internet did not have the same utopian undertones as its predecessor's, but U.S. funding of the global internet continued aggressively in Silicon Valley and around the world post 9/11. In the early-to-mid-2000s, U.S. tech companies started dominating the cyberspace even as they inspired the possibility of global civics in defiance of national borders. The ideal of a new internationalism bolstered by global communication reached its acme of novelty at the end of the 2000s when internet-assisted movements such as Wikileaks and the Arab Spring seemed to

seize on the utopian promise of free and transparent communications to challenge powerful governments. Ironically, however, the epoch that ostensibly accomplished the soft-power enthusiasts' liberal dreams of rampant free speech and democratic organizing around the world has not only revealed the U.S.'s exploitation of the internet, but also undermined the original conception of a new U.S-led liberal order.

I document three phases of this short history of the global internet and soft-power internationalism. In the first period, roughly between 1990 and the early 2000s, the projects are coeval, that is, they do not refer to one another explicitly (except for a rare foray by Joseph Nye, Jr. in 1996). The U.S. government and Silicon Valley entrepreneurs were both committed to the global internet and liberal internationalism, but neither theorized cyberspace as the milieu of cultural diplomacy. The second period, between the early 2000s and 2010, is marked by the rise of the global internet not as just a networked public sphere essentially run by Silicon Valley companies, but with a more direct U.S. investment in infrastructure and a liberal mission for global good. It was in the third period, 2010 onward, that U.S. foreign policy explicitly embraced the global internet utopia for cultural diplomacy, yet, ironically, it was also then that the American project of a U.S-led liberal internationalism and global internet was irreparably damaged when counter-hegemons effectively challenged U.S. imperium in both cyberspace and international affairs.

The Beginnings of Soft Power Internationalism and the Internet, 1990-2000

One of the earliest discussions explicitly connecting soft power and the internet is found in a 1996 essay by Joseph Nye, Jr. and Admiral William A. Owens, then Vice Chairman of the Armed Forces Joint Chiefs of Staff. Titled "America's Information Age," the piece suggested that not only did the internet provide the U.S. with a clear advantage in collecting and circulating intelligence in the post-Cold-War era, but also that information technologies "can strengthen the intellectual link between U.S. foreign policy and military power."[2] Nye and Owens, conscious of the growing unpredictability of a post-1989 international order, recognized digital technologies' potential for building a system of omnipotent surveillance. "The systems of the systems that the United States was building" could provide information that could be used to prevent regional conflicts or, in a multipolar world, deter countries from becoming hostile – and the rest of the world depended on the U.S. leadership to use such knowledge.[3]

America's information edge was not limited to untangling the new adversaries; the authors also identified the possibility that global cyberspace could propagate liberal values. Riding the wave of a techno-utopianism dominant in the 1990s, they suggested that while information technologies "can enhance the effectiveness of raw military power, [they] ineluctably democratize societies."[4] This new world of computers and digital networks was "a force multiplier of American diplomacy," and constituted the connective tissue between U.S. foreign policy and the military.[5] Nye's later writing displays various iterations of this argument, manifesting as excitement about the speed

and declining costs of circulating messages, and raptures about "the irreverent, egalitarian, and libertarian character of the cyber-culture."[6] He certainly was not alone in spelling out a civilizing mission for information highways. "Cyberspace is the land of knowledge," industry consultant Esther Dyson and collaborators proclaimed in 1994, "and the exploration of that land can be a civilization's truest, highest calling."[7] Similarly, policymakers were fascinated by the versatility of a system built by the Department of Defense, but now used "to chat with friends and swap recipes with strangers."[8]

The narrative of a global internet with untrammeled access to abundant information, ideas, and people, all unleashed by the screeching wail of a dial-up model, caught on worldwide. In the countries surveyed in this volume, the internet became publicly available in Turkey in 1993 and in Brazil in 1995. The Chinese government connected to the global network in 1994. With the 1994 launch of Netscape, the world's first commercial browser, liberal discourses of individual freedom, free speech, entrepreneurship, and transparency came to the fore while the internet's military origins and its securitized uses took a backseat.[9] First for the U.S., then for the emerging hegemons, the global internet became a vehicle to build and participate in transnational markets, while also giving voice to a myriad of new actors. Despite the dot-com crash of the late 1990s and the Global War on Terror, optimistic narratives of the internet rarely wavered before the mid-2010s.

The internet's early promises were incorporated into the larger project of economic globalization. Coming out of the 1991 recession, U.S. policymakers saw

information superhighways as the number one priority for improving the country's infrastructure and generating growth.[10] Rather than cultural diplomacy or even military capabilities, the Clinton Administration routinely emphasized the importance of building a global infrastructure and supporting a U.S.-based tech industry.[11] In 1994, for example, then-Vice-President Al Gore announced the Global Information Infrastructure Initiative (GII) at the International Telecommunication Union's (ITU) first World Telecommunication Development Conference. The plan was to wire the world by encouraging deregulation in telecommunications, removing trade protections, and increasing direct foreign investment in global networks.[12] "These highways or, more accurately, networks of distributed intelligence – will allow us to share information, to connect, and to communicate as a global community," Gore proclaimed.[13] He occasionally referenced the prospect of stronger democracies and a peaceful global order that would be spurred by an "increasingly interconnected human family," but the priority was expanding the reach of the global internet.

Many networks and products of the early internet lay within the control of the United States. The early computer networks, for example, required signing up for a connection with an U.S.-based infrastructure (Japan and France were exceptions). Internet traffic initially flowed via the free Netscape browser.[14] To make sure that the governance of this growing network stayed aligned with American interests, U.S. policymakers formed the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) in 1998. ICANN was a not-for-profit

enterprise tasked with protecting intellectual property rights by managing the domain name system.[15] Even though the organization's scope was international, it had a contract with the US National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA), along with the goal of becoming independent in 2000. However, the U.S. did not give up leadership until 2016. The seemingly independent, non-profit, and multi-stakeholder-based governance framework of ICANN legitimized the free-flow narrative of the global internet, while allowing the U.S. to keep its dominance in cyberspace.[16]

The end of the first decade of the global internet was less euphoric than its beginning. Many dot-coms imploded in the early 2000s, and Silicon Valley woke up from its dream of magically making money on the web. A new investor came to the rescue: the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). In 1999 the U.S. government founded In-Q-Tel, a not-for-profit corporation to "foster the development of new and emerging information technologies and pursue research and development that produce solutions to some of the most difficult IT problems facing the CIA."[17] Recognizing the innovation potential in Silicon Valley, the In-Q-Tel embarked on direct investment, strategic ventures, and sponsorships of open competitions – all without requiring prior CIA authorization or approval for the business deals that the company negotiated. In its first years, In-Q-Tel provided $100 million to 20 companies, including Google and IBM, building an extensive portfolio in computer infrastructure.[18] Its early funding decisions reflected a concern with keeping the internet open and free, but after 9/11, attention turned to terrorism prevention and detection technologies. In-Q-Tel's overall

investments funded many of the commercial internet and data products popular today, from touch-screen technologies to Google Earth.[19]

The Making of a "Global Village," 2000-2010

In the early 2000s, U.S. government priorities shifted from promoting trade to boosting security measures as well as mass surveillance of domestic and foreign actors.[20] Working closely with public agencies, tech companies began receiving more government contracts. As Oracle's David Carey put it bluntly, "September 11 made business a bit easier," adding, "Previous[ly], you pretty much had to hype the threat and the problem."[21] While cybersecurity was top priority, the United States continued expanding the reach of the global internet. The Bush administration announced a "Digital Freedom Initiative" (DFI) in 2003, intended to overcome barriers to internet access in the developing world. Established within the USAID Africa Global Information Infrastructure, the DFI supported projects in Indonesia (cybersecurity), Jordan (education), Pakistan (telemedicine), Peru (rural internet services), Rwanda (broadband development), Senegal (entrepreneurship), and elsewhere.[22] In addition to helping these countries, the initiative bluntly aimed to "establish a business-friendly regulatory framework conducive to US investment and partnerships."[23]

What truly marked this decade, however, was the massive international growth of many Silicon Valley companies. Founded in 1998, Google was already a global giant by the mid-2000s. Facebook emerged in 2004, and became

internationally available in 2007, the same year Apple introduced the iPhone.

Twitter, originally dubbed "the free speech engine," was founded in 2006. With

the rise of social media platforms and a much larger user base, the global internet

soon solidified as a playing field that enabled bloggers, foreign journalists and

dissidents to reach a mass audience without needing the approval of

governments or big media companies. A "networked public sphere" began to

take shape, spurred by the proliferation of civic engagement worldwide.[24] A

cosmopolitan community of so-called netizens formed to participate in debates

over internet governance, seeking their rights to explore uncensored information

and contribute to global conversations.[25] These netizens – online activists and

developers of technology – conjured, albeit briefly, a new, self-organized world

operating transparently and with bottom-up processes. The idea of a global

civics driven by netizens seemed to achieve soft-power internationalism's goals,

too, with the U.S. values (or professed values) of political freedom, democratic

communication, and civil society dominating cyberspace.

　　While this new networked sphere was predominantly run by U.S.-based

companies such as Google, Facebook, and Twitter, it was their cosmopolitan

values and promises, not their American roots, that were on display throughout

the decade. As sociologist Zeynep Tufekci once observed, "America's tech

entrepreneurs won the world's admiration," becoming the stars of a growing

digital culture.[26] At one point, "Google [was] much more popular in China than

the USA," according to the Chinese blogger Michael Anti.[27] In contrast to the

contested politics of the 1980s against U.S. cultural imperialism, [28] Silicon Valley

had the capacity to attract politically (taking part in internet governance

discussions), financially (making transnational investment decisions), and

ideologically (inspiring a global community of wannabe entrepreneurs, digital

activists, students, and policymakers).

Toward the end of 2000s, the great paradox of the global internet and soft-

power internationalism began to surface: regional hegemons, empowered by

soft-power internationalism, began to assert their weight in international

development, economic growth, and cultural diplomacy. They turned

increasingly to digital infrastructures and internet-enabled global

communication, interacting with Silicon Valley companies on their own terms.

Despite the techno-utopians' belief that nation-states would succumb to the

democratizing potential of technology, many governments began taking control

of cyberspace to consolidate domestic power and project influence

internationally. At the same time, however, many internet-powered grassroots

movements managed to reorganize national politics, thereby seemingly

validating the global internet's capacity for liberalism.[29] The peak of this

narrative was, of course, the so-called Arab Spring in late 2010 and early 2011,

when digital activists helped bring down the autocratic governments of Tunisia

and Egypt. Tunisian and Egyptian activists' heavy reliance on the internet

became so well-known around the world that the names of global social-media

platforms were attached to these political revolutions as if they were the sole

enablers of global waves of activism.

It was against this paradoxical background, that is, the political as well as economic challenge of rising hegemons against the U.S.-dominated internet on one hand, and an activated global civics that testified to the liberalizing potential of the web on the other, that the Obama administration and then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton finally acknowledged an intentional connection between soft-power internationalism and the global internet. This deliberate merger of these two projects came with certain modifications. Secretary Clinton adopted the concept of "smart power," a combination of hard and soft power that, arguably, bolstered each other. Next, instead of abstractly endorsing internet freedom as a liberal value,[30] the State Department began to fund dissident cyber-activists, invested in tools to circumvent censorship, and contacted Silicon Valley giants to postpone routine maintenance that would hinder the work of digital activists in other countries.[31] The Obama administration spent at least $105 million on these programs, which included investment in encryption and filter-circumvention products and support for fighting network censorship abroad.[32]

Internet freedom as U.S. foreign policy agenda, on one hand, harkened back to the Cold-War investments (or interventions) in free speech/free press in other countries as an expression of U.S. leadership.[33] On the other, the widespread use of the global internet, from political organizing to entertainment, meant that the U.S. internet freedom agenda found large and sympathetic audiences in other countries. Yet the same North American technology businesses that provided the infrastructure for international liberalism were also enabling both repressive regimes abroad and U.S. government agencies to

launch digital surveillance and automated combat techniques against other countries. These contradictions were eventually laid bare when first the Wikileaks and then the Snowden revelations challenged the Obama administration's internet-freedom project.[34]

The Reveal and Decline of US-dominated Tech, 2010-2015

On January 21, 2010, Secretary Clinton appeared at the now defunct Newseum in Washington, DC (a glass-walled museum of news and journalism) and declared internet freedom a new pillar of American foreign policy. "A new information curtain is descending across much of the world," she proclaimed, "and beyond this partition, viral videos and blog posts are becoming the samizdat of our day."[35] With the official launch of the internet freedom agenda, the U.S. government's sheepish approach to intertwining foreign policy and economic interests over the global internet was finally over. Policymakers and tech entrepreneurs began to explicitly cooperate to assert U.S. dominance in cyberspace.

The timing was not coincidental. By the end of the 2000s, many emerging hegemons were explicitly challenging Silicon Valley's dominance of the global internet – either by censorship and regulation or by investing in global software and hardware markets with their own companies. Facebook, for example, was blocked in China in 2009 – though Mark Zuckerberg never hides his eagerness to

return. Twitter has not been accessible in mainland China since 2009. Even regional hegemons like Turkey occasionally blocked internet platforms and demanded tech companies comply with national laws.[36] Silicon Valley companies first tried to exert pressure by putting together international coalitions, then expected the U.S. government to get involved. Google's then-legal chief David Drummond, for example, suggested that internet censorship was not just a violation of human rights, but a barrier to US trade.[37]

Less than three months after Secretary Clinton's speech, Wikileaks, a whistleblower website that posted classified and sensitive documents, released a graphic video of a 2007 U.S. Army assault in Baghdad that left 12 dead, including two Reuters reporters. Called "Collateral Murder," the video was part of the largest leak of classified records in U.S. history. In July 2010, Wikileaks released a new cache of documents, this time war logs from the field in Afghanistan. And in November 2010, the site, collaborating with professional news organizations including *The Guardian, Der Spiegel, Le Monde,* and *El Pais,* published confidential State Department cables that US embassies had sent to Washington. The source, Chelsea (then Bradley) Manning, was later sentenced to 35 years in prison; she was released early when then-President Obama commuted her sentence.[38]

Secretary Clinton immediately framed the leaks "as an attack on the international community – the alliances and partnerships, the conversations and negotiations, that safeguard global security and advance economic prosperity."[39] US companies including Amazon, PayPal, and MasterCard dropped Wikileaks as a client, prompting its founder, Julian Assange, to call them "instruments of

U.S. foreign policy."[40] The Wikileaks saga delivered a diplomatic blow to the U.S. and over the course of 2010 exposed the inconsistencies in the country's soft- (or smart-) power strategies and internet-freedom agenda. Some activists in the Middle East, who had become the poster children of the networked public, began to express concerns. Tunisian blogger and activist Sami Ben Gharbia, for example, pointed out the contradiction between the U.S. funding for and support of digital activism in the Middle East and the country's backing of autocratic governments in the region.[41] Nevertheless, Secretary Clinton continued the commitment to internet freedom as a foreign policy priority, and gave a second speech in February 2011, announcing an additional investment of $25 million to help online dissidents and digital activists fight state repression.[42]

A bigger challenge to the internet-freedom narrative appeared in 2013. In June, the U.S. and U.K. press used documents leaked by Edward Snowden, a former defense contractor, to report on the surveillance activities of the U.S. National Security Agency (NSA). The leaked documents detailed the NSA's global mass surveillance, including political leaders, UN officials, and international businesses, such as Google and Petrobras. In addition to revealing hypocrisy in U.S. foreign policy and damaging US relations with a number of its closest allies, the leaks severely damaged public trust in U.S. tech and telecom companies, as it became clear that these companies had given the NSA access to their networks.[43] Most important, the Snowden revelations empowered many rising hegemons to attack U.S. leadership in internet governance more boldly. As one policy expert pointed out, it took the leaks about massive NSA surveillance

to lay bare the fact that "most of the software and the innovative business models in the internet come from the U.S."[44]

Just two weeks after the first leaks, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who was also the target of NSA surveillance, appeared in a joint press conference with U.S. President Barack Obama and called the internet "uncharted territory for all."[45] "It makes it possible for enemies and opponents of our democratic order to endanger our way of life," she said, "with entirely new means and entirely new approaches."[46] In response, many nation-states, including Germany, India, and Brazil, expressed discontent with the existing open internet and signaled interest in forming national or regional intranets outside the domain name system. After canceling a state visit to Washington, D.C, Dilma Roussef, then president of Brazil, spoke at the U.N. and called for a new internet governance framework to prevent "cyberspace from being used as a weapon of war, through espionage, sabotage, and attacks against systems and infrastructure of other countries."[47] Together with Merkel, she proposed a non-binding UN resolution protecting the privacy rights of internet users; it was adopted on December 18, 2013.[48] Next the California-based Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), which was subject to U.S. Law, came under scrutiny. The European Commission criticized U.S. dominance over the organization governing the internet,[49] and Brazil convened the NETmundial meeting in April 2014 to encourage a new model of internet governance that would be less susceptible to US influence.[50] In 2016, after two years of

negotiations, the U.S. government agreed to transfer its oversight of the ICANN to a multi-stakeholder group, though details have not yet been made available.[51]

Riding the global wave of discontent with U.S. tech companies, Turkey's then-Prime-Minister Erdogan attacked social media at a rally in 2014, shutting down Twitter a few hours later in an effort to assert "the power of the Turkish Republic" against international companies that did not comply with national laws.[52] In addition, European regulators have amped up legal pressure on U.S. tech firms to counter the economic and social influence of Silicon Valley companies. In addition to hitting Google with a record $2.7 billion fine for anti-trust[53] and fining Apple $15.4 billion for unpaid taxes,[54] the European Union recently introduced the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which strengthens European rules governing data and privacy.[55] Setting new privacy and regulatory standards to manage U.S. tech companies and lobbying Brazil and Japan to pass similar laws, the European Union has emerged as "the world's tech watchdog."[56]

Meanwhile, China has been massively shaping the global internet. In addition to the tremendous growth of China-based internet giants like Huawei, ZTE, Tencent, Baidu and Alibaba, the government has invested $173.73 billion in telecom and data infrastructures in Africa and Asia as part of the Belt and Road initiative (BRI), a development strategy of connectivity and cooperation between China and countries in Asia, Africa, and Europe.[57] Dubbing this a "Digital Silk Road," China aims to expand internet connectivity and digital economy across Eurasia and Africa while investing in next-generation network technologies like

artificial intelligence, smart cities, and big data. By mobilizing both state-owned and private telecom and internet companies, the country hopes to "promote an internet-enabled inclusive globalization."[58] In addition to economic investments, China is also taking the lead in launching and setting standards for 5G, the next-generation wireless technology.[59] Even as China seems to be replicating the 1990s U.S policy of internet expansion in Eurasia and Africa with the BRI, Silicon Valley companies are working hard to re-capture the country; Facebook is aggressively courting Chinese leadership,[60] and Google recently opened a China-based research center devoted to artificial intelligence.[61]

It only took a decade for China, India, and Brazil to catch up with the US and Europe in terms of internet penetration, and by 2019, the first two led the world in internet users, with the United States just above Brazil.[62] As the consumer base expanded, these new hegemons gained sway over Silicon Valley, which still had money and know-how, but needed new markets. Emerging regional powers also funded and promoted entrepreneurial culture and built their capacity for tech innovation.[63] The growth of new internet billionaires across China and India is striking, while the European Union, Brazil, Russia, and Turkey contested the U.S-dominance on the internet via infrastructure, regulation, and taxation. As of 2020, it is not clear what the future of the global internet will look like – free, decentralized, and open, or tightly controlled, balkanized, and regulated? But one thing seems obvious: for Silicon Valley and U.S. policymakers, their unrestricted expansion of the global internet is over.

Conclusion

In 2013, Google's former Chair and CEO, Eric Schmidt, co-authored *The New Digital Age* with Jared Cohen, then a director at Google and former advisor to then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. The book ambitiously tried to showcase how the internet – "the largest experiment involving anarchy in history" – would transform social relations, states, and businesses.[64] The authors met in Baghdad in 2009 to figure out "how technology can be used to help rebuild a society," – a society, they conveniently neglected to mention, wrecked by a U.S.-led war. They first "collaborated as writers of a memo to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton about lessons learned in Iraq," one of which was that there was no bridge between the people who understand technology and the people responsible for tackling the world's toughest political issues. Packed with anecdotes, assertions, and speculations, the book reads more like a superficial ode to the power of global connectivity than a thoughtful reflection on a digitally enabled collective future. Yet it epitomizes that moment when U.S. foreign policymakers and tech executives explicitly cooperated to put the global internet at the heart of international liberalism as a means of regaining U.S. dominance.

The underlying assumption of *The New Digital Age* is that the global internet, a paragon of Western liberalism, had arrived at a crossroads by 2010. As the initial excitement about the Arab Spring ebbed, and the Wikileaks and Snowden revelations shook the implicit trust between the public and tech companies with respect to surveillance and privacy, cyberspace called for a new

governance framework. The authors' solution was clear: the global internet needed to be run by a coterie of liberal internationalists aligned with U.S. interests. Their obvious perception of the global internet as an exclusively Western, liberal and democratic project overlaps with the evolution of Nye's soft power in the late 2010s – just as Nye repeatedly suggested that China could not truly have soft power because of its illiberal values, the authors could not imagine that repressive countries could participate in the governance of the internet.

Yet myriad civic groups, regular users, tech companies, and governments on the internet, each with their own values and agenda, are now so deeply entwined that these various networks cannot be simply separated into binary camps or their differences simply narrowed down to issues of freedom or democracy.[65] The economic, political, and even cultural relationships among states and peoples, on and over the internet, are tightly enmeshed, and while the U.S. still claims leadership over information and communication networks, it has been significantly challenged on many fronts over the last decade. It also became impossible for U.S. tech companies to avoid their political responsibilities, at home as well as abroad, when their business decisions and massive platforms have potential to inflict harm on anyone, particularly already-marginalized populations around the world. States, civil society groups, tech companies, international organizations, and citizens all grapple with this "chained" connectivity, which sorely lacks a locus of responsibility and needs a plan for cooperation.[66]

This chapter has documented the evolving relationship between the global internet and soft power internationalism since the 1990s. I argue that the intimate connection between soft power internationalism and the global internet formed slowly and then let them proceed in lockstep. Just like soft power, the global internet started as an attempt to project a U.S.-led, liberal, and multilateral world. It immediately became a frontier to assert post-Cold-War hegemony while propagating global trade, communication, and democracy. As happened with soft power, the War on Terror spurred the U.S. government's intentional investing in digital infrastructures, in Silicon Valley as well as abroad, while advancing a narrative of global connectivity as a public good. Silicon Valley companies soon joined this civilizing crusade, which converged neatly with their ambitions to create new markets. This synergy reached its logical conclusion with Hillary Clinton's smart power and internet freedom strategies. As the U.S. roots of the global internet became obvious – partly intentionally with Clinton's internet freedom agenda, partly due to the leaks and movements enabled by the internet – China, India, Brazil, Turkey, and the EU ramped up their efforts to counter U.S. dominance in cyberspace.

According to legal scholar David Pozen, the internet-freedom agenda was "fundamentally a national economic project, rather than an international political or moral crusade."[67] He argues that its failure was almost inevitable, as more tech companies became powerful around the world and the U.S. took up the internet as a soft power tool. Internet critic Evgeny Morozov similarly suggests that it was American diplomats' explicit attempts to link Silicon Valley and the political

interests of the U.S. government that provoked the ire of other countries.[68] What both authors overlook, however, is that the decline of U.S. dominance on the global internet is also the result of the internet's true globalization, as more people, organizations, and states have been able to control how products and ideas travel across cyberspace. Like soft power, the global internet, both as a socio-technical infrastructure and an ideal, has been taken up by multiple actors to build influence in international trade, diplomacy, and governance. U.S. policymakers and tech companies have yet to come to terms with the reality that emerging hegemons will continue challenging the omnipotence of a U.S.-based internet. It remains to be seen what the next generation internet will look like, but its norms and rules seem less likely to be shaped in Silicon Valley or Washington, DC.

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