

**Written testimony of Ambassador Karen Kornbluh**  
**Chair of the Board of Directors, Open Technology Fund**  
**Before the House Committee of Foreign Affairs**  
**September 24, 2020**

Thank you, Chairman Engel, Ranking Member McCaul, and members of the Committee for holding this hearing and receiving my testimony.

I am the Chair of the Board of Directors of the Open Technology Fund and am here representing that bipartisan, expert board. I have worked at the intersection of democracy, technology, and independent media for many years and currently lead the Digital Innovation and Democracy Initiative at the German Marshall Fund. Previously, I served as U.S. Ambassador to the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development, where I negotiated the first global Internet Policymaking Principles.

I have been invited here today to discuss the challenges posed by USAGM's new leadership to the Open Technology Fund and thereby to America's internet freedom efforts abroad.

Since Michael Pack was confirmed as CEO of the U.S. Agency for Global Media, the agency has defunded and is now disparaging one of its most valuable assets - the Open Technology Fund. These actions undermine both USAGM's mission and the cause of internet freedom at a time when they are needed most.

The internet is a vital information lifeline for billions worldwide, including USAGM's audience of over 345 million people, and particularly in countries where traditional print and broadcast media are controlled by state authorities. Authoritarians strive to sever this lifeline. Over two thirds of the world's population live in a country where the internet is censored.

The Open Technology Fund was created precisely to counter censorship and surveillance in the world's most repressive countries. Since its creation, OTF has supported the development of the world's leading circumvention and secure communication technologies, successfully enabling millions of people living in censored countries to access USAGM content and other sources of independent news and information online.

Until recently, OTF was the world's leading funder of internet freedom technologies pursuing a multi-faceted strategy:

- OTF has directly funded more than **100 internet freedom technologies**. Today, those technologies are used by over 2 billion people globally, including circumvention tools that support tens of millions of users in China and Iran, and secure communication technologies relied on by journalists and democracy activists in Hong Kong and Belarus.
- In addition, OTF has **fostered a global community** of technologists, digital security experts, journalists, and human rights defenders advancing internet freedom. By connecting these groups and individuals, in part through global meetings and

workshops, OTF has help to grow the community from several dozen organizations to thousands of groups and individuals around the world.

- **Research efforts** funded by OTF have been essential to exposing aggressive new censorship and surveillance threats in places like Xinjiang and developing next generation solutions, including AI-powered circumvention techniques.
- OTF has funded **security audits** that have exposed and patched over 2,000 vulnerabilities and **supported the translation of internet freedom technologies** into more than 200 languages, ensuring OTF funds not only the most effective technologies, but tools that are secure, resilient, and accessible to users around the world.

Both Congress and the U.S. Department of State have recognized OTF is a critical bulwark against rising digital authoritarianism and essential to America's efforts to advance internet freedom globally -- as have thousands of independent media outlets, human rights defenders, and civil society organizations. By all accounts, OTF is a remarkable American success story.

Yet in June, Mr. Pack attempted to fire OTF's expert leadership and remove its independent bipartisan Board of Directors. Those moves were temporarily blocked by a unanimous decision of the D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals.

In addition, USAGM representatives have leveled a variety of accusations against OTF which the organization has repeatedly refuted, providing USAGM over 200 pages of information and documentation and offering numerous times in writing to undergo additional independent financial audits, a GAO assessment, and/or an OIG investigation. USAGM has refused, making it clear that the goal is not to resolve evidence-based concerns, but rather to discredit this effective bipartisan success story.

More devastating, the agency continues to withhold nearly \$20 million in Congressionally allocated funds from OTF -- forcing the organization to halt 49 out of its 60 - or 80 percent - of its ongoing internet freedom programs, leaving journalists, human rights defenders, and activists around the world without the tools and technologies they need to face escalating censorship and oppression. In just four months, the world's leading funder of internet freedom technologies has been dismantled and U.S. internet freedom and democracy efforts around the globe have been crippled.

Authoritarian regimes have made it abundantly clear that they are willing to do and spend whatever it takes to extend their control over the internet. From Xinjiang to Tehran to Minsk, repressive regimes are deploying a new generation of advanced censorship and surveillance technology, designed to stifle dissent, track minorities, and manipulate content online. While these were once the tactics of a few rogue regimes, they are now a global threat - with governments around the world investing billions of dollars in the latest censorship and surveillance systems each year.

The United States should confront these threats head on in an effort to preserve the internet as democratic space for free expression. Instead, the recent actions have played directly into the

hands of despots and dictators. They have undermined critical U.S. foreign policy and national security priorities, and imperiled the lives of millions of journalists, activists, and human rights defenders around the world.

For the United States Government to maintain its role as a global leader on internet freedom, at this critical moment in history, it is urgent that it restore OTF's funding and recommit to its important work.