

The Internet's Lost Promise And How America Can Restore It | Foreign Affairs

By Karen Kornbluh

August 27, 2018

Karen Kornbluh argues that the libertarian mythology associated with the origins and development of the Internet—that it did not and does not require government intervention—is both wrong and wrong-headed. The US government played an essential role in the development of the Internet and, in order to confront threats to democracy, needs to play a bigger role in its regulation.

...

At a time when fully half of the world's population is connected to the Internet, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the technology that promised to give power to the powerless has ended up also hurting the very people it was supposed to help.

[...]

It's time for Washington to overcome its techno-utopian belief that the Internet can fix itself and instead take active steps to ensure that the Internet is a tool to strengthen, not undermine, democratic values.

[...]

Most of the relevant government policies were designed when the Internet was just a fringe part of people's lives, but it has come to touch nearly every aspect.

[...]

In the past, when the future of news seemed in question, Americans publicly

debated what role media should play in a democracy. Congress regulated growing forms of media, with the 1927 Radio Act and then the 1934 Communications Act requiring broadcasters to act in the public interest as a condition of their receiving licenses to use the public airwaves. Civil society joined the debate, too. After World War II, the Commission on Freedom of the Press, led by Robert Hutchins, the president of the University of Chicago, concluded that mass media must be committed to social responsibility. And in 1967, the Carnegie Commission on Educational Television issued a report on how to bring public broadcasting to U.S. households, spurring the passage that same year of the Public Broadcasting Act, which established the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. But when the Internet took off, no such examination took place.

In short, as the Internet grew more centralized and as its role expanded, policymakers failed to keep up. When it came to updating regulations for online activities—whether the matter at hand involved political advertising or privacy—the Internet was treated as a special realm that did not need regulation. And the bad guys took notice.

[...]

Even though public policy played a large role in enabling the creation and growth of the Internet, a mythical, libertarian origin story arose, which fed the belief that the Internet is so open that regulation is unnecessary—indeed, that government is like Kryptonite to the Internet. Of course, this was also a convenient narrative for opponents of regulation, who fought updating offline rules to fit the online world for economic or ideological reasons. But it is critical that Washington act now to prevent the further weaponization of the Internet against democracies and individuals attempting to exercise their human rights—and to do so without sacrificing democratic values such as freedom of expression.

[...]

What's needed is U.S. leadership. The Internet would never have become such a transformational technology were it not for openness—a quality that was inherent in its design yet nurtured by government policies. But over time, those policies did not keep up with changes in technology or the way it was used. The victims of this lag have been those who initially benefited the most from the Internet: democracies, champions of freedom, and ordinary citizens.

Source: [The Internet's Lost Promise And How America Can Restore It - Foreign Affairs](#)