

Opening Speech

By the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Uri Rosenthal,
at the Conference on Freedom Online,
in cooperation with Google and Free Press Unlimited
The Hague
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Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

[Introduction]

Good evening and welcome to this conference on Freedom Online. I am delighted that my esteemed colleague Hillary Clinton, US Secretary of State, has joined us tonight. Welcome, Hillary, to The Hague, City of Peace and Justice. I would also like to extend a warm word of welcome to my colleagues Carl Bildt from Sweden, Urmas Paet from Estonia, Minister Samuel Pogisho from Kenya and Minister Haruna Iddrisu from Ghana.

Last but not least a special welcome to Google's Chief Executive Chairman Eric Schmidt. Thank you for hosting this evening together with Free Press Unlimited. This joint event testifies to the need for a comprehensive approach to freedom online.

[Freedom of speech, driver of democracy, both on and offline]

For centuries, freedom of speech has been the driver of democracy. The fight to ascertain it continues. In the last decades, however, it has taken on an extra dimension: that of freedom online. Freedom of speech *online* is no different from freedom of speech *offline*. Freedom of speech online directly derives from article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The variable here is novel technology, and a much faster pace.

The internet compresses time and space. It is immediately with us, and with us immediately from all over the globe. Whereas it used to take *days* to mobilize the masses, texting crowds and flash mobs *now* organize protests instantaneously. Online technology is a catalyst, as we have seen so vividly in the Arab Awakening, which started largely online.

[Censorship]

Unfortunately, censorship techniques are still being used massively in some countries. Last Sunday's arrest of Syrian-American blogger Razan Ghazzawi is a worrying example of how freedom on the net is under increasing threat. Tight control on the internet impinges on our freedom of speech, association and assembly.

Unfortunately, off-the-shelf surveillance technology sells. Hacking, tapping and monitoring software. It sells, intensely and extensively. Devices enabling governments to filter, block and infect people's computers and cell phones.

[Corporate social responsibility]

Online technology can also make life difficult for the censors. And we should not make their life easier by providing them with filter technology. Here I do strongly believe, with Google, in corporate social responsibility. In codes of conduct such as the Global Network Initiative, the Internet Rights and Principles Coalition and - not to forget - The Silicon Valley Standard. Several IT companies and search engines, like Yahoo, have already shown excellent initiatives. Like Google and Twitter, who during the uprising, helped Egyptians tell the world what was going on, by converting voicemail to tweets.

[Dual-use nature of technology, and what to do about it]

This is no time for half-hearted solutions. It is vital that our technology is not complicit in human rights abuses. I say it clearly and loudly here. Therefore, export of certain technologies to certain countries must simply be prohibited, if we know that it will be used to limit freedoms. We are worried about a proliferation of internet filter technologies that is reaching repressive environments.. As governments, it is our responsibility to prevent this. We must take inspiration from existing initiatives such as the Global Online Freedom Act and others. For its part, the Dutch government has requested the European Commission to include such technology under the EU Dual-Use Regulation.

[Examples of Dutch policy on internet freedom]

The Netherlands is ambitious about freedoms online. About protecting them in the fullest sense possible. Last June, the Dutch parliament was the first in Europe and second in the world to adopt a net neutrality law. The Dutch government is determined to step up its efforts to aid people online facing persecution and NGOs suffering from censorship. The Netherlands is allocating €1 million to support projects providing back-up internet solutions, mesh networks and rapid response mechanisms to bloggers and others in repressive environments. Over the next four years, €5 million from our Human Rights Fund is going towards projects promoting internet freedom. Target countries include for instance Syria, Iran and Zimbabwe.

[Conclusion]

With my foreign affairs counterparts here today and tomorrow, I intend to establish a Coalition of States which will share information on the violation of freedom online. The coalition will support individuals, particularly those operating in repressive environments, in their exercise of human rights through the Internet. The Coalition will cooperate closely with international and regional NGOs, ICT businesses, academia, civil society, indeed other like-minded governments. I feel confident that we have the right spirit to come up with viable answers to the questions before us tonight and tomorrow:

- a. How can we really ensure that freedom of expression online is guaranteed?
- b. What is the role of businesses in keeping the Internet open?
- c. What lessons can we learn from the experiences of bloggers and all those other online voices?

Ladies and gentlemen, the Internet is a public space par excellence. Let's honour and protect it!

Secretary Clinton's views on the promotion of freedom online have been truly inspiring. I would like to welcome her to the stage to share her vision. Thank you very much.