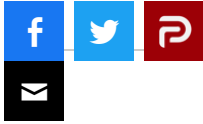


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Michael Pack, Chief Executive of USAGM. (Courtesy USAGM)

POLITICS

US Agency for Global Media Reopens Office of Internet Freedom

BY BONNIE EVANS | September 23, 2020 Updated: September 25, 2020 Print

News Analysis

The U.S. Agency for Global Media ([USAGM](#)), which oversees U.S. government broadcasters such as Voice of America and Radio Free Asia, reopened its Office of Internet Freedom (OIF) last month.

OIF, which began operations in 2016, had been closed by leadership prior to the June 4 confirmation of current USAGM

Chief Executive Michael Pack.

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“There is a critical need to support technologies that allow individuals to securely access and share information online,” the agency said in an Aug. 18 statement.

OIF’s mission is to support the testing, deployment, and management of technologies that circumvent internet blocking, filtering, and other censorship techniques principally used by repressive regimes, such as China and Iran, the agency said in the release.

“Unlike prior USAGM leadership, which sidelined OIF, I consider bolstering internet firewall circumvention to be a top priority,” Pack said. “Blocking access to information is a horrible thing. ... That’s why we’re funding a range of internet firewall circumvention tools.”

With the announcement that OIF is back in business, Pack is moving to reestablish control over USAGM’s circumvention efforts, which had been challenged by a previous attempt to establish a shop called the Open Technology Fund (OTF) independent of USAGM control.

At least one issue central to the conflict within USAGM is a debate over whether to use open-source or closed-source technology. As Pack has sought to regain control, the USAGM and a key staff member have come under attack.

Circumventing Censorship

Mechanisms that censor the internet are principally used in authoritarian countries such as China and Iran. Circumventing those mechanisms is a common goal of government agencies and nonprofit organizations that attempt to empower citizens in repressive regimes by opening up access to the internet, but the means for doing so are often hotly debated.

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One major point of contention is the use of open-source versus closed-source software (often called “proprietary”).

OIF will begin its new existence by funding one of each type. Open-source Psiphon and Cisco's closed-source proprietary ACI are the first beneficiaries of the revived OIF.

In exclusive remarks to The Epoch Times, Katrina Lantos Swett, a noted human rights expert and president of the Lantos Foundation for Human Rights and Justice, said that “the Lantos Foundation advocates for all classes of internet freedom tools to be funded, including circumvention tools.

“Freagate and Ultrasurf are both large-scale circumvention tools that have received U.S. government funds in the past, and we would be happy to see future awards go to field-tested technologies like these that have undergone rigorous security vetting,” she said.

“We also believe all internet freedom technologies that receive funding should be thoroughly evaluated on an ongoing basis, to ensure that funds are being spent on the most effective tools available,” Lantos Swett said.

USAGM also includes under its funding and supervisory umbrella an entity called the Open Technology Fund (OTF). It, like OIF, has been in the business of supporting internet firewall circumnavigation tools.

OTF, however, has been firmly in the camp of using open-source solutions exclusively since its inception as a program within Radio Free Asia (RFA).

Going Rogue

OTF's adamant exclusion of any internet freedom tools that are

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closed-source may have been one of the reasons that leadership of the program seemed to go rogue last year.

In September 2019, U.S. records show that Libby Liu, at that time the head of RFA and the OTF program, incorporated Open Technology Fund as a domestic nonprofit corporation under her own name.

Liu is listed as “incorporator” under the “beneficial owners” listing of the corporation’s registration file.

Senior officials at USAGM maintain that Liu had no authorization from either the agency or from any government organization to spin OTF off into its own entity. OTF receives its entire budget from USAGM.

In addition, OTF vacated its location within the USAGM’s Radio Free Asia in downtown Washington, D.C., taking up new office space about a block away. However, according to officials, OTF didn’t leave a forwarding address, and officials at the USAGM say they had to search for the new offices themselves.

When Pack took office just over nine months later, he fired the heads of the USAGM networks and the OTF, including Liu and some board members.

Now, a lawsuit seeks to invalidate those firings, and to unfreeze grant money, which dismissed officials claim is being withheld.

Senior officials at USAGM dispute the lawsuit’s claims that Pack didn’t have the authority to fire network directors and Liu at OTF. In addition, senior USAGM officials say that money isn’t being withheld from the OTF, stating that it is being paid on a revised schedule.

Open-Source Versus Closed-Source

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Some experts differ with OTF's dogmatic rejection of closed-source circumvention technologies.

CoreDNA, a Australian company that provides a unified cloud platform for digital businesses, according to its website, states that "open source software is available for the general public to use and modify from its original design free of charge."

"What it means is that a piece of software can evolve and be iterated upon by other developers anywhere in the world."

Therefore, CoreDNA's blog on the subject continues, open-source software "should also come with a warning label."

"Whilst an open and peer-to-peer-oriented web is to be applauded philosophically, it can leave us vulnerable to rogue developers who choose to break things for their own benefit. Hence, the need for a warning label."

Closed-source software doesn't need that warning label.

The source code of closed-source software "is not shared with the public for anyone to look at or change," the company states.

'Next Frontier of Human Rights'

"Internet freedom is the next frontier of human rights," Lantos Swett also told The Epoch Times. She's also a former chair and vice-chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, and teaches human rights and American foreign policy at Tufts University.

She says there are "a few clear goals" that the foundation she leads strives to achieve.

“Open the internet to those in closed societies. Provide funding and tools to empower people to see beyond the censored views of their own totalitarian governments. Give them the freedom to learn, to organize, and to thrive the same way we do in open societies.”

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Unlike OTF and its supporters, however, Lantos Swett said that “we are proponents of internet freedom in all its forms.”

“This encompasses both open and closed source technologies.”

The key is to have “a large and flexible toolbox of technologies and approaches” that not only protect a user’s privacy, including those under repressive surveillance, but that also, and critically, “currently circumvent firewalls for millions of users in closed societies.”

It’s funding for those circumvention tools that’s concerned Lantos Swett for years.

“Circumvention tools offer one of the most effective ways to bring down, for example, the Great Firewall of China,” she said.

“At the very least,” Lantos Swett said, those tools can “punch large holes” into China’s infamous digital barricade.

Despite their effectiveness, however, recent years have seen “a trend of reduced funding,” and in some cases a “complete lack of funding” for large-scale circumvention tools.

“We don’t view funding for internet freedom as an either-or scenario, where we have to fund only open-source or exclusively circumvention tools. But we feel strongly that the latter should receive adequate funding to ensure that there is enough capacity to meet the demand coming from closed societies.”

“We also support the continuing development of new

technologies,” she said.

Lantos Swett also weighed in on the controversy between USAGM and its erstwhile spinoff, the OTF.

In The Hill in May, Lantos Swett wrote, “It is folly to think that the 2019 re-establishment of OTF as an independent nonprofit and the sole grantee of the USAGM’s internet freedom funds will lead to any meaningful change.”

“We have been advocating since 2009 to re-direct a portion of the U.S. government’s internet freedom funds” to what is now the USAGM.

Since then, despite potential breakthroughs, “we have equally often been disappointed when we have seen obfuscation, misdirection, and at times even blatant discrimination vis-à-vis decisions about funding.”

Despite “ongoing dialogue” with the former leadership of both USAGM and the OTF that Liu headed, “we have generally witnessed a lack of follow-through in support for some of the most effective circumvention tools currently available.”

“When OTF was re-established as a nonprofit in late 2019 under the same leadership, we had little confidence that we would see meaningful change and this fear was borne out.”

Lantos Swett is “cautiously optimistic”, however, that the changes at USAGM may result in “increased funding for circumvention tools, alongside continued funding for other types of internet freedom tools.”

“We welcome a move in this direction, but given what we have witnessed in the past, we’re going to reserve our judgment until we actually see what action the leadership at USAGM takes.”

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“Again, our goal is to open up the internet in closed societies. We look forward to working with anyone who shares this goal, and we’re supportive of pursuing the full range of tools and approaches that hold promise for reaching it,” she said.

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Since the firings, USAGM and one member of Pack’s staff, in particular, have come under attack on social media and in the press.

Mora Namdar, vice-president of legal compliance and risk at USAGM, has been a key focus of disparagement on Twitter.

One Twitter user, Nima Fatemi, wrote:

“This is an absurd intimidation tactic being employed by Michael Pack and his disgrace of ‘acting VP for legal matters’; A new low standard for the US government. Big congrats to Mora Namdar for becoming a sock puppet for the fascists.
#saveinternetfreedom”

The “tactic” to which Fatemi refers is likely the planned inspection, coordinated with OTF, which Namdar made to OTF’s new offices, once its location had been identified.

Fatemi is described as an “independent security researcher, focused on encryption, privacy and censorship circumvention technologies,” on the website Dxfest.com.

Pack came to Namdar’s defense in a press release and on Twitter.

“The attempts of those with money and power to disparage her are transparent, weak, and without merit. I am lucky to have Ms. Namdar on my team,” Pack wrote.

“The campaign being waged by individuals who seem more

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concerned about covering up corruption and past failures than working on behalf of the American people should outrage every American citizen. In particular, the personal and false attacks launched against Mora Namdar and other members of my staff working to advance freedom and human rights are totally without merit," he wrote on Twitter on Aug. 21.

"One can only surmise that OTF's desire to foment scandal is to distract from its numerous serious lapses and unwillingness to be transparent about its activities."

Namdar is a lawyer, a daughter of Iranian immigrants who came to the United States prior to the 1979 Islamic revolution, remaining in America thereafter. Namdar is also a recognized human rights activist.

Namdar told The Epoch Times that "all of the people who have attacked me have never met me."

"I'm an ardent supporter of rooting out corruption."

Namdar has been heartened, though, by some of the responses to social media slurs directed at her.

"On Twitter, people I don't know have jumped on the bandwagon to defend me."

Pack, a Trump appointee whose nomination languished in the Senate for more than two years, had already withstood one spate of fierce media criticism earlier in the summer from Democrats and some never-Trump Republicans as a tool-in-waiting of the president who would pursue a policy of selective speech in favor of the administration.

The predictions of interference from the White House into the journalistic process at networks such as Voice of America to date haven't been realized.

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In the meantime, on July 1, the Open Technology Fund posted a notice on its website titled “Pause in September Round.” The notice went on to say:

“Due to the current lack of clarity around the availability and timeline of the remainder of our FY2020 funds, we have decided to postpone the opening of the upcoming rounds of the Internet Freedom Fund and the Core Infrastructure Fund and will not accept submissions.”

It goes on to tell readers, “We are always available for your questions – feel free to contact team members directly or get in touch via hello@opentech.fund.”

However, no one replied to a request for comment sent to that email address. In addition, an email sent to the email address for press inquiries that is listed on OTF’s website bounced back. No phone number for the organization is listed on the website. The LinkedIn listings for Liu and Laura Cunningham, the principal director of OTF under Liu, don’t include a messaging function.

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