

U.S. Reverses Sanctions Policy To Open Access To Culture, Education ^[1]

WASHINGTON -- A recent "pivot" of U.S. sanctions policy toward Iran, Sudan and Cuba was discussed in detail this morning by a senior State Department official.

Alec Ross, Secretary Clinton's Senior Advisor for Innovation, said the new policy is designed to promote access to global education and culture by permitting certain telecommunications equipment and services to flow to those countries. Export of those equipment and services had previously been blocked by U.S. sanctions.

"In authoritarian environments it is important to get access to technology," said Ross, adding the U.S. will promote the distribution of free downloadable software to open access to the uncensored global Internet and thus reduce those countries' political, educational and cultural isolation.

In addition to promoting open access to information, Ross said the U.S. has initiated a campaign to actively support "grassroots organizations" around the world.

Ross singled out bloggers as worthy of support, describing blogs as "the samisdat of the 21st century." And he said the fastest growing primary medium for access is not broadcasting but the mobile telephone, especially in developing countries. When Secretary Clinton took office, he said, there were four billion cell phones in the world, and now, just over a year later, the number is almost five billion.

One handicap faced by the Obama administration, according to Ross, is the lack of "global, timely" information on Internet censorship around the world. A few countries get all of the media attention, he said, but Internet censorship is a problem in "dozens of countries" around the world.

Speaking at a Media Access Project conference, Ross said what is at stake is not just the Internet but civilization itself.

He compared 2010 to the year 215 A.D., when the flourishing scientific and cultural center of the world was located in Alexandria, Egypt. In that year, Roman emperor Caracalla took offense at the robust political satire there and ordered the massacre of all 20,000 of the city's "combat age" men and boys. That led to the decline and eventual destruction of the world's greatest library and research center, which had been the birthplace of science and technology since the third century B.C. And Islam's golden age ended similarly, when Damascus and Baghdad abruptly ended open access to information.

By contrast, he said, Europe's rise dated to opening access to information and culture through the invention of the Internet of the era - the printing press - which ended the dark ages and enabled the advances of the Enlightenment.
