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U.S.-Backed Efforts To Promote Openness And Democracy Are At Risk In The Age Of Trump

The Open Tech Fund spends millions to fund tools that support freedom of information and democracy. What happens now is anybody's guess.

Steven Melendez

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Secure, online communication has gone mainstream since the election. Downloads of Signal, the encrypted messaging tool, have jumped dramatically, as have those of browsers for accessing the web through the anonymizing Tor network. News outlets including the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* have advertised secure digital channels for sources to send anonymous tips. Even Trump administration insiders have reportedly taken to communicating through Confide, a previously obscure app for sending disappearing text messages.

But years before Trump took over the government, secure digital communication tools including Signal and Tor have been receiving substantial funding from a perhaps surprising source: the U.S. taxpayer. Since 2012, an organization called the Open Technology Fund (OTF) has operated within an often overlooked offshoot of the U.S. government that traces its origins back to the *Voice of America* and *Radio Free Europe* broadcasts that took otherwise censored information—and highlighted American culture and prosperity—behind the Iron Curtain during the Cold War.

It's a natural extension of a decades-long policy of challenging oppressive regimes by promoting the free flow of information, writes Emily Metzgar, an associate professor at The Media School at Indiana University who has written about U.S. international broadcasting, in an email to *Fast Company*. "The Open Tech Fund's efforts today are a natural extension of this longtime U.S. foreign policy priority," she says. "The tools the Fund has helped develop are, as the group's annual report indicates, available in more than 200 languages for users in almost as many countries."

Technically, the OTF is a program of Radio Free Asia, one of several overseas-focused journalistic services funded by Congress through an agency called the Broadcasting Board of Governors. The OTF has become a kind of Y Combinator for the nonprofit, open internet, delivering funding to projects like Tor and Signal, the secure operating system

distributions Tails and Qubes, and locally focused efforts like the Vietnam Open Internet Project, often at earlier stages and with fewer hoops to jump through than large private foundations. Advisers to the organization include activist Cory Doctorow; cryptographer Bruce Schneier; Mozilla head of public policy Chris Riley; Apache cofounder and Google engineer Ben Laurie; Slack senior staff security engineer Leigh Honeywell; and Kevin Bankston, director of the New America Foundation's Open Technology Institute.

“On their website, they say, ‘Here’s what you do, here’s what you need to say, here’s how you do it,’” says Nathan Freitas, founder of The Guardian Project, an OTF-funded initiative that creates secure smartphone apps. “You don’t have to be even established if you come in with a solid idea.”

The OTF’s budget is inexpensive by the standards of government programs, and laughably small for a tech incubator—its reported budget last year was \$7.5 million, compared to \$27 million that Y Combinator invested in early-stage startups. Yet it faces an uncertain future under President Donald Trump.

Trump hasn’t spoken specifically about any plans for overseas news agencies, but it’s been repeatedly rumored that he may call on Congress to cut funding to domestic public broadcasters like PBS and NPR, and he’s publicly shown more interest in censoring hostile regimes on the internet than promoting free speech.

That, in turn, has prompted populist leaders in Central and Eastern Europe to push back against nongovernmental organizations, according to a recent report from the *New York Times*. NGOs that support democracy and openness are especially at risk.

“There’s no indication from this administration in terms of their rhetoric that this is the kind of thing that would be a high priority for them to support,” says Julian Sanchez, a senior fellow who studies technology issues at the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute.

The Fund in particular has been a prominent backer of open source encryption tools, while Trump last year called on supporters to boycott Apple over their hard-to-break encryption. The OTF has funded GlobaLeaks, a platform letting whistleblowers securely leak data to the press; Trump has repeatedly taken to Twitter, vowing to crack down on leaks in his administration, and accused the media of fabricating anonymous sources.

“It’s not possible to predict how the Trump administration might address this ideologically fraught potential disconnect between the president’s views on leaks and a broader institutional tradition for freedom of information,” writes Metzgar.

Other prominent conservative politicians haven’t always been opposed to funding digital anti-censorship tools. The OTF got its start after members of Congress, including many prominent Republicans, felt frustrated in 2011 with the State Department’s pace in implementing its own programs to combat internet censorship in countries like China and Iran.

“China is also beginning to export its internet censorship technologies to other countries bent on controlling information,” warned former Senator Richard Lugar (R-Indiana), in a report at the time. “In part because of this, and because U.S. international broadcasting must already use internet circumvention technology on a daily basis to reach its audience in countries such as China, Iran, Cuba, Belarus, and other closed societies, I have come to the conclusion that the Broadcasting Board of Governors, which oversees these operations—and not the State Department, which has been somewhat dilatory in disbursing the \$50 million in internet Freedom funds granted by Congress—should be the primary driver in the U.S. government on this issue.”

U.S. international broadcasting agencies have a long history of promoting anti-censorship tools: During the Cold War, they sometimes broadcast instructions for building antennas to circumvent Communist governments’ attempts to jam their signals. The organizations also are quite aware of the importance of protecting journalists and their sources, says Kevin Klose, a former president of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, pointing to the 2014 jailing in Azerbaijan of a reporter for that network who had covered human rights issues.

“The premise is exactly the right premise. How do you get confidential lines open in order to provide quality verifiable information back to the people in all those regions and countries?” says Klose, now a professor at the University of Maryland’s Philip Merrill College of Journalism. “I think the activity that has arisen out of [Radio Free Asia] follows in that goal.”

And when it comes to developing those secure communication tools, the OTF has a fairly good track record of picking projects that proved successful, and of ensuring that they remain open source, says Jillian C. York, the Electronic Frontier Foundation’s director for international freedom of expression.

Serval, for instance, allows for phone-to-phone messaging when existing cell networks are down or blocked.

“Overall, I would say that its biggest successes still are what it set out to do, which is funding technologies, so tools, whether those are privacy tools like Tor or circumvention tools for people in countries like China,” she says.

York served for a time on an OTF advisory board but says she left partly out of a concern about the Fund moving further into funding country-specific programming in a way that can seem to mirror U.S. political priorities.

“There’s a lot of stuff funded by OTF that deals with China,” she says. (FreeWeChat, for example, tracks censorship on the popular Chinese messaging platform WeChat.) “You don’t see a lot of projects getting funded to combat censorship in Saudi Arabia the way you do China.”

Still, she offered praise for the Fund’s overall transparency and close integration into the worldwide open internet community, including a fellowship program that places researchers and developers from around the world with organizations working in the field, including the Electronic Frontier Foundation.

“Ours was a U.S. citizen, but in a lot of cases, the fellows are people from other parts of the world who then get that experience of working with a bigger NGO in the U.S. or in Europe, for example, and then going back,” she says. “I’ve never met a fellow in that scene who wasn’t incredibly grateful for that.”

In response to interview requests for this article, the OTF pointed to published reports, and the Broadcasting Board of Governors did not make anyone available for an interview prior to publication.

If the Trump administration were to eliminate the Fund or substantially cut its budget, it would be likely to leave a gap in support for internet freedom-focused work.

“If you look around for tech funding if you’re a nonprofit, there’s very few sources, and even fewer for those focused on enhancing freedom such as anonymity and security. OTF is one of the largest supporters of such technology,” says Joshua Gay, communications director of the Tor Project.

Still, there’s a possibility that private funding would pick up some of the slack. In its most recent annual report, the OTF noted that private foundations and other governments are increasing their support for such work, sometimes in direct coordination with OTF.

“Venture capitalists are also increasingly interested in fundamental technologies such as decentralization that have the potential to foster innovative new tools for at-risk communities,” according to the report.

And, adds Cato’s Sanchez, support for civil liberties initiatives has risen in recent months along with interest in digital privacy.

“At a time when the American Civil Liberties Union can raise [millions of dollars] in a weekend because people are worried about the Trump administration and civil liberties, it may be that there is enough private support to make projects like these viable,” he says.