

# Evaluation of the Internet Freedom Portfolio

The United States Department of State, Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, Office of Global Programming (DRL/GP) commissioned DevTech Systems, Inc. to conduct a mixed method evaluation of the Internet Freedom (IF) Portfolio to examine the effectiveness of its strategy; garner lessons learned; assess progress; and ascertain any unintended outcomes. This summary presents a snapshot of the evaluation team’s key findings and conclusions as well as action-oriented recommendations for DRL/GP’s consideration.

## KEY FINDINGS

DRL/GP’s Internet Freedom portfolio has and continues to serve a critical role in promoting human rights online through its programs focused on developing and enhancing technologies (Pillar 1), equipping digital activists and human rights defenders to combat digital attacks (Pillar 2), empowering civil society to challenge repressive laws and policies (Pillar 3), and expanding the existing evidence base with cutting edge research on Internet freedom-related challenges (Pillar 4). Through their various programs, DRL/GP is filling a critical void within the broader ecosystem.



Stakeholders alike emphasized that, “if not for DRL, [and] the overall U.S. government commitment... to internet freedom, we would probably be in a much worse situation than we are today.” “This is really an area where DRL is providing a central support..., that, in the absence of the level of funding from the U.S. government and from DRL, in particular, we would be in a very different place than if [these] programs did not exist.”



### PILLAR 1: TECHNOLOGY DEVELOPMENT

The Technology Pillar’s goal is to support the development of technologies that provide, or enhance, access to the Internet by providing circumvention tools that bypass blocking, filtering, and other censorship techniques used by authoritarian governments. As demonstrated by the effective progress against the pillar’s indicators and values, DRL/GP’s approach—supporting a plurality of tools—has been and will continue to be an integral part of its success, mitigating the sudden elimination or blocking of a specific tool. However, while often creating redundancy and resiliency for the whole system, it is important to also be mindful that the sheer number of technologies in the Internet freedom space, can also create challenges for end users and sustainability issues for developers. Moreover, some societies still limit the ability of a user—the intended beneficiary—to even access those solutions in the first place. Thus, a holistic approach to technology development that considers the context of the user at a macro and micro level, as reflected by DRL/GP’s strategy and corresponding theories of change, is desirable.

### SAFEGUARDS

From the onset, DRL/GP successfully laid a strong foundation to prevent risks of illicit use of IF-funded

technologies. The safeguards established in the DRL/GP Illicit Use Mitigation Strategy—notably, the application of a human rights framework and proposal and project review controls—are the strongest ones in the broader Internet freedom ecosystem to prevent risks of illicit use technologies. By anchoring technology design in the unique needs of human rights defenders and vulnerable populations as compared to the quite different needs of criminals, the human rights use case sets a solid and cohesive filter to select technologies with the lowest risk of being used illicitly. Moreover, the established safeguards support the promotion of the DRL/GP’s broader IF goals and values. However, an opportunity exists to enhance and further the success of DRL/GP-funded technologies by enhancing and building upon the existing safeguards to mitigate illicit use. Nevertheless, no major illicit uses of DRL/GP-funded technologies were found or disclosed within the evaluated grants.

### PILLAR 2: DIGITAL SAFEGY

The goal of the digital security pillar is to enhance digital security training and capacity building for democracy activists and to combat violence against bloggers and other users. User-generated content has shifted from primarily being self-hosted on blogs to being hosted and shared on and through a variety of different platforms. Because of this, the word bloggers

should be interpreted broadly to include any Internet user. The evaluation found that the sampled grants effectively pushed forward on this goal building upon the established theories of change that accurately reflect the historical and evolving nuances of digital security, emergency support, and public awareness raising within the ecosystem. Notably, localized solutions were found to have contributed to and enhanced DRL/GP's approach and subsequent success around digital safety. However, while DRL/GP's overarching IF Strategic Framework demonstrates its' commitment to a holistic, systems-based approach, the respective theories of change that inform DRL/GP's digital safety programs could benefit from further emphasis on these principles.

### PILLAR 3: POLICY ADVOCACY

The Policy Advocacy pillar's goal is to support civil society to counter the development of repressive Internet-related laws and regulations, including countering threats to Internet freedom at international organizations by, in part, advocating for human rights in Internet policy and challenging repressive laws that restrict freedom of expression online. As evidenced by the effective progress against the pillar indicators and values, the sampled grants were successful in pushing towards this goal. Furthermore, the theories of change

and underlying assumption which inform the DRL/GP Policy Advocacy Pillar, accurately reflect the historical and evolving nuances of challenging repressive Internet-related laws and regulations within the Internet freedom ecosystem. Notably, DRL/GP's multi-stakeholder approach empowered a diverse network of civil society to serve as champions contributing to tangible improvements to repressive laws, policies, and procedures. While glimmers of success have emerged, due to the nature of this work, the full impact of DRL/GP's policy advocacy efforts will only be realized over time.

### PILLAR 4: RESEARCH

Ultimately, the goal of the Research Pillar is to research key threats to Internet freedom. As the findings demonstrate, the sampled grants effectively pushed this goal forward, delivering timely and relevant information to stakeholders about core Internet freedom issues. Specifically, the uptake of the produced methodologies and associated research products illustrate the advancement of this goal. Furthermore, the Global Ranking's theory of change along with its underlying assumptions accurately reflect the historical and evolving nuances surrounding the Internet freedom ecosystem, thus advancing the available research and existing evidence base.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

While the Internet freedom ecosystem has developed extensively over the past decade—in part due to DRL/GP's programs, contributing to a well-established ecosystem—the ecosystem continues to rely heavily on DRL/GP funding. To maintain forward motion and DRL/GP's leadership in Internet freedom, the evaluation team suggests the following recommendations.

1. **Sensitize grantees**, among other key stakeholders across the Internet freedom ecosystem, on key terms and concepts of DRL/GP's vision for success.
2. Consider formalizing an overarching **IF Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning plan**.<sup>1</sup>
3. Conduct a **gap analysis** to expand the IF Strategic Framework to address funding gaps and needs within the ecosystem to further Internet freedom.
4. Continue to **review and update theories of change** to reflect the ever-evolving context of the Internet freedom ecosystem.
5. Update and expand the **IF Illicit Use Mitigation Strategy** to more clearly articulate the process that is implemented throughout the grant cycle.
6. Intentionally and strategically **collaborate with grantees under Pillar 1** to enhance the effectiveness of safeguards to mitigate illicit use.

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<sup>1</sup> Following the completion of data collection, the evaluation team discovered that DRL/GP has already taken steps to move forward with developing and formalizing a plan to address these concerns.