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Thank you. It is my pleasure to be here.  I welcome this opportunity to

share thoughts and be part of an important dialogue in this region and

the world, a dialogue that hopefully is just as important to all of you

here – Internet freedom.

For the organizations I represent – the U.S. Broadcasting Board of

Governors, which operates all U.S. government-funded civilian

international media – Internet freedom is an integral part of our work.

It's a mission grounded in support for free speech, free press, and free

access to information as means of advancing free, open, democratic

societies.

We provide multimedia service in 59 languages to more than 100

countries, reaching a global audience of nearly 190 million people

weekly.

Additionally, I serve as the Chairman of the Middle East Broadcasting

Network.  Here in Saudi Arabia and across the Middle East, you know us

as Alhurra TV and Radio Sawa.

Alhurra and Sawa are about supporting free flows of factual, credible news and information.

They're not in business to advocate; they're in business to investigate and report.

They're journalistic organizations.

That's why we used the name Alhurra  (the "free one") – to symbolize free press and expression.  Every state-sponsored media organization has a mission. We are transparent about ours.

Let me say why.  Just a few weeks ago we witnessed horrific attacks on U.S. embassies and consulates and the killing of U.S. diplomats in Benghazi.  These crimes, provoked in part by a crude, privately made and insulting video, were fueled by the same satellite transmissions and viral spread of information that ignited the popular protests of the Arab Spring.

Media have extraordinary power.

They can convey messages of hate as well as hope.

But as President Obama said at the United Nations this week, "The strongest weapon against hateful speech is not repression; it is more speech."

I couldn't agree more.

In America, we believe in free speech as a fundamental human right.

And that belief, extends to our international media services –

digital media via the Internet and mobile, as well as traditional media via radio and TV.

Conventional wisdom holds that we live in a highly networked, inter-connected world in which information flows instantaneously from one distant pole of the planet to another.

But, the irony is, while the world may be awash in media, media freedom remains elusive in scores of countries, from Cuba to China.

In fact, free speech is all too frequently under siege.

Here in the Middle East with 20 countries and nearly 400 million people – according to US based NGO Freedom House, only 2% of the region has a fully free press.

I know this might sound surprising, even shocking, in light of hundreds of satellite TV channels available in the region. But it's true. National media environments remain relatively closed.

Why does this matter?

It matters because free societies offer their citizens genuine self-determination and development. People in free societies are able to be and become what they wish – in their relationships, careers, and civic engagement.

It also matters because over the long run free societies are the most peaceful and stable; they rarely threaten their neighbors or offer safe havens for terrorists.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who serves with me on the Broadcasting Board of Governors, put it well: "Clamping down on …

what people read or say or see can create the illusion of security, but illusions fade because people's yearning for liberty does not."

We at the BBG believe that free media and expression are essential to establishing and sustaining free, open democratic societies.

Our outlets play a role as surrogate free media in countries that lack them.

Which brings me to Internet freedom.

Last week Freedom House released a report on Internet freedom that found, and I quote: "Brutal attacks against bloggers, politically motivated surveillance, proactive manipulation of web content, and restrictive laws regulating speech online are among the diverse threats to Internet freedom emerging over the past two years."

And it added, "Several downgrades, particularly in the Middle East, reflected intensified censorship, arrests, and violence against bloggers as the authorities sought to quell public calls for reform."

So this is a subject of keen interest and relevance here in the region.

Countries of the Middle East and Northern Africa are not alone in the struggle to protect and improve freedom of speech and while dealing with the rapidly expanding communication and social media platforms, like YouTube, Twitter, Facebook.  There is not one country in the world without an annual violation of free speech.

When we look at Saudi Arabia and all across the Middle East, we see tremendous the population growth of our young people, which parallels the exponential growth of mobile devices, like smartphones.  In fact, smartphone growth is faster here than in the US or the UK.

There are incredible cross pressures and growing pains for governments and societies that are struggling to deal with generational and technological changes in the way we communicate with one another.

Additionally, last week's report further documents that Saudi Arabia has a significant social media presence.  In the past year, Saudis have among the largest adopters of Twitter in the Arab world, with nearly 40

percent of all Arab tweets coming from here.  Saudi Arabia has nearly 5 million Facebook accounts, roughly one in five Saudis.  And millions of Saudis visit YouTube on a regular basis.  Saudis flooded social media sites following the 2011 Arab Spring; and hundreds, if not thousands participated in campaigns to demand political, social and economic reforms.

As we see here and around the world, the digital divide between those with access to the Internet and those without it is shrinking and the rapid spread of mobile devices is bringing connectivity to populations that were previously cut off from the digital world.

All this makes has tremendous potential for the advancement of freedom of information, while posing significant challenges.

According to Freedom House, the world has less free press today than 20 years ago.  It's ironic given the how quickly free media is decentralized.

In recognition of increasing internet censorship, the BBG's Global Internet Freedom program works with cutting edge developers.

Globally, more than 15 million people daily use a tool to circumvent restrictions to the Internet. Hundreds of thousands of these people live in the Middle East and Northern Africa.

To counter these censorship threats, the BBG's Internet Freedom Program is taking a number of steps to help users circumvent government created firewalls that block access to certain content and to avoid surveillance by accessing the Internet anonymously. Given the active campaigns in some countries to censor online news, we must continuously experiment with anti-censorship tools. We regularly test new techniques, keep the ones that work and drop those that don't.

Some of our successes include:

Tor is an anonymity network that provides strong privacy protections and security against traffic analysis and surveillance.

Freegate is an anti-censorship software product designed to provide secure and fast Internet access.

Psiphon is a web proxy with enhanced video caching and streaming abilities.

And Ultrasurf is a proxy circumvention tool that is used by BBG audiences in places like Iran, China and Vietnam.

While we are eager to provide our audiences with tools to gain access to an uncensored Internet, we know we have to take the safety and privacy of users very seriously.

While no tool is completely safe, we work to make users SAFER.

That's why we insist on third-party testing to ensure that the products we back do not contain flaws that could compromise the anonymity these products promise.

Meanwhile, our broadcasters are pursuing a strong innovation agenda that includes the development of next-generation content, tools, and distribution platforms.

One example, Radio Sawa, Alhurra television and Voice of America invited Egyptian students and freelance journalists to post images and reports to the Twitter hashtag #Egyptdecides and a special EgyptDecides Facebook page.

But unfortunately, there are too many authoritarian states that have taken various measures to filter, monitor or otherwise obstruct free speech online.

Sadly, over the past two years, both physical and technical attacks on journalists and bloggers have been on the rise.  In our own broadcast family, two Alhurra journalists who reportedly have been seized by Syrian forces on August 20th remain missing.

The BBG's Internet Freedom program aims to both maximize access to

information and minimize and ultimately eliminate Internet censorship.

We see censorship as a serious threat to free expression in repressive societies, users can also find themselves the targets of surveillance, their websites and social media accounts can be hacked and the Internet and mobile service can be restricted or cut off completely. Penalties for accessing or distributing prohibited content can be severe.

Reactive Internet censorship, and thus Internet circumvention, especially concerning social media is on the rise. And the complex challenges remain.

Global citizens are using media not only to tell their stories on a digital world stage but also to connect with one another, to chart the future of their communities, and build new forms of civil society and civil discourse. Widespread access to information also contributes to economic growth by empowering users and encouraging them to create communities around issues and enterprises. We at the Broadcasting Board of Governors are committed to broadening access

to information, and to connect like-minded people with one another in

support of that goal.  And we appreciate the chance to enter into a

discussion with you on this subject.