"The Internet and the Emergence of Democracy"

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Okay, well, good evening and thank you all for showing up. It's a nice and cozy small audience so I'm going to be really very brief and simply tell you enough about what I'm thinking about and what I might be able to answer questions about so that you can ask questions and we can have a lively and vigorous discussion. But even before I start, I'm curious who you are. How many of you are members of the Foreign Policy Association? Okay, how many of you are strictly domestic U.S., if anybody? Okay, but you mostly came because you wanted to hear about outside the U.S., is that fair? How many of you consider yourselves Internet—familiar with the Internet, use it a lot, you couldn't live without it? Okay. How many of you would have answered that same way five years ago? Ten years ago? Okay, great. Suitably calibrated.

Well let me make a very brief distinction just about how the Internet gets used in politics in the U.S., which you can extrapolate from. But that's one point worth making. I want to do that, then I want to talk briefly about my sad but educational experiences at ICANN, which enabled me to meet a lot of government officials because they considered me almost one of them. And then finally, I just want to get a little travelogue of some countries I've been to lately, including Kazakhstan and what I saw the Internet doing there.

My basic thesis is that the Internet is an incredibly powerful tool. It is mostly completely neutral. It can help terrorist as well as budding democrats, but that in the end, the habits it promotes are the habits of empowerment, sharing of information, and basically freedom. You get on the Internet, you expect to find things out, you expect people to answer you, you begin to expect institutions to be responsive, and that's probably more important than really the content of any of the information that flows over the Internet.

So very briefly, and this is really a very brief Cook's Tour. In the U.S. the first politicians to get the Internet were really, too many people's surprise, the republicans, who were very good at direct mail and understood the power of the Internet simply as a somewhat traditionally used tool to reach out to people, to communicate one to one, to solicit donations, to get their messages out, and so forth, and so on. And the Internet's very, very useful simply as a political tool, used in somewhat the traditional get out the vote, get the donations, reach people, kind of way. The second way it's used is a very different one, which is the fomenting of discussion—the discussion boards, the communities, bloggers going online, all this kind of thing, getting people to get out there and express themselves.

I'm on the board of meetup.com, which is well known as the site that launched Howard Dean. It was really initially started without politics in mind, it was simply a guy called Scott Heiferman, whom I knew, who read Robert Putnam's book Bowling Alone, and thought wouldn't it be nice if people used the Internet to get together in real life. And we assumed it would be people who wanted to get together to speak Spanish or to play chess. We had a lot of programmers who wanted to get together to talk about programming. We have wiccans, and warlocks, and so forth. But we also ended up being discovered, really, by Joe Trippy and a number of other political people, and the political meetups became a huge phenomenon, the ultimate meaning of which is still unclear. There's a certain school of thought that people get on line, they go to meetups, they do all this stuff, and they feel they've done their political involvement, and they forget to vote. Or, they get on line and they talk to other people like themselves and don't really realize what's going on in the larger world. To some extent, I think the Howard Dean phenomenon was number one, uniquely inward looking and number two, Howard Dean himself didn't really get the Internet, though the Internet was very important to what he did.

A final interesting thought about this, and again I encourage questions later, the meetups that were political were in many ways part of the divisiveness you've seen over the last decade or two. The meetups that really fostered community, and bonding, and perhaps that were not polarizing, were the meetups that were organized around chess, or gardening, or stay at home moms, because those are the ones that brought republicans and democrats together around a common interest rather than polarizing them around separate divisive interests focused on politics.

So these things have really interesting impacts that aren't what you might think of at first. Currently, the blogosphere, such as it is

called, matters a lot in politics, but it mostly matters as kind of, again, it's it's own world of specialists that then has a real impact when what a blogger writes gets picked up in the regular press. There's still that TV mass medium that is what really matters on a mass basis. I think over time that will change some but I think the Internet people a little overestimate their power and their influence, but that's my opinion.

Now I could give a whole talk on each of these topics. Let me just talk briefly about ICANN, which is not the Internet's government, Carl. The whole point—well, ICANN was created at a point when the U.S. government, in its wisdom, said we do not want to be in charge of the international domain name system for the Internet. That's not appropriate. It shouldn't belong to a country, it should be international. This was a beautiful example of American idealism at its finest. They knew that the Internet was an international, worldwide, affordance, and they thought it should be accountable to a worldwide community. This was most strongly, Ira Magaziner, who if you remember, did Clinton's health care policy, and then Clinton said to him okay, Ira, you find something else to do, and Ira found the Internet.

I mean this kindly, but it was overly idealistic. The moment the U.S. government made the announcement that they wanted to do this a huge anarchistic, for you John [unintelligible], a huge anarchy erupted. The business community thought that the U.S. government was doing something really stupid because the Internet worked fine the way it was. The foreigners didn't trust what the American government said it was doing and figured it was some kind of dirty plot. Most people in Congress, egged on by a company called Network Solutions, which had the monopoly that ICANN was overseeing, thought it was a dirty plot to give an American birthright away to foreigners, the Internet community thought it was an incursion of bureaucracy and officialdom onto their pristine Internet. So nobody liked this, and then they did the thing you should never do on the Internet or in life in general, they pretty much lied. They said we want this governing structure to emerge spontaneously from the grass roots. And of course, it did no such thing.

So the American government and the European Union pretty much got together, figured out how to make this happen, got some kind of, if you like, what can we do buy-in from the rest of the countries, and I ended up on the board of this thing because I was non-partisan, didn't know—I was probably the person on the board that knew the most about the Internet with two exceptions. They went after people who had not been involved in these holy wars, which

was smart except that it meant that the board didn't know anything about the Internet or the people it was dealing with, and it was a uniquely un-transparent organization. We had one piece of bad luck, which was that the guy who had been running the predecessor to ICANN died during the time that the board was being created— completely legitimately. [laughter] And he ended up being represented by his lawyer, who was a great guy, but he was a corporate litigator and absolutely the wrong person to engage with the Internet community. So we had some bad luck.

I became chairman, and I won't go into any more details but the thing was created in an atmosphere of mistrust and it was supposed to set policy for this international system—not really for the Internet itself. It didn't control content or anything like that but it controlled the system that gave you fpa.org, or ned.org, or adventure.com, and I learned a ton from this. There were the people who thought that the Internet should be governed by the people— anybody should be able to get on line, have his say, vote to elect the board of ICANN. There were a few problems there as you can imagine, like, how do you validate who a person is, how do you make sure that they don't create 29 versions of themselves, should you include the unborn children, should you include the people who do or don't use the Internet yet, too many Americans, all these kinds of problems. And so we were supposed to be in sort of the old fashioned sense, the wise trustees that would take care of this thing. But then you had governments who really thought this was a foolish idealistic experiment of the United States anyway, and really they should be running things behind the scenes.

The saving grace of ICANN was that it had very little power. Everyone wanted it to have more power and then for themselves to be in charge, and whenever anybody talks about world government and can't the Internet make everything international I think of ICANN and I shudder. [laughter] The point of this story really is that there are reasons we have sovereign governments. I'm a big fan of the Internet but I don't think we need any kind of global governance. I think that thought is scary. And the moment you create something that is not illegitimate, that people actually are willing to give power to, you have a scary entity because it will become, it will suck up power, and then it will get into the wrong hands. So our current system of slightly controlled chaos, nobody's really in charge, actually works amazingly well. Kind of like democracy, it's better than any of the alternatives.

I learned a whole lot during that experience about on line discussion. The beauty of on line discussion is different points of view can be heard. The bad part of it is nothing ever ends.

Someone can always bring up a grudge again. The great thing about voting is that it has timing, and deadlines, and there's a result that matters. As I said before, part of the chimera of Howard Dean, and sort of the blogosphere, and everything else, is you think that by talking you're making change, and you may not be. You may be expressing yourself and of course you may be giving people new ideas but government doesn't really happen on the Internet. Good ideas do, compromise does, but it's dangerous to think that the Internet is where we want to run our affairs. We want to use it to run our affairs but it's still a far cry from being what the idealists think it is.

Okay, so let me just finish quickly with a few thoughts on a couple of these places I've been to lately. I am a big fan of the Internet. I think it's an incredibly useful tool, and it does enable people to find out information, it is a force for transparency, and all those things, but it really doesn't do much other than what people use it for. So in the last six months I've been to South Africa, Kazakhstan as mentioned, and I'll throw in Russia because I go there every month or two.

So in South Africa you have—this is—apologies to all of you who are experts in any of these regions. This is my very brief version of history and how things work, so I hope I'm neither betraying too much ignorance nor insulting anybody here, but I've been on something called the President's Information Technology Advisory Council in South Africa, which advises Mbeke and his ministers on information technology. It's a wonderful thing to be part of. The president actually comes and spends a whole weekend with the relevant ministers of communication, science and technology, public works, and so forth, and listens to a bunch of mostly outsiders, many of them vendors to the government, which is perhaps not the ideal, but they know a whole lot about information technology and they're interested enough to show up, and we talk about what South Africa should be doing. This has now been going on for six years and every year we've more or less said the same thing, which is liberalize your telecom system, create competition, use the Internet to do this and that, yes you should put the Internet and computers into schools but it's more important to have good teachers, and so forth, and so on.

About a year or two ago, South Africa Telecom was finally privatized. It's now about to get competition but right after coming back from South Africa, I went to a Wall Street, some Wall Street conference, and they happened to have South Africa Telco's description in their book of investment opportunities, and it said South Africa Telecom has hundred percent market share in all its

markets. [laughter] So the problem in South Africa is the government has so much moral credibility for having, being basically the people who took apart apartheid and tried to create a new system, that they're not being held accountable for doing the rest right. And you have a country which is now failing to live up to its potential, failing to do all the things it should be doing, and really not serving its people well. Again, it's probably better than the alternative but the Internet is expensive, it's hard to get access to.

In South Africa, as in many, many underdeveloped countries, the really exciting technology that's happening is the cell phone. Forget the Internet. The cell phone is actually an access device for the Internet. It doesn't give you the richness or the beautiful screens but the ability to find out what crop prices are, the ability to collect epidemiological information for your health care system. These things matter far more than everybody having broadband, but it's still a shame that they can't provide competition for their telco and make it cheaper. And I have a scheme, which is for people to resell their access to their neighbors using wireless, which I raised at this particular weekend, and everybody scratched their heads and well, no, I don't think it's illegal. If it is it shouldn't really be, and maybe you have to register.

So I announced this at a press conference afterwards. I said, you know, we talked about this. I can't tell you about our private meetings but we did have a certain consensus that if you have Internet access you can resell it to your neighbors. And of course, the press picked that up, and was delighted, and it created quite a stir. But I got one very disturbing email back, which said, in essence, it's not the people's job to deregulate telecom, it's the government's. [laughter] And that guy was serious, so—

Kazakhstan is not the country Borat would tell you it is. [laughter] In it's own way it's probably worse. It is indeed corrupt. One man plus cousins rule. The big news when I was there was that somehow it had been published that the head of Kazakh Telecom makes, what was it, I think $300,000 a month. And those of you who are political, you'll find a certain irony in the fact that the discussion wasn't about how much money he made, which was assumed, the precise figure isn't really very interesting, but who was it that caused that information to be revealed and what was their agenda. [laughter] That's the real challenge in places like this.

I went, as Carl said, to Kazakhstan. I was on my way from Greece to Bangalore. It's sort of on the way. So I spent a weekend there and spent the time with the two local program officers. And I'm

saying this to you because you're mostly family in some sense. As a board member of the NED and probably many other organizations, you wonder are we really doing good. Are we genuinely fostering democracy or are we going in there and interfering? What are we teaching these people? It was actually a very encouraging weekend.

First of all, almost anything you do that helps people use tools, understand better how to create a message, and be proactive and empowered, is to the good. While I was there I met a man some of you may know called Nurbalot Masanof [phonetic]. He ran something called Club Polyton [phonetic], which was where I went with the two NEDders and we spoke with a group of assembled sort of activists / journalists. This is a place where visitors come and talk to local activists. It's a political discussion group—in Kazakhstan that's bad enough. [laughter] Put it like that. Nurbalot Masanof [phonetic], he died four days after I was there of food poisoning, a food allergy, with his wife, in a restaurant. Nobody thought there was anything suspicious, though of course, it was the first thought in anybody's mind. Let's be candid. There's no one to replace him in Kazakhstan. If an activist in the U.S. dies, sad as it is, there's someone there to take up the cudgel. In Kazakhstan and other places it's very, very hard.

So the word of the NED and other organizations, the NGOs is tremendously important, and there may be nuances that aren't perfect but I was extremely encouraged on that weekend that we're doing useful work, we're getting people to complain about things they should be complaining about, we're getting people to understand that if you have a political message you still have to craft it in a way that it will make people listen. Just like the U.S. blogosphere, unfortunately, the Kazakh dissident community I don't think is terribly effective at reaching a broader public and certainly that's because they don't have access to the press, by and large, but it's also because they're not very good at sending out a message. They're not very good at crafting the message and they're not very good at understanding how to use all those plain old tools, of email lists, and market segmentation, and all that kind of stuff. And anything that will teach them how to do that is tremendously valuable.

Let me not talk about Russia because I really want to leave time for questions. I just want to leave with one other thought, which is, as I said at the beginning, I think the Internet is a very powerful tool because of what it does, not just because of what it carries and I think most people who start using it are not going on to elect a president or discuss politics. When I was in Russia I was having my hair done. I mentioned to the woman doing my hair that I'm on the

board of Yondex, which is the Russian version of Google. This is a hairdresser, people, it's not some academic, and she immediately brightened and said oh that's great, that's what I use to find a summer camp for my daughter. I have two little dogs that I show at dog fairs, and this is what I use to get special food for them, and to find out where the dog fairs are, and-- She's not political but she now expects to be able to find things out. She expects institutions to be responsive. She expects the dog fairs to respond to her emails requesting registration materials, whatever. Over time, as people start using these tools, and as they start feeling that they're in control of something, they're going to start feeling they should be in control of more. Suddenly you don't just find a summer camp for your daughter, you get on the equivalent of the PTA, you start organizing with other parents. It's slow, it's not inevitable, but I think it's really important, and I think it's a much more fundamental impact of the Internet than everything you read about in the press. All the news it carries, all the scandals that get revealed, the fact that individuals have tools as individuals that in many ways enable them to engage with institutions in a way they never could before is probably the most important impact of the Internet.

So let me leave it there and see if I can get you guys to be interactive.