



[Prepared remarks by Leslie Harris for keynote at Personal Democracy Forum 2012]

From A Moment to A Movement: Sustaining the Internet's new Power

So here's a story. Maybe you've heard it:

The Internet is threatened by a shortsighted attempt by Congress to pass a sweeping censorship bill aimed at reigning in a growing threat to the American way of life: the Internet.

The Internet community rises up in protest. Phone calls flood into Capitol Hill. But armed with collective moral panic, the bill passes with only a few dissenting votes.

Internet users take to the digital streets and stage a black out. Over 2,500 sites go dark. Companies join with advocates to challenge the bill. The Supreme Court strikes it down

in an historic opinion and gives the highest level of First Amendment protection to online speech.

The Court leaves one part of the law in place: Section 230, which shields the Internet's intermediaries from liability for the speech of their users. (Yes, Senator Wyden has had our back for a long time).

The Internet revels in its new power. Of course, the year was 1996 and the bill was the Communications Decency Act.

It's what happens next that's telling. Innovators and entrepreneurs boldly step forward into this welcoming environment and create a free speech commons that transforms the web into a place for social connection, collaboration and community.

And in turn, this innovation lays the foundation for the powerful SOPA uprising in defense of the free and the open Internet.

So why look back? To make two points: first that advocacy matters and has always mattered to the open Internet. We did not get the Internet we have today by code alone.

And second, that it takes more than a moment to make a movement. The defeat of the CDA was a seminal moment in the development of the Internet. I am proud that CDT played an important part. But... it did not launch a movement.

The years between the CDA and SOPA were marked by many such important moments for the Internet, but it is fair to say that they also did not lead to a sustained movement for the open Internet.

It may be too soon to fully understand whether the SOPA moment will become the sustained movement we all hope for. The full implications of the SOPA tsunami will be revealed over the course of years, not months or days.

It has been 145 days since the Internet stood still and SOPA imploded.

Yet, Washington does not seem to have learned very much. The dominant meme remains unchanged: we are an unruly mob of pirates & pawns; victims of a misinformation campaign led off a cliff by Google.

As one House staffer recently insisted, "as for SOPA being a genuine home grown grassroots up-from-the-streets opposition, I beg to differ on that."

You beg to differ? Well, so do I. The Campaign against SOPA was not a "tactic" and Internet users are not "Astroturf. "

The unwillingness of Congress to take stop reading from the same dog-eared script speaks volumes about how it views the world. The story line goes like this: There is a bill, companies are lined up for and each side has a set of "owned and operated" front groups in its service.

The SOPA uprising disrupted this well-worn narrative and they just can't make sense of it.

But we, too, are just beginning to have a better understanding of the force we collectively unleashed.

Yes, first narratives have emerged; heroes anointed, Reddit and the LOL cats have been saved. But it is really too soon to write the final history of the SOPA uprising; we don't yet know what we don't yet know and to the extent we think we do, we are all frankly a bit hobbled by our own perspectives.

It reminds me of the ancient Indian tale of the six blind men and the elephant. One touches the elephant's leg and claims that it's column, another the tail and declares it is

a rope and yet another holds the trunk and is convinced it's a tree. Everyone is right and yet everyone is wrong. No one has the full story.

Yes, something profound happened during the SOPA uprising. But if we are going to get from a moment to a movement, our first task is to knit together a common narrative that will bring our stories together into a richer more inclusive whole.

We should view ourselves as a start up with a wealth of energy and a powerful idea: Build an advocacy movement to defend the open Internet. We need to give ourselves the space to innovate, experiment and evolve. We have to figure out how to meld together our skills and strategies in the service of our common goal. We need to form and test new partnerships, build our collective knowledge and deepen our trust in each other. Each new challenge offers us another beta to test and refine our strategy and move closer to the movement we aim to be.

Whatever we think we have accomplished, we will understand more fully over time.

I do know this, SOPA shook Congress to its core and left Members looking over their shoulders, fearful of 'getting SOPA'd', and asking, "What will the Internet do?"

The answer has not been long in coming. ACTA is on the rocks in Europe and the future of CISPA is in doubt.

Even as many of our corporate allies in SOPA lined up in support of CISPA or stood on the sidelines, the Internet community succeeded in putting privacy at the center of the cybersecurity debate. We deprived the proponents of enough votes to overcome a threatened White House veto and substantial privacy changes are now the works in the Senate. Nice encore.

So what's next? It's not too soon to ask what we want to be when we grow up. Do we aim to be defenders of the Internet against a feckless and reckless Congress? We have no choice. Even as copyright may have been swept off the table for at least the near future, there many other issues in the wings: data retention, surveillance technology mandates, and depending on the outcome of the election, maybe even the repeal of net neutrality.

As long as elected officials view the Internet as source of danger and evil doing, the Internet has to use its growing power to keep them in check.

But does it always have to be this way? Can we envision a time when the open Internet becomes an issue at the ballot box? When candidates scramble to take a pledge to protect the Internet and proudly tout their Internet freedom record?

The green shoots of democracy are already emerging. Just head to Austin and check out the crowd sourced "Don't mess with the Internet" billboards in Lamar Smith's district or the growing success of the Pirate Party in Europe.

But my hope we can resist the temptation to just do "Nerd Politics". We can't just talk to ourselves and others "in the know." We can't simply disdain traditional politics. We have to grab our passports, leave the comfort of the Republic of Nerdistan and seek to develop a more inclusive Internet politics. Can we use our Nerd skills to take on, disrupt and re-shape traditional politics and help empower ordinary people to reclaim our democracy? I think we can.

But first we have to set out a positive vision for the Internet and an agenda that captures the imagination of the electorate, one in which they can envision their future and that of their children.

That means that sometimes we will have to get beyond "no." I like "no." I have spent a lot of my career saying "no." No is safe. It is easy to organize around. No keeps us united.

But no can't be the sole basis for a lasting movement that attains political power.

We have to be prepared to grapple with the issues that affect all Internet users, and willing to entertain the possibility that sometimes the answers won't be as simple as "hands off." We can and should use our collective knowledge and Nerd skills to find better answers to real problems that respect the Internet's openness and protects our rights.

And we must articulate a common set of ethics for the Internet community and be willing to step up and call out those who step out of bounds.

If we want to keep the government out and invite the American people in, we need to clearly state our values and live by them.

We also need to work out our place in the global movement for Internet freedom. What happens in the U.S. matters to the freedoms of Internet users all over the world. When we stumble, Internet freedom around the world suffers. As one prominent Internet advocate from India put it, "the world is waiting to cherry pick from your worst practices."

The three million people from around the world that joined in our fight against SOPA were not just lending a helping hand, they were fighting for their freedoms. We should fight for their freedoms as well.

Finally a thought about money. Let's not squander an opportunity to build a powerful movement because of a lack of resources. Please don't force us to play the hunger games.

Start ups need investment to help nurture new online groups, give us all room to be more entrepreneurial, build new collaborations and yes, to occasionally fail.

There simply needs to be more money on the table and not just from foundations, but also from the investors, entrepreneurs and innovators who are a critical part of the Internet's new power politics. SOPA should be a wake up call. Internet advocacy matters. It protects what you do every day: innovate without permission. It deserves your support.

So lets celebrate our moment and then get down to the hard work of building it into a lasting movement for Internet freedom. Let's erect a big tent and set a welcoming table. Let's try out bold ideas. And let's be kind to each other and learn to celebrate our differences. It makes us stronger. It increases the chances for success and makes the journey between a MOMENT and a MOVEMENT a lot more fun.

Thank you.

