

By Ben Rooney

Throughout the short history of the Web plenty of commentators have spouted some pretty good nonsense about it. Nicholas Negroponte, the then head of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Media Laboratory, predicted that the Net would bring world peace by breaking down national borders.

Speaking at a conference in Brussels in 1997 he told the credulous audience, in 20 years time children "are not going to know what nationalism is."

To be fair to the utopian Mr. Negroponte he was following in a long, and inglorious, tradition of over-imbuing technology with near mystical properties. A century earlier the transoceanic cable was seen as an equal harbinger of fraternal love. "It unites distant nations, making them feel that they are members of one great family... By such strong ties does it tend to bind the human race in unity, peace, and concord," wrote one commentator in 1880.

But was Mr. Negroponte as wrong as all that? For while the Internet may not have brought world peace, what it can do is help countries emerging from conflict build the sort of institutions that build new democracies.

One of the things that the Internet is good at is bringing a measure of transparency and sunlight to historically dark places.

Dark places like prerevolution Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. How were billions of dollars of net worth able to be accumulated by Moammar Gadhafi, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, and Hosni Mubarak? It is because of the lack of transparency within financial systems, within government tenders, within significant sectors of the Libyan, Tunisian and Egyptian governments.

In an interview with The Wall Street Journal, President Toomas Hendrik Ilves of Estonia, a

country that has very successfully made the transition from Soviet vassal to Western democracy partly through huge investment in technology, said he believes e-government can help root out corruption.

"The big problem is not toppling the dictator and going home from the city square," he said. "It is what do you do after that. Do you have effective institutions? You get rid of one dictator and if you don't build the institutions you pretty soon have another.

"One of the ways of building institutions is through e-governance, where you can implement transparency, reduce all the rent-seeking behavior of people who come into power, because however noble they may be, suddenly they realize 'I can handle this tender...'. "

Mr. Ilves wants to use the experiences of his country to help others, particularly those in North Africa attempting to make the transition. He is working on plans to establish a center in Estonia to help emerging democracies embrace open government and technology.

Nor is Mr. Ilves a lone voice. Alec Ross is senior adviser for innovation to U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. He grounds his technological enthusiasm in the realpolitik of the region. "You have to have a government that is fully bought into the idea," he said. "If a government is half-bought in, then it will not work. You can't do it by degree. You either do it entirely, or not at all."

Dutch Member of European Parliament Marietje Schaake is championing the inclusion of Information and communication technologies into the European Community's aid policies. "There is a huge opportunity for a great leap forward, especially when it comes to administrative reform," she said.

"We should start by promoting concepts like open data and by integrating ICT at the most advanced level in administrative reform. That will trickle down into how budgets are managed, how transparency will be fostered, and how participation by citizens will come along.

"If we integrate it into the roots of transition it can flourish in unprecedented ways. It will lead to

entrepreneurship, accountability, collaboration in ways that we may not have seen ourselves. If we can get people to access information beyond the control of authorities, then fostering human rights can be helped a great deal."

These are not lessons wasted on some of these states. Libya's National Transitional Council is implementing its e-Libya initiative, which has the support of the main political groups. It has four aims: open and transparent government, e-government to improve quality of service, e-commerce, and e-learning. "Paper-based systems are a route to more corruption," said Khaled el Mufti, who heads the initiative, in an earlier interview with The Wall Street Journal.

³We need to eliminate that.²

Katherine Maher, a consultant who has recently returned from Tunisia, said one of the first acts of the new government had been to pass a Freedom of Information act that was used to free up more data.

"The Tunisian government has been using that act to extract data around public finances and the like from various agencies. At the same time civil society through the opengov.tn initiative has done an excellent job in mobilizing the support of a number of members of parliament to press for an open government agenda."

According to Ms. Maher, the government is committed to joining the Open Government initiative, which means meeting a number of minimum standards.

"The government has demonstrated a degree of trust, if not among the illiterate, then among the elites.

Mr. Ross, having learned the lessons from the neo-utopians, is keen to inject a dose of realism. "Let me say first of all I don't know if it's going to work. Am I optimistic? Moderately."

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