

Nathanial Freitas
Opening Statement
CSCE Hearing "Twitter vs. Tyrants"
October 22, 2009

I greatly appreciate the opportunity to participate in this hearing. Thank you to the members of the commission, Chairman Cardin and Co-Chairman Hastings, for the invitation to appear here today, and for your interest in this very important topic. I come to you as a representative of the countless technology and new media advocates, experts and educators who believe that the most amazing and ground-breaking innovations of our generation should be used for more than just the acquisition of wealth or as new channels of entertainment and distraction. I am also a longtime member and former board chair of the international non-profit group Students for a Free Tibet, led by Tibetan activists Lhadon Tethong and Tenzin Dorjee. What I will share with you today are some of my experiences working with new media technology as an activist practitioner, and my ground-level perspective, so to speak.

First, a small bit of history. The roots of this latest wave of new media technology, specifically Twitter, began in 2004, with an open-source web service called TXTMob. TXTMob was first developed by MIT's Institute for Applied Autonomy for use by protesters at the 2004 Democratic National Convention in Boston and the Republican National Convention in New York. I was part of a team that utilized TXTMob to broadcast thousands of short messages to over 10,000 people on the streets of New York, letting them know what was happening moment by moment. Later in 2004, during the Orange Revolution in the Ukraine, students utilized the same service to coordinate spontaneous protests also known as "flashmobs", strikes and sit-ins. In 2005, two of my colleagues who had been involved in TXTMobs use during the RNC went to work for the company that became Twitter, where they demonstrated the power of short message broadcasting to their coworkers around the office. It was in those times and in those moments, that the idea for Twitter was born. It is not an accident that things have come full circle, with Twitter now being the standard go-to tool for activists around the world.

In my activism work, my areas of focus and expertise is Asia. I have specific experience traveling in and working with organizations focused on China, Tibet and India. I have also been employed in Silicon Valley and Silicon Alley, developing patented technology focused on the exchange of data between mobile devices over wireless networks. As a student at the University of California in the mid 90s, I worked on a DARPA and NSF-funded research effort known as the Digital Library Initiative. Today I am an instructor at New York University's Interactive Telecommunications Program, teaching a new graduate course entitled "Social Activism using Mobile Technology".

My personal path in this sphere, as a developer, practitioner and instructor in the use of new media technologies within social movements, may seem novel, but is in fact built upon a very long tradition of geeks trying to good.

During the second world war Second World War and the Cold War, inventors, mathematicians and the earliest digital computers played a critical role in helping the allies stay one step ahead of the axis.

During the civil rights movement, the use of telephones, telegrams and traditional social networks within churches and universities, helped build a

foundation to mobilize supporters throughout the south. In recent years, open-source hackers, nerds and geeks have gravitated towards the social justice, environmental and human rights movements, creating unique alliances and very rich opportunity for innovation.

The idea of two guys in a garage in Silicon Valley has translated into global teams of activists communicating in realtime through Twitter, Skype, Facebook through their laptops, iPhones and Blackberries, working to weave together the grassroots organizing and non-violence tactics of Gandhi with freely available, open-source software, cheap internet bandwidth, cloud servers and mobile devices.

Take the case of Burma in 2007. Video journalists and I.T. (Internet technology) student organizations teamed up to provide their own coverage of the Saffron Revolution. Using SMS, instant messaging technology, digital video cameras, internet-based file transfer services, combined with old fashioned "sneaker nets", a network was able to present an uncensored view of the protests as they unfolded.

As their footage began reaching the outside world, appearing on the BBC and elsewhere, the journalists became more bold and increasingly targeted by the state security forces. When the revolution never fully materialized, the monks, activists and journalists involved paid a very heavy price, facing imprisonment, torture or worse. However, the innovative work of the video journalist teams made a lasting impact and was largely considered to have been successful due to the global attention the protests received. A similar model is being used in Iraq, through the award-winning online video channel, "Alive in Baghdad", that works to cover and disseminate stories of the every day lives of Iraqis. We have also seen this model used with simple camera phones in the Kashmir and most recently in Iran, when a single video clip of video of an innocent dying girl instantly clarified the issue for a global audience and brought overwhelming sympathy and support to the side of the Iranian people. The power of the moving image is unavoidable, and with the low cost of distributing video online, the ability to easily stream live over mobile and satellite data networks, its reach and impact has come to rival broadcast television.

In many cases, the authoritarian states' power proves too formidable for new media technology to have a meaningful impact. While we can instantly know about the smallest conflict in any part of the planet, there is often very little that the Internet can do to help those in harms way. In Tibet, the largely peaceful uprisings in March 2008, were perceived by the outside world as being "riots", due to China's ability to control the story by severely restricting news media access and blocking telephone and internet communication. Thousands of Tibetans were detained, many died, and hundreds were given lengthy sentences, many convicted through evidence gathered via close-circuit security cameras, use of mobile phones, PCs and the Internet. Just yesterday, four Tibetan political prisoners were executed after being hastily convicted of crimes related to the March uprising. There are countless stories of Chinese, Tibetan and other activists within China being incriminated through their use of email, Skype and other tools.

The evidence gathered by the state is often done in collaboration with the technology providers - Yahoo!, eBay/Skype, and so on.

In August of 2008, over seventy activists from around the world traveled to Beijing to protest for Tibetan human rights and independence during the Olympic

games. New media tools played a major role during this effort, providing a loosely coupled link between the various independent activists who were traveling to Beijing to participate in protests. The tools also enabled a team of citizen journalists to document the many different protests and press conferences that occurred, using techniques evolved from what the Burmese students accomplished in 2007 and a bevy of new technology - solid-state HD digital video cameras, handheld tablet computers, live streaming camera phones. Their photos and footage were broadcast around the world, appearing in the NY Times and on the BBC and CNN International. Mainstream press was unable to cover the majority of these events due to the close monitoring and scrutiny they faced. The Beijing authorities eventually caught on, arresting and detaining for a week, six American citizens who had been documenting the protests.

During their detention, they were told that the crimes they were guilty of, documenting and spreading media of protests, were a far worse a crime than actually participating in the protest itself.

Fortunately, due to their American passports and support from the White House, they were treated fairly and made it home. Chinese and Tibetan activists, bloggers and journalists who have been arrested for similar acts have faced far worse treatment and sentences.

During last year's presidential elections, I was a member of a diverse team of software developers and open government activists who came together to build "Twitter Vote Report", a nation wide web 2.0-style election monitoring system that tied together google maps, wikis, and iPhones with human resources on the ground from watchdog groups and the media. Over 30,000 citizens reported from outside their polling places, providing a real time view and instant notice of any long lines, hanging chads and potentially voter fraud. The data captured that day was released freely to the Internet for analysis and research by academic institutions. The open-source code from this project, as well as a few others, has been utilized in India and Afghanistan, and we hope to see it become a standard tool in the fight against election fraud. It is important to remember that using technology to promote civic engagement and democratic participation is as important as its use for active dissent.

As you can tell, I am very enthusiastic and active participant in the use of new media tools for social good and in the fight against authoritarianism. However, the use of these tools also brings about the possibility of serious risk to the user, their friends, family and broader movement. As a friend of mine said, "You cannot twitter your way out of a bludgeoning by security goons". Mobile phones are unique, always broadcasting personal identifiers; changing SIM cards does nothing, phones are tracked easily tracked by their hardware IDs.

Laptop computers are often full of incriminating documents, web caches and email addresses. Digital viruses that deliver powerful espionage-ware such as GhostNet are common and becoming more powerful and more invisible every day - one slip and your entire email inbox can be copied by an adversary. Use of new media and social networks reveal one's "social graphs", buddy lists, friends & followers... in a free country, these provide benefit, amplifying your ability to communicate and connect. In an authoritarian state, these same tools can make clear loose connections between activists, which make the job of cracking down on dissent much easier and more efficient. It often takes an entire generation to rebuild when an activist network is decimated. The protests of 2007 and 2008 in Burma and Tibet were at level not seen since 1988 and 1989. That twenty year gap is no

accident. Rather than just focus on the use of technology as a better megaphone, we need to consider how it can be used to safeguard and protect the identities and well-being of dissidents. The Tor Project is a successful case of technology that provides anonymity to web surfers and the ability to route around state-sponsored censorship.

While the free world is easily enamored of applications of new media tools within dictatorships and authoritarian states far way, our own federal, state and local law enforcement are often quite fearful and hostile towards their use within domestic movements. I raise this point not to say that we do not enjoy great freedoms in this democracy, but in order to make clear that tools which provide a more powerful platform for dissent are universally threatening to those in power. Tad Hirsch, creator of TXTMob, is the subject of a subpoena by the City of New York in connection with several active lawsuits against the City that allege police misconduct during the 2004 Republican National Convention. Elliot Madison, a 41 year old social worker, was been arrested in Pittsburgh on Sept. 24 and charged with hindering apprehension or prosecution, criminal use of a communication facility and possession of instruments of crime. The Pennsylvania State Police said he was found in a hotel room with computers and police scanners while using the social-networking site Twitter to spread information about police movements. Just this week it was announced that In-Q-Tel, the CIA's venture capital arm, has invested in a company whose technology is capable of powerful data mining from any information openly published on Twitter, Facebook and other social networking sites. In summary, measures taken to secure our homeland from violent terrorists often have similar justifications to those taken by authoritarian governments to squelch dissent and democracy. We all must be mindful of these contradictory positions on the benefit of new media within our own democracy.

In summary, there are constructive steps that can be take today by policy makers, NGOs and technology developers. We need to support the development of a Global Technology Bill of Rights that extends freedoms of speech and the press to the tools needed to communicate using the Internet and mobile phones. Congress should develop policy and programs that recognize and fund new media technology as a fundamental component to the promotion of human rights, liberty and democracy. There also must be guidance and motivation for corporations, startups and venture capitalists who are building these technologies to consider their global impact on human lives, and not just on the bottom line or their stock price. I am all in support of entrepreneurs being rewarded for their risk, and am happy that tools such as Twitter can be used just as well to cover the daily lives of Ashton and Demi or break the news of Michael Jackson's death, as it can to broadcast updates live from the streets of Iran or spread the news of the execution of four Tibetan political prisoners this morning in China. I just hope that MBA students at Harvard and Stanford will consider the Humanity Quotient of their work while dreaming up the next big thing.

Finally, I would like to briefly emphasize the comments from Mary Joyce of DigiActive, who could not be here today, on the topic of embargoes. In the digital age, where a "good" is a string of code that can be delivered anywhere in the world with the click of a mouse, even today's smart sanctions are not smart enough. By preventing access to blogging platforms, social networks, and other types of new media, current embargo policies harm the very activists who are

furthering our common goals of democracy promotion, while leaving authoritarian governments free to spread propaganda through a range of state-controlled media outlets.

Referenced web resources of note:

TXTMob: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/TXTMob>

Alive in Baghdad: <http://aliveinbaghdad.org/>

TwitterVoteReport: <http://twittervotereport.com> Beijing Olympics Protest

Coverage: <http://freetibet2008.tv>

GhostNet: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/GhostNet>

Tor Project - anonymous web browsing - <http://torproject.org>