



Stanford eCorner

Original Ideas in Global Diplomacy

Alec Ross, *Advisor to US Secretary of State*

May 26, 2010

Video URL: <http://ecorner.stanford.edu/videos/2473/Original-Ideas-in-Global-Diplomacy>

Social networking tools have the potential to be exceedingly effective at solving the world's problems. In this clip, Senior Advisor for Innovation in the Office of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton Alec Ross cites two examples of cutting edge technology and creative thinking as an effective way to engage the public in serving itself. He shares the success of a mobile texting protocol that raised over \$30 million for relief from the earthquake in Haiti, and an upcoming text messaging program that allows citizens to anonymously report crimes in Mexico's most violent cities.



Transcript

Twenty miles north and south of here in Silicon Valley, everybody knows the role that technology can play in empowerment. And so very few initiatives that we focused on using technology is something that can be empowering and can get people engaged in diplomacy and development in ways that weren't the case historically. One example: In the hours after the earthquake in Haiti, there are these fantastic women who worked in the innovation space at the State Department. And they got the idea in the hours that followed the earthquake that, "Hey, tomorrow morning when people wake up and are having their morning coffee and they heard about what happened in Haiti, we should be able to do something so that those people hearing about this for the first time over that morning cup of coffee can do something right then." And so what they did is they worked with the private sector at the secretary's direction to immediately stand up a program so that people who texted the word Haiti to a short code 90999 could donate \$10 for earthquake relief. And at the time, we thought, "Hey, maybe we'll raise a couple hundred-thousand dollars if everything breaks right, Wow, we might be able to raise \$1 million and that would be of a truly historic nature." And what happened was this campaign became viral over social media, over the Twittersphere and social media space, and other social media spaces. And once it became viral, in the days immediately after the campaign in social media spaces, it was then adopted by the mainstream media. And eventually, more than three million Americans chose to use their cell phones to make a \$10 donation, and more than \$30 million was raised for earthquake relief in Haiti. Another example of the kind of 21st century State-craft that Secretary Clinton is leading is an example south of our border here, in Mexico. As I'm sure many of you are all too familiar with, the drug cartel-fueled violence in Mexico is completely out of control. It's a disaster.

Far too many people are dying, especially at border towns like Ciudad Juarez. And one of the things that the Secretary of State and our Ambassador to Mexico, Carlos Pascual, said is, "We need to take a new and innovative approach for this. Let's get some people from Silicon Valley to help us to think through in creative ways what we could do differently, what is something new we could do." And so I and others were deployed down to Mexico to meet with the President's cabinet, meet with the people like Carlos Slim, to meet with leaders from civil society. And our goal was to come back with one idea that could help reduce crime in Mexico. And so we came up with a program that is likely going to launch some time in the fall, based on what we learned down there, which was that the Mexican citizens themselves will no longer report crime, by and large, because they are afraid if they walk up the literal or proverbial steps of the station house to report crime, they are going to get found out and will therefore be in danger. One of the things we learned while we were down there is that everybody, even in the lowest

income barrios and places like Ciudad Juarez, they all have cell phones and they text message like crazy. So we've set up a program where people are going to be able to anonymously text message, and I could explain how that works but that's not the best use of this time. Just take for granted I am telling the truth, people will be able to anonymously text message crime reports that will then compel the security forces to be onsite within 10 minutes. So what we're trying to do with this program is to restore anonymity, transparency, and accountability back into crime fighting in Mexico. And we don't yet know if that will work, just like when we launched the Text Haiti program, we didn't know what the results for that would be, but we're very hopeful.