CARNEGIE COUNCIL for Ethics in International Affairs

Thought Leader: Ethan Zuckerman

Thought Leaders Forum

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Transcript
As part of the Carnegie Council Centennial Thought Leaders Forum, Carnegie Council's Devin Stewart spoke with blogger and internet activist Ethan Zuckerman, director of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Center for Civic Media and founder of Global Voices Online.

DEVIN STEWART: We like to start out with a question of describing the world we live in today. What do you see when you travel around the world? What do you see in your work, particularly from a moral perspective?

ETHAN ZUCKERMAN: The term that I often use to describe the world that I see today is "imaginary globalization," which is to say that I think we have gotten very good at imagining how connected we are to the rest of the world. But I think our imagination and the reality can be very, very different.

Americans have become acutely aware of how intertwined we are with China. But most Americans haven't been to China. Most Americans don't have a very good picture of what China is like or looks like. Oddly enough, our news media isn't always that good at giving us rich, nuanced pictures of what's going on in other parts of the world.

So we're really aware that we're tied together, that we have mutual dependencies, that we're interacting with each other, but we don't know each other very well. Most of the time we're interacting with what we imagine about the other person rather than what the culture actually is.

DEVIN STEWART: What are the implications? This is a recurring theme. We had Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist. He talked about this. A lot of the interviewees have talked about the implications of being more aware of the world and the problems and the opportunities. What are the implications?

ETHAN ZUCKERMAN: I think we have reached a moment where we are aware that we are interdependent and have relationships with people that we're very distant from. The fact that we don't know very much about them means that we often propose solutions or we think about problems in ways that are pretty unrealistic.

You might think of climate change in this fashion. If you look at climate change and you get as far as saying we can't do anything in the U.S. until China and India make commitments. But you haven't been to China or India or you don't know China or India well and understand the incredible demographic force that is world urban migration. People are discovering for the first time, often through television or through other media, how many more options they would have in their lives if they came to cities, which changes how much energy is getting used, which changes all these questions around fossil fuel use and CO_2.

If we really want to think about solving problems on a global scale, we can't just be aware that other countries are out there, that other people have different needs. We really need to get to a point of understanding. That means actually meeting people in those countries, listening to their stories,

understanding their motivations, and then thinking about the problem from a much broader point of view.

It's wonderful that we have reached this first phase of the game, where we realize that most of the interesting problems are global. But there's a next phase where we start figuring out how to get solutions that are actually global, rather than solutions that are really rooted in whatever culture or nation we're in, but that might not work at all when we bring them to other parts of the world.

DEVIN STEWART: It sounds like what you're describing requires some action. It seems like it requires a solution. Do you have something in mind?

ETHAN ZUCKERMAN: The philosopher Kwame Appiah has this great definition of cosmopolitanism, where he basically says that to be cosmopolitan, you need to be aware that there are other perfectly valid ways of living, and you also have to have a certain obligation to people in other parts of the world. *[Editor's note: Check out Kwame Anthony Appiah's Thought Leader interview from July 2012.]*

The first piece of that is fairly easy. It's not that hard to start being aware that there are other ways of doing things. People have been challenged by that philosophically for a while, but are starting to figure out ways to do it.

That feeling of responsibility is when things get tricky. If you take responsibility for a problem for a group of people that you don't know well, you end up doing things that are very well-meant, but are generally not very clearly thought-out. I think what this actually means is that we need to get beyond sort of imagining each other and actually have conversations with each other. A lot of the projects that I have been involved with look for ways to help people both make novel connections across international boundaries and then start looking for ways to deepen those connections.

There's only so much you can do with giving someone a window into someone else's world. Eventually you need to find a way to cross a bridge. Crossing a bridge usually has to do with a joint project, a joint action, some way to try to work together. Some of the work that we have done with groups like Global Voices—we thought we were starting with giving people perspectives on what was going on in a different part of the world. That is, on the surface, what that project has been all about.

In some ways, the real work behind it, the real impact on the world, is what happens when you have an Israeli and a Bahraini trying to figure out how to jointly manage news coverage of a Gaza incursion. That forces you not just to open those windows, but to actually sort of walk across that bridge together. To me, that's where the interesting work starts getting done.

DEVIN STEWART: Do you think that the world today is getting better compared to times in the past? Are you optimistic?

ETHAN ZUCKERMAN: I am optimistic. I think it's easy to perceive the world as getting worse. I think it has to do with having increased awareness. As we get more aware of people living in poverty, people living in horrendous conditions, having their human rights violated, as we get aware of environmental impacts that we're having, it's very easy to be overwhelmed. It's very easy to feel like things aren't changing.

But there are also tractable problems out there. Thirty or 40 years ago, we were talking about poverty as an intractable problem, and through political and technological and ecological solutions, we're not talking about rural agrarian poverty very much anymore. That's a pretty rapid transformation.

Some of the environmental problems that we face are utterly terrifying, incredibly stark. But if you look back to the killer smog of London in the middle of the past century, there are situations where, when there's sufficient public will, you can have real change really quickly.

I think what's so hard about this moment in time is that we now have the challenge of building public will not just within a country, but internationally. I think that brings us into a realm of interaction that we're just not very good at yet.

So I'm hopeful, but I understand why smart people are less than hopeful.

DEVIN STEWART: Here's another big one that is important to us: What is the greatest ethical challenge facing the world today?

ETHAN ZUCKERMAN: That's an amazing one. I think the greatest ethical challenge facing the world today is understanding our range of impact, and therefore our range of responsibility. In some ways, the challenge of a connected world is that we're starting to understand the ripples and impacts of every decision that we're having. We can start seeing what those impacts might be, but it's often very difficult to figure out how we would change those impacts.

Just to give you an example of this, my friend and colleague Leo Bonanni has a wonderful project called Sourcemap. Sourcemap picks apart where a product is sourced from. He'll take a pair of jeans and he'll show you the different factories and the different countries that put together that pair of blue jeans.

If you are trying to make an ethical decision about buying your jeans, on the one hand, this is a lovely idea. You can think about, "Well, maybe I want to buy this from denim that's made in Lesotho because it's a developing economy and I would really like to see that country get strengthened. But I really don't like Singaporean labor conditions used to make my zipper." It's very easy to start with that bit of information and then find yourself in this very strange place where you are trying to figure out how you honor and how you respect the thousands of people that you're sort of touching with a very simple decision about, "Should I buy this pair of jeans or another pair of jeans?"

I think we're getting fairly good at understanding how complicated these webs can be. I think we're not nearly as good at figuring out what's livable as a solution rather than perfect solutions.

Every time I get behind the wheel of my truck, I feel terrible. I bought the most fuel-efficient truck that I possibly could, but I live in a rural part of the world where I need four-wheel drive and there just aren't a lot of other options at this point. I can think about impacts. I can think about carbon. I can think about environmental impact. I can think about global implications. But my decisions then get constrained by very powerful systems of infrastructure.

At that point, you start having that awareness of, "I'm having a global impact with many of the decisions that I'm making, but my degrees of control over it are extremely limited." I think it's important to figure out how to move beyond that and say, "That's fine. I'll live with it. I just won't think about it all the time," to actually saying, "How would I get those deep, systematic changes?" I don't think you can change everything at once, but I do think you can pick a broken infrastructure and try to figure out how you would make that more fair and more equitable.

For me, that has been media. It was a space that I felt was incredibly broken when it came to this question of how we're representing people in other parts of the world, how we're using media to understand and perceive others. But it doesn't change that I often feel like I would like to be having

impacts on human rights, on the environment, on trade, on any number of things at the same time.

That awareness of the connection and the limit in terms of where you can have impact is a really interesting challenge at this moment.

DEVIN STEWART: And if we don't address it? What's at stake if we don't address it?

ETHAN ZUCKERMAN: I think what's at stake if we don't address this question of how we make change is complacency with systems that don't work very well for most people in the world. I think we run the danger of ending up in situations where we are periodically surprised by terrible tragedy. We have enormous complacency about the U.S.'s very unusual relationship to firearms, and we manage to ignore it up until the moment that 20 kindergarten students get shot.

Most of us have pretty terrible complacency about systems of criminal justice in the U.S. and how the prosecutorial model happens. Within my community, which is the Internet and social change community, we're now going through a very powerful week right now where our friend Aaron Swartz killed himself, in part likely due to mental illness aggravated by prosecutorial pressure and power.

It's very easy to forget these things up until the moment that something horrible happens.

I think what's more interesting, in some ways, is, as we start seeing the nature of these problems, instead of trying to figure out how to give up the responsibility for solving all of them, we should be shouldering the responsibility for making real meaningful progress on one or more of the issues that we really care about, that we really think about, and that we really have some expertise and talent and energy to devote to solving.

DEVIN STEWART: On a more upbeat note, we were founded about 100 years by Andrew Carnegie. He was a peace advocate. Part of what we're doing is looking at the past 100 years. We also want to think about the future. We don't want to just pat ourselves on the back or do things like that. We want to think about what we should be aiming for. I don't want to put you on the spot to make a prediction for the next 100 years, because that's somewhat of a fool's errand. But what would you like to see?

ETHAN ZUCKERMAN: I'd really like to see us get globalization right. For me, getting globalization right wouldn't mean that we have stuff from every corner of the world, but would mean that we have people and ideas and opportunities and solutions from every corner of the world.

What we have done with globalization so far is, we have gotten pretty good at globalizing atoms. We move them around the world at a ferocious pace. We could leave this building right now and walk to a corner store and we could drink water from Fiji that has been shipped overseas. We could have atoms that started in the other half of the world and have access to them. But we have a much harder time getting media from Fiji, getting ideas from Fiji, getting people from Fiji.

So I would really like us to figure out how we deal with all the different axes of globalization. If we're just dealing with each other by throwing stuff at each other, it's something like a cargo cult. We have the goods, but we don't have the people. We don't have the ideas. We don't have the logic. We don't have the solutions.

So for me, that means fixing media, because that's one of the more important ways we understand what's going on in other parts of the world. It means fixing immigration, which isn't necessarily about dropping borders entirely, but is about finding ways to help people have a global presence and not just a local presence. Ultimately it's about helping people figure out how you work across those

borders of language and culture and religion, because the really interesting problems to solve are all transnational ones. In many cases they are not solvable unless we can find ways that people can start working together.

For me, in many ways, the most hopeful thought I've encountered recently is from my friend Pankaj Ghemawat, who has sort of positioned himself as the anti-Tom Friedman. What Pankaj basically says is that Friedman is on the right track—globalization is important—but he's wrong when he says it's over. The answer is that it's just beginning. The great news of it's just beginning is that it means we can get it right. If we don't like how it's happening, we can look at this process and, rather than running away from it, which is what the left has traditionally done, we can really engage with it and say, "How do we want to think about our responsibilities and our relationships to the other 7 billion people on the planet?" *[Editor's note: Check out Pankaj Ghemawat's Thought Leader interview from June 2012.]*

DEVIN STEWART: Another theme that Andrew Carnegie cared a lot about—along with education—he established 2,500 libraries, including the New York Public Library—was world peace. World peace means different things to different people. What does it mean to you? Is it possible? Is it achievable?

ETHAN ZUCKERMAN: You're asking all the big ones today.

It's very hard for me to conceive of world peace independent of justice for everybody living in the states that they are living in. Simply ending up in a world of stable tyranny where countries aren't at war with one another, but some countries are very effective at crushing dissent and preventing democratic movements, that's not peace for me.

I think much of what the United States, in fact, got wrong at the end of the last century was a real tolerance for stability and sort of a notion that we would be willing to tolerate a Paul Kagame in Rwanda, who is running something very, very far from a democracy, as long as it wasn't the active slaughter of one group by another.

The answer is, we have to be able to do better than that. Real world peace isn't just the absence of conflict between states or between groups. It's justice for those who are wronged. It's representation for those who are underrepresented.

This doesn't mean that it's impossible. It just means that it's a much, much harder problem than we're generally willing to look at.

In some ways, we may often be looking at the symptoms rather than the causes. When we see a civil war in Mali, if we just look at the conflict, whether we're looking at Tuareg separatists or whether we're looking at al-Qaeda moving into a power vacuum, we're missing underdevelopment, we're missing poverty, we're missing very complicated racial dynamics. We're missing all sorts of issues of justice that have plagued Mali for a long time.

I worry sometimes that if we come at the frame from avoiding conflict, we might miss those underlying causes which in many case are going to make conflict inevitable unless they are addressed, and don't get us to a really rich vision of world peace unless we find a way to address them.

DEVIN STEWART: Good answer, Ethan. Thank you. Another hard one—these are hard. This is somewhat of a philosophical endeavor, this idea of a global ethic. Michael Ignatieff is our Centennial

chair—

ETHAN ZUCKERMAN: Good choice.

DEVIN STEWART: Thank you. I'll be traveling with him pretty soon to our various fellows around the world, to see if this idea of a global ethic works for people.

I think there is an aspirational aspect to this idea of a global ethic, that human beings share certain core values and that we can see eye to eye. We ask every Thought Leader, as well as all the fellows, to help us figure out what a global ethic is. Does it resonate with you? If so, what does it mean?

ETHAN ZUCKERMAN: I'm not sure I can answer a question as broad as a global ethic. I will share something that we have learned from our work on Global Voices. At Global Voices, we have about 900 people from about 120 countries, almost all of them volunteers, working together to give a more thorough, just, balanced, fair, inclusive portrait of what's going on in people's countries.

When we started the project, Rebecca MacKinnon and I thought we would get a lot of hand-holding "Kumbaya" types, essentially saying, "We're all one. We all want to connect with one another." *[Editor's note: Check out Rebecca MacKinnon's Thought Leader interview from October 2012.]*

What's funny is that what we actually got were a lot of very passionate nationalists, not in the chauvinistic sense of "my nation is better than your nation," but I the sense of, "Hey, Ghana is pretty awesome, and we really want people to know that wonderful things are going on in our country and that there are things about our culture and our way of doing things that you should admire and respect."

What has come out of that community over the course of about eight years is an ethic of, "I want to share my story about my people and I want to hear your story about your people. That means I'm going to fight for my right to tell my story and I'm going to fight to defend your right to tell your story."

We don't always live up to that. It's hard. When you have narratives that come together and clash, as often some of them do, it's very hard to stand up for it. But if you look at our coverage of the Middle East, we have Israelis talking very earnestly about what people in their country are feeling and how threatened they are feeling by rockets from Gaza. We have people from Palestine talking about the incredible feeling of insecurity, that everything that you have could be eliminated by a power that you have very little control over; other people in the region who feel that there's very little justice and very little perspective in that corner of the world.

What we're learning over time is that if we start from that principle of—you have a story to tell, I have an obligation to listen, and I, in parallel, have a story to tell and you have an obligation to listen—that can get you pretty far. It doesn't solve everything. It doesn't always take you to the point of acting. But it does take you to the point of being able to hear some very uncomfortable truths and hear some very uncomfortable perspectives. That's a good first step.

DEVIN STEWART: It sounds a lot like Anthony Appiah.

ETHAN ZUCKERMAN: Tony and I have talked more than a few times about this stuff.

DEVIN STEWART: That's great.

By the way, almost everyone you have mentioned today is in our Thought Leader Forum.

ETHAN ZUCKERMAN: Oh, I'm so glad. How wonderful.

DEVIN STEWART: The last impossible question is: Who's responsible for everything we have talked about today? Is it the Spiderman thing, "with great power . . . "? Is it that one or is it more of a general, universal thing?

ETHAN ZUCKERMAN: The only possible answer to the question of who's responsible for this is that we all are. That's maybe not a helpful answer. Obviously, once you get to a world as big and complicated as ours, people have more opportunity and people have more power. But it's really disempowering to take away from people the notion that they are complicit, that they are responsible, that it's part of their work.

One of my favorite projects of the last few years is a project out of Kenya called Kuweni Serious. It's an attempt to get young Kenyans excited about politics and civic life. They did an utterly beautiful viral video that introduced a bunch of young Kenyans. One of the things that some of them end up saying is, "Obama is not going to save us. Our leaders aren't going to save us. Your tribal chieftain isn't going to save us. We're going to save us."

The message that they end up giving, which is tough—because it's right in the wake of a terrible disputed election—is, "If this country burns, I burn with it."

I think there's a version of that that we all have to feel. To the extent that this world burns, whether that's literally through climate change or whether it's through conflict or whether it's through different forms of injustice, we all burn with it.

We can try to pass responsibility to those who have more power and more opportunity. That's fine. We can hold them responsible. But at the end of the day, none of us is outside of this game. We're all playing to one extent or another. We can either choose to very actively go after what change we're capable of making or we can choose not to.

But if the world burns, we burn with it.

DEVIN STEWART: The last sort of bonus round is to talk about things that you're famous for. You can think about this as if it were to be almost like a stand-alone clip of you explaining something that you're known for. I think the cute cat theory is probably—

ETHAN ZUCKERMAN: I'm happy. It's a fun theory for me to be known for.

DEVIN STEWART: Give us the two-minute thing.

ETHAN ZUCKERMAN: Sure. The idea behind the cute cat theory was sort of my advice and instructions to people in the technology community who believe that you can solve human rights through technological wizardry. The idea that everyone comes up with—and I get a phone call about this roughly once a week—"I'm going to invent a super-secret network. No one will ever be able to see who's talking to whom, and social justice will flow as soon as everyone uses my application."

That might be true. There have been some technological innovations that are very important for human rights and freedom. But most people who are going to do activism are going to use very simple tools. And there are really good reasons for them to use it. Some of them are pretty boring. The simple tools, whether it's blogs, whether it's Flickr, whether it's YouTube, are easy to use. Lots of people use them. You probably already know how to use them. The fact that you know how to use

them means that at a moment when you're not political, you're not particularly active, you have developed a latent capacity, so that when something bad happens—whether you're living in Kenya and an election goes wrong and you want to talk about the injustice of it—you know how to use those tools.

But there are some other wonderful things about those tools. It's very hard for a repressive government to shut down a system that most people are using for perfectly innocuous means. If you start distributing your human rights videos on YouTube, it's really hard for the government to suddenly say, "We're going to shut down YouTube. We want nothing to do with all of that." And if they do, they reveal themselves as censors.

So what it really was, was sort of a shorthand for people who care about technology for change. The shorthand basically says, before you build anything on your own, think about whether you could use these tools used by millions or billions of people to accomplish your goal, because you get some interesting positive externalities out of it.

"Cute cats" is just an easy way to think about it. Amazingly enough, we were having a conversation today. One of my favorite researchers in this space is a young ethnographer named An Xiao Mina. She has researched for many years in China, but now she's starting to focus on Uganda. Because she's very interested in popular online media and social change, she was curious whether cute cats went over in Uganda. And the answer is no, not really. People actually just didn't think that Grumpy Cat was funny.

But, of course, it turns out that there are cute animals in Ugandan Internet culture; it's just that they are chickens and goats, which makes sense. There are a lot more chickens and goats in everyday life. We think that cats are what the Internet is made of because there are a lot of cats in the United States and in Europe.

I'm really challenged by this idea that there's a cute chicken theory coming out of Uganda. I'm excited that that may change my thinking on this.

DEVIN STEWART: Thank you so much.

ETHAN ZUCKERMAN: Great.

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"I'd really like to see us get globalization right. For me, getting globalization right wouldn't mean that we have stuff from every corner of the world, but would mean that we have people and ideas and opportunities and solutions from every corner of the world."
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