

Mark Wilson:

Good morning and welcome to the Spring Research Forum. It has been a true pleasure to work with INDEPENDENT SECTOR to plan this event. On behalf of those of us who volunteered to make this a success, to join with INDEPENDENT SECTOR, I welcome you. I think that INDEPENDENT SECTOR and their staff have put together an outstanding event, in spite of me, and I think that they deserve congratulations for all that they have done.

Our program over the next two days spans a wide range of issues, interests, needs and places. We have participants from six continents. And, short of a few penguins, we couldn't really have asked for more. We have total global coverage, and we look forward to enjoying those different voices about information technology and the nonprofit sector.

You represent many interesting groups and organizations – the nonprofit community, business, government, the media – and I'm sure you all have a great deal to share with us and each other. When planned two years ago, the topic of information and communication technology as part of the nonprofit sector was just emerging. But in that time a lot has changed. The number and quality of papers we've received is testimony to the analysis and innovation that the sector now generates.

Our wish for this forum is to encourage discussion and interaction. The Spring Research Forums have a tradition of being open and collegial gatherings, so we encourage you to do a number of things.

To welcome the many international participants to the community of nonprofit scholars to Washington, to the United States.

To meet and encourage the emerging leaders in their work and research. They have a lot to offer and a lot to gain from joining us.

And to bridge the interests of practice and research.

At many conferences, the model is for many to observe the presentations of a few. Not this time. The presentations are a catalyst for discussion and inquiry. There are 280 people registered for this event, and so we have 280 participants, discussants and analysts on our program.

We're watching you. We expect great things. No one can escape this responsibility.

In addition to this event, we're working with NPSQ – Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly – to develop a special symposium issue. We invite the presenters and speakers to submit their papers for publication, to combine their research and the lessons of this meeting to reach a wider audience.

I now want to turn to the theme of this forum, the impact of information technology on civil society. By information technology, we mean a wide range of electronic technologies. Items such as computers, telecommunications networks, the Internet, worldwide web, that have emerged so powerfully during the past decade.

In considering this topic, it is valuable to pause to remember that technology is not a force disconnected from society. It is a force of our own making. Embedded in the technologies and their associated institutions are the strong social forces that have long

shaped how we interact and behave. We create technologies, yet often forget that we created them.

We see them as inevitable forces, hence the subtitle for our meeting today, “How will online innovation, philanthropy and volunteerism serve the common good?”

We’re turning the tables; not just accepting, but creating what technology can do for the nonprofit sector. Technologies can change our lives dramatically. Think about how the automobile has changed the way we interact, we live; how the form of our cities is dramatically different because of the automobile than it was in a period of walking or riding public transport.

Think about the way television has shaped our values and behaviors; how it influences our social and political lives.

And even think about simple technologies. The simple device of the microwave oven. By itself, nothing particularly exciting. But it has had the power to change what and how people eat, and also how families eat and how families interact.

We cannot really underestimate the length and the connections that new technologies have and the power to change our lives.

As technology shapes our lives, we must remember our responsibility to influence how technologies evolve and are used. Technology is not, should not, be a one-way force. We need to negotiate our relationships, and not accept what we may mistakenly see as inevitable.

The information and communications technologies of our day offer great appeal. It’s easy to be distracted and seduced by all that is new and magical and electronic. But what is new and magical and electronic is not divorced from our basic issues and institutions.

To give you an example. My own interests span on one hand nonprofit organizations and on the other the political economy and geography of cyberspace. If we look at the geography of cyberspace, on the surface it is often seen and represented as a seamless network, a system of connected, integrated parts accompanied by a rhetoric proclaiming the death of distance and the linkage of all.

This web is a blanket. We need metaphors when we discuss cyberspace because there is no “there” there, so we need other things to describe it. So if we think of the web as this seamless blanket that covers our world... it covers gaps and chasms, mountains and volcanoes.

But, and this is an important element, as we surf across a terrain, we surf across territory that lacks signposts and signals of location. We don’t necessarily know where we are in cyberspace.

But that is just frequently the appearance. On further examination, the seamless blanket is not so seamless. The web is shaped by people and places, by institutions, government regulations, commercial realities, cultural values, and legal jurisdictions. As soon as this blanket is disturbed or lifted, underlying social, economic and political terrain emerges. We are looking at an image, but as we dig into that image we see that what was so important in the past remains important today.

Some elements of our technology are new, but they are also constrained within strong pre-existing relationships and conditions.

To conclude this introduction, I want to mention the contribution of one young woman – Annie Ellsworth, who made a choice in 1844 that lives with us today. Samuel Morse, wishing to demonstrate the power of the telegraph, links the U.S. Capitol, just a few blocks away, to the *St. Claire depot in Baltimore. He asked Annie, the daughter of a friend, to choose the message. She chose a verse from Numbers 23, the infamous “What hath God wrought.” The first message sent in the telegraph.

It was a prescient and fitting statement for what we now have renamed in some texts the Victorian Internet. But it is a statement we could well use today. “What hath God wrought?” as we think about the power of technology and our use of it.

So let’s spend some time now talking about, examining, the issues of technology and the nonprofit sector; thinking about what we can do for technology and what technology can do for us.

What I’d like to do now is invite our three panelists – Tae Yoo, Trabian Shorters, and Marian Becton – to join us in the living room. (My living room has Legos all over the floor, so this is a vast improvement.) And we will have some time for presentation by each of our guest, and time for conversation about information technology and the nonprofit sector.

As in any living room, we invite you to come to the front. Join us; don’t be shy. Make your way up here. We want you to be comfortable. It’s our living room, you have a role here. We’re glad you have come.

We now move directly to our opening plenary session, “Charting the Future of New Technology: Implications for a Civil Society.” What is the impact of the Internet? Are we connecting and interacting more? Are we merely browsing alone?

We start our session with commentary by Tae Yoo, director of corporate philanthropy of Cisco Systems. Ms. Yoo has worked globally and locally in the realm of information technology, and currently addresses social action through the work of the Cisco Foundation and the Cisco Community Investment Organization. We welcome her and look forward to her comments.