Podcast Episode: Hack To The Future

Like many younger folks, Zach Latta went to a school that did not educate any computer courses. However that didn't stop him from learning the whole lot he might about them and turning into a programmer at a younger age. After shifting to San Francisco, Zach based Hack Club, a nonprofit community of high school coding clubs around the globe, to assist different college students find the education and neighborhood that he wished he had as a teenager.

This week on our podcast, we speak to Zach concerning the importance of student entry to an open web, why studying to code can improve fairness, and the way school's on-line security and the regulation usually stand in the best way. We'll also discuss how pc education can assist create the following generation of makers and builders that we need to resolve a few of society's greatest issues.

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In this episode, you'll study:

Why schools block some harmless academic content material and coding sources, from frequent sites like Github to "view source" capabilities on faculty-issued gadgets
How locked down digital techniques in colleges stop young people from learning about coding and computers, and create equity issues for students who are already marginalized
How coding and "hack" clubs can empower younger folks, help them learn self-expression, and find neighborhood
How pervasive college surveillance undermines belief and limits people's capacity to train their rights when they are older
How young people's curiosity for the way issues work online has helped bring us a few of the technology we love most

Zach Latta is the executive director of Hack Membership, a national nonprofit connecting over 14,000 young people to assist them create and participate in coding clubs, hackathons, and workshops around the globe. He is a Forbes 30 Underneath 30 recipient and a Thiel Fellow.

Music for a way to fix the Internet was created for us by Reed Mathis and Nat Keefe of BeatMower.

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Transcript:

Zach: I grew up close to Los Angeles, both my dad and mom were social employees and rising up, I went to public colleges that most schools in America didn't educate any pc classes. And for me, as a young particular person, I just felt like, oh my God, if only I may determine how these magical gadgets work, that is where the secrets and techniques of the universe lie. However it was all the time a solitary activity for me.

As a teenager I used to be very lonely and that culminated for me, I ended up dropping out of high school after my freshman yr when I was sixteen and that i moved to San Francisco to grow to be a programmer. And after working at a couple startups to get some money and put collectively some savings, I started Hack Club to try to create the form of place and community that I so desperately wished I had when I was a teenager.

Cindy: That is Zach Latta. He's the founding father of Hack Membership and he's our guest at the moment. Zach is going to tell us about how teams like Hack Club are instructing children the right way to hack and in any other case be creators on-line and how that's one of the methods we can assist shift them from being just passive shoppers of the digital world to truly charting their very own futures.

Danny: We're going to talk to Zach about student rights to an open internet, why learning to code can increase equity and what occurs when a school's on-line safety and the law get in the way of all that.

Cindy: I'm Cindy Cohn, EFF's govt director.

Danny: And I'm Danny O'Brien, special advisor to the EFF. Welcome to How to repair the Web, a podcast of the Digital Frontier Basis, the place we deliver you massive ideas, options, and hope that we will fix the largest issues we face online.

Cindy: Zach, thanks a lot for joining us.

Zach: Properly, thank you a lot for having me. I am so honored. Rising up as a teenager, I simply loved the EFF and the whole lot the group stood for. It's an actual honor to be with all of you right here immediately.

Cindy: Oh, terrific.

You reached out to EFF for help and that's how we ended up actually meeting you. Are you able to speak to us about what led you to try this?

Zach: We're a community of teenagers all the world over who love constructing things with computer systems and run communities to attempt and bring teenagers together, to make things with know-how. And virtually each month, we have now a serious problem where a faculty district just blocks Hack Membership. And there isn't any worse call to get from a Hack Club, they're saying, "All right, I acquired 20 people within the room, we're making an

attempt to get started, hackclub.com is blocked, github.com is blocked, Stack Overflow is blocked, how can we presumably run our meeting from here?"

Due to this downside, kind of in a little bit of frustration. With some Hack Clubbers I wrote a letter to EFF support line, simply saying, "Hey, is there any means that EFF is likely to be ready to assist us with this? As a result of that is beginning to be a thing the place it is not like one school has this problem, it is like we have now dozens of colleges around America where just the whole lot's blocked."

Danny: Just to be clear right here, this is not simply you being blocked, this is major informational resources, right?

Zach: Oh yeah. It's loopy. If you are a young one who needs to find out about computers and needs to learn to code, you kind of want the web to do that. And also you depend on websites like Google, like GitHub, like Stack Overflow, like GitLab. There's a whole ecosystem that each single skilled developer depends on each single day and at a significant percentage of faculties round America, all of those assets are just blocked, including hackclub.com.

We run a membership locally here in Vermont, where we test out all of our stuff before we put it on-line and open supply it. And I used to be speaking with a Hack Clubber there the place actually each single website apart from college classroom is blocked on their college pc. And this Hack Clubber is not from a family with means so the one pc that they have entry to at dwelling is their school issued Chromebook. And because of this, he is six weeks behind everyone else on this club and nonetheless hasn't gotten past the preliminary hurdle of constructing early websites.

Danny: Obviously what you are doing in Hack Club must be extraordinarily subversive to be blocked in this fashion. What are you doing? What are these children studying or failing to learn because they cannot actually entry to the web?

Zach: What Hack Club's all about is bringing teenagers together who love computers and want to learn to make things with computers. Whether it is building a web site or making a video recreation or perhaps even beginning a local business and most colleges do not provide any curriculum or support round that. What Hack Clubbers are doing is in their conferences, they're often attempting to be taught HTML, CSS, JavaScript or later on, more advanced languages like Rust or not too long ago there's a giant motion round Zig, which is a new popular language. And when you are making an attempt to run the assembly and convey people to github.com, the place we've loads of our sources, when it is blocked, it is the meeting's useless on arrival. I don't suppose college administrators are bad people. I come from an extended line of teachers and I feel that folks in schools are doing their greatest but are in all probability afraid round issues like liability.

Cindy: Their incentive is simply to make it possible for youngsters don't ever get to something

which may possibly be problematic. They don't have an incentive to make sure youngsters can truly study some of these abilities. And so, whenever you outsource this to people whose enterprise it is to block, they're going to block as opposed to having a considerate process by which you figure out what do students actually need to learn? And I believe you're completely right, in relation to laptop programming and understanding how computer systems work, everybody discovered this by going out onto the internet and discovering the places where other individuals are sharing this and something like GitHub, a huge share of what truly runs the web is there. It is a bit of loopy

Danny: After we teach folks to read and write, we're not anticipating them to be English literature college students or novelists. We're giving them the instruments to work in society. When we've reading, writing and algorithms or no matter, it's in order that they will do what they wish to do in society and they'll build society with an understanding of the issues around them.

Zach: While you understand that the world round us is constructed by different human beings, you understand you could possibly be one of those human beings. I think that starting 10 years ago, there was this huge shift in schooling that occurred. And for some purpose nonetheless isn't actually a part of the dialogue around what good classrooms or good studying environments seems to be like, which is that each single younger person on the planet began having these magical gadgets of their pockets, which had all of human historical past and knowledge on them. These items are better than the Library of Alexandria. That is it. It does not get higher. And I feel that a lot of public education methods around the globe are designed to resolve entry issues. How can we simply merely get entry to data in front of everyone and to them?: And we have constructed this unimaginable distribution mechanism. It is actually remarkable but I feel the brand new problem of studying in the twenty first century is one in every of motivation. How can we get folks to care? How will we get individuals to use this? And I feel that when we lock down digital systems around younger people, we kind of tell them, "Do not poke and prod, don't strive things, do not exit of your option to go down a path that we haven't pre-accepted for you." And I think that that sort of kills curiosity. It is really counterproductive.

Danny: How a lot do you consider it is because you are referred to as Hack Membership? How much do you assume is because people associate that with malicious hacking?

Zach: I feel it is possibly a small ingredient. Although I feel Hack Membership as a corporation is a bit of subversive in nature. We work straight with teenagers. We operate form of outdoors of the system, in some regards. The schools that Hack Clubs are in, usually the school loves Hack Membership as a result of it's teenagers at their college who are getting together in a means which means that they're actually engaged of their learning. And we're one of tons of of groups that run into these issues every single day. And I believe this concept of scholars' rights, notably on the web, as a result of it is so new, it is so technical, just for some purpose is not talked about at all, despite the fact that it impacts young individuals more than virtually every other decision made at their school.

Cindy: We've been talking rather a lot about blocking entry to information, blocking web sites and things like that however I believe that you have seen problems with the units themselves, haven't you?

Zach: Yeah. More and more Hack Clubbers, the one gadget they've entry to both in conferences or at house is a college issued Chromebook. And one of many choices on school issued Chromebooks is to disable proper clicking and clicking examine aspect. And you can't learn how to program websites with out being ready to try this. And this is such a real drawback that we've had to construct our personal debugger to assist with that.

Danny: Just to be clear here, whenever you say proper click, this is the thing the place you have got the second mouse button after which people always stumble on this by accident and marvel what the heck have I executed? Because you click after which there's just a little menu. It is for coders or for somebody who needs to kind of go a bit deeper or after all save an image. It's the kind of metaphor for, okay, let's go a little bit deeper into what we're looking at right here. And that doesn’t… kids can't do this on these lockdown computers?

Zach: Yeah. It's a machine security setting. You can flip off inspecting element, which implies that younger individuals in Hack Club meetings who do not have a college issued pc can view the supply code of any web site that they go to. And if you don't have the assets at dwelling to have one and also you only the school issued laptop, you simply can't.

Danny: All people in the early web learned how to build the rest of the early internet by view source. There was just a little pull down menu.

Cindy: Absolutely.

Danny: And if you saw an internet web page that you just appreciated, you might look at the original HTML after which cut and paste it and mess around with it. And you're saying that children simply must take what they've given now?

Zach: You excellent click on and it is not an option.

Danny: Holy cow.

Cindy: And it is a setting. Chromebooks do not come like this essentially however they give the directors the ability to lock children out of this information. It's just, it's hard to think about the pondering that leads you to resolve that we're going to deny youngsters knowledge in class.

Danny: And simply me and Zach and Cindy and now are vibrating in the studio. You can't actually see this. One of the issues so upsetting about this is that the surroundings, the mouse, the windowing environment that you're using was particularly built to be an educational setting that you could explore and be taught. It is an absolute perversion of the

very fundamental approach these items were developed and meant to make use of. It's like in case you gave somebody a painting set however no paints.

Cindy: The fairness issues here are simply large. As a result of we all know that one in every of the good things is that we're now giving kids units that they will use to help themselves be taught. But if they're locked down gadgets and that is the rich children have one other system that they'll use but the poor kids end up with just a lockdown device, a poor gadget for poor folks actually it sounds like.

Zach: If you look on the advertising and marketing for some of these faculty filter corporations, the advertising is like, we prevent student suicide. And it is, we stop school shootings. What a wierd connection to attract. And then the things they do to be in a position to draw that connection is not solely do they filter what websites you're able to go to but they actually scan every single electronic mail you ship out of your college account, each single IM that you just send from your faculty account, they scan the belongings you do on web sites. For this one district that we're in, in Georgia, while you go to a website that's blocked, not only does it say, "This webpage's blocked, you're not allowed to return right here," however it really says that there is a security challenge with your pc and that the way in which fix it's to obtain this intermediate SSL certificate, set up it on your pc, set as a trusted supply and what that means is it permits the school to man within the middle your entire encrypted site visitors.

Danny: Proper. That is like your undermining the safety of that laptop. And I think this is basically essential to emphasise. One of many things that we at all times speak about at EFF is you can't do censorship with out surveillance. You have to have the ability to see what people are taking a look at to block it. And what that means for these sort of techniques is, as you say, simply to be clear, what that person is being asked to obtain there may be the master key to all of their communications on that laptop, from their financial particulars to every part.

Cindy: Sure. And it is a problem that predates COVID however it really got supercharged throughout COVID, this concept that fixed surveillance is what it's a must to tolerate if you're a student. And that's harmful first because that is dangerous for kids but it is also harmful because we're making a technology of children who assume that being watched on a regular basis is okay. It is a fundamental human proper. It's central to human dignity. And one of many things that we have learned is you cannot deny children fully human dignity and then expect them to immediately at age 18, have the ability to exercise their full rights in a way that can work. It does not work that manner.

Danny: “How to fix the Internet” is supported by The Alfred P. Sloan Foundation’s Program in Public Understanding of Science. Enriching people’s lives by a keener appreciation of our increasingly technological world and portraying the complex humanity of scientists, engineers, and mathematicians.

How do the kids themselves really feel about this? What do you get from them?

Zach: Well, there's two issues I might love to contact on there. I think an concept that I would love for us all to start out talking about is this concept of digital civic responsibility. And I feel it is the same factor the place you not only receive being a shopper but you give too. You make your personal websites, you modify the internet, you modify technology. You are not just a client, you're a creator too.

In terms of what Hack Clubbers really feel about school surveillance. Hack Clubbers really feel like they live in an Orwellian surveillance state since you spend your time on networks that are surveilled, where if you happen to try to poke prod, bad things might occur. And I believe positively Hack Clubbers feel like they cannot work together with their school on points like these because I feel a number of faculty administrators will not be technical enough to understand what's going on. When you flag the incorrect thing, you would very simply find yourself facing disciplinary action or something like that. I had this occur when I used to be a teenager, I installed a VPN on my laptop computer, what I delivered to my faculty, I was the one person at my school that I knew on a laptop computer and I used to be pulled aside by the vice principal as a result of they had been like, "Why are you hacking our college?"

Danny: And I believe it undermines trust. Initially, you set the stakes. That the administration is form of claiming, "We do not really belief you so we're going to put this software." But then when kids who're curious and interested in this look into it, they understand that they're also being lied to.

Zach: And I believe it really undermines these values that we discuss loads about, like curiosity, like tinkering, like making an attempt issues out, determining who you wish to be by way of attempting to make issues. When there's a consequence to these actions, which is the case when you might have your web exercise filtered after which mechanically reported in some circumstances, it implies that all of a sudden trying to be taught there might be a consequence if you happen to Google the fallacious thing. And I think that in a spot the place we care a lot about independence and where we care rather a lot about helping individuals turn out to be their own particular person brokers of change, I feel that our digital environments that we create for young people inside of colleges, I think form of does the opposite. It tells you, "No, you are a shopper, keep watching Netflix, don't mess together with your pc."

Cindy: I believe this really hearkens again to the beginning of the Digital Frontier Foundation, the place we had law enforcement coming in and doing raids on a number of children who had been poking around on the early web, attempting to determine how issues work. This is admittedly one of the founding tales of EFF. And the flip facet of it's a few of those same youngsters or kids who have been mates with them, by the name of possibly Wozniak or other issues, they went on to develop some of the tools and the things that we love the most. We're not simply doing something unfair to those children, we may be short circuiting the

following technology of people who find themselves going to bring us a greater world.

Cindy: Let's talk about a few of Hack Membership's successes. And by the way, I just need to give you extra love for reclaiming the term hack for doing one thing good. This is being a hacker, again, I am an old school web individual, being a hacker was being someone who dug in deeply, tried to determine issues out. And it might have been not the prettiest thing however really made things work. And I believe that someway we have misplaced that sense of the phrase and it's turn out to be synonymous with evil. And so I actually admire you reclaiming it and lifting it up however that is just my little soapbox moment. However let's hear some success tales. What's Hack Membership doing for youths? What are you seeing?

Zach: Oh, it is unbelievable. I do not know. There is a Hack Clubbers who wrote a complete game engine in Rust. I was talking with Hack Clubbers who constructed a whole clone of Minecraft in Rust where they made the OpenGL calls themselves. But the thing that I believe is admittedly important about Hack Membership for people who find themselves in it beyond simply the coding and past the socialization is I feel that for Hack Clubbers, coding is not only a way to make video games or make a personal webpage or I don't know, get a job in the future. It's a type of self expression. It's that is a spot where I could be myself, where I can get what's in my head out on paper. Liberty is not free is a thing that gives you energy and an company as a young individual that you don't actually find in school and do not actually discover in different actions or round your life. And it is a spot the place it would not really matter where you're from or what you appear to be or who your parents are, how a lot money you make. It is this is a spot the place people will treat you like an actual person with actual respect. And I do know for me, when I was a younger individual, I was really desperate for that.

Danny: As you talked about this, I used to be thinking concerning the early days of the net and the web. And i out of the blue thought to myself, it's not simply Hack Membership, it isn't simply these places the place kids gather, I feel a huge chunk of the positive sides of the web were constructed by children or built by teenagers. I consider Aaron Swartz, who very near EFF. Me and Cindy knew him properly.

Zach: Wow. He is a personal hero of mine

Danny: Right. And once we first met Aaron, he was hacking on the basic code that was building the web with Tim Berners-Lee at, I believe he must have been 14. Heaps of individuals start out at that age. And the other thing is and I think this goes to the guts of what we attempt to speak about on this show is you are modeling the optimistic future of the internet. And it's pushed by individuals wanting to build that, wanting to build that for themselves. Do the children you talk to, do they assume about this more widely?

Zach: I think coding is the glue. It's the thing that brings everybody collectively however the magic is in all of the why questions. As a result of Hack Membership's an area the place individuals ask questions like, who am I? Who do I want to be? What is this world I reside in?

What's my relationship with it? And I think that we have this idea of hacker mates where if I feel if Hack Club does one thing, we wish to try and help younger individuals find other hacker associates because when you have another person like you, that shares your interest at a really deep stage, it signifies that once you explore those questions, you'll be able to go a lot deeper and you're feeling heard in a way that you won't if you don't have associates which might be as into some of these things as you.

Cindy: Hack Club's not the just one. There are packages like this all around the world which can be actually specifically aimed toward reaching communities who basically weren't the main target of sort of the first era of hacker kids. For those who'd discuss that too, I'd love it.

Zach: For me rising up and I feel this is constructed into Hack Membership's DNA, I definitely felt like a baby of the world or a child of the web because the individuals I was having so many of those formative conversations with online had been from all around the world from all backgrounds. And I feel that that's just so extremely necessary.

One in every of my favourite things about Hack Membership is since we do not this design a playbook that then all people runs, each Hack Club at each school is different. And in consequence, when you go to a Hack Club in Kerala India, it is dramatically completely different than a Hack Club in America. It's totally different. It makes more sense for local context.

And in consequence, if you walk into a few of these clubs from all over the world, the local leaders have actually requested, "What makes essentially the most sense for me? What makes the most sense for other individuals like me?" And I feel that, significantly in areas the place individuals feel marginalized or they don't see a home for themselves or they don't have position models in the same manner that some more conventional people may need, my hope is that with Hack Club, that they will build the home that they've all the time been looking for. And I feel that the web allows young people to do this in a manner that simply wasn't possible before.

Danny: That is such a cliche, but this is definitely the next generation. This is the long run. Do you've gotten any predictions about the way forward for the internet? What are the issues that they are constructing which might be lacking in the prevailing system?

Zach: We face a few of the largest challenges over the following 50 years that humanity's ever needed to reckon with. And I think that we'd like a generation of younger people who not only have actual exhausting skills, they can truly do one thing from a builder perspective around these enormous challenges but they also have the fitting mindset and network to suppose a little bit in a different way.

The mindset is that if there's an issue, what does it take to repair it? It's extremely actionable moderately than feel, we're born with problems and we must deal with these issues. There's nothing that we are able to do about it. It is a very empowered mindset.

They form of see expertise not as an finish in itself but as a tool for every single thing wanted to construct wonderful communities on this new world that we dwell in.

Cindy: Such a superb vision. Let's soar to that future. What does it appear to be if we get this right? If we unleash all the Hack Clubbers and the opposite kids who're utilizing know-how and envisioning applied sciences to build a greater world than the one we've now. Take us to that world. What does it appear to be?

Zach: I do not know if this is simply too big of an concept but I want to live in a world the place there's a hacker president. However in additional concrete terms, I want all of the revolutionary, thrilling stuff to be open supply as a result of it means that all of a sudden the individuals who can interact with it, is not everyone who can afford to purchase a license to their firm however it's every single individual that has technical knowledge in all the world and internet entry. I wish to reside in a world the place the constraints of location, of locale are smaller than ever before.

Cindy: And what I really love about this vision is that it really is a couple of movement. I feel one of many issues that distresses me in regards to the stories coming out of the early web is they all appear to at least one man who did one factor. And actually, they're nearly all guys and guys of a sure color. And I think that this manner of storytelling, I am unsure it was really all that true for these of us who lived by way of it however what I hear you is actually, actually doubling down on this idea that it takes a motion, that people move together and that this kind of single individual narrative isn't truly the narrative of excellent change and that you're working to strive to build communities and networks so that we get previous that.

Zach: And I believe that one thing that really helps with that's the open supply movement and the open supply group as a result of it means that in case you are coding on actual tasks, the connection between you and the person that wrote that line of code is closer than ever. And you see, wow, projects like Ruby on Rails, they weren't built by one individual. They had been constructed by 2,000 folks. And also you see that related things with large projects, like Firefox, massive initiatives like Rust, these are issues that take tribes.

Cindy: Yeah. And let's simply double down, we bought to get those obstacles out of the best way. Youngsters want to be able to access all the knowledge. They need to have the ability to proper click on their Chromebooks and think about source and all of these items. And the function of that, which seems like funny little geeky issues, it is central to how we get from right here to there.

Danny: Effectively, thanks a lot, Zach. I stay up for not only seeing what you have to give you sooner or later however seeing the subsequent 20 years of what these youngsters produce.

Zach: Thank you a lot for having me right here. It is such an honor to be in a position to join you on this dialog. It is such an honor for Hack Clubbers to have their story and their

struggles be part of the conversation and for the work you are doing. Thank you, thanks, thanks, thank you, thank you.

Cindy: It goes both ways, Zach. You are raising the following era of EFF members, most likely EFF staffers and perhaps congressional and administrative staffers who have this in their bones. And that is the world. Just understanding how expertise works is not sufficient. And I feel that is actually clear from what you're doing is you're constructing networks and you're constructing moral and responsible frameworks for how do you be somebody who understands about tech however is using it for good?

Cindy: Zach, thanks a lot. This has been so enjoyable talking to you and so inspiring. I agree, we started off and we were talking about the issues that you are having and so they're tremendously vital. And naturally that's the place EFF's rubber meets the highway is attempting to get these obstacles out of the best way. However we ended in such a cheerful place in terms of this future. So thanks.

Cindy: I so recognize hearing about optimistic, young people finding, using and building the tools to make issues higher and the position that the internet is playing in each serving to them join, and serving to them really construct this right into a motion that is going to build the instruments that are going to make a greater web in the future.

Danny: A lot of this speak of the surveillance and the censorship of children is wrapped this idea of keeping them safe. And then Zach who's caught in the center. He goes to the websites of those makers of filter expertise the place they're actually claiming to be stopping school shootings and but all of us need children to be secure but I do question whether this is absolutely security when Zack talks to the actual Hack Clubbers and they say that they really feel like they're in an Orwellian surveillance state, that's not safety.

Cindy: No, no. And I think college administrators, it is simply clear that they're outgunned right here and we'd like to really support them in recognizing what children actually need to grow. I also actually appreciated him speaking about coding as a form of self expression. Obviously that is near and pricey to my coronary heart as EFF started with the concept that code is speech but also that this self expression isn't simply in a constitutional sense. It's about a spot the place I may be myself, the place I can really be the actual me and all of that coming out of the concept individuals are studying how you can code, this as a means of self expression it's simply heartening.

Danny: You train kids how to specific themselves, whether or not it is code and talking up and then they get to be part of that debate. And I feel they're an essential part of that debate.

Cindy: One of many issues that I really loved about the way Zach talked concerning the community he's building is it is being built by teenagers for teenagers, possibly for the rest of us too. However recognizing that this group needs to be designing the applied sciences and developing the applied sciences that this neighborhood wants. That where it needs to be

centered. It jogs my memory of the dialog we had with Matt Mitchell, where he talked about communities needing to build the tools that they want, whether or not they're in, the place he was in Harlem or in a rural space or someplace world wide. This group empowerment works not solely in geography but also in the distinction between being a child and being an adult.

Cindy: Nicely, thanks to our guest, Zach Latta, for sharing his optimism and the work that he is doing. If you'd like to start a Hack Membership or donate to assist help them, they're at hackclub.com. There are comparable organizations all across the country and all across the world. But supporting this work, I believe is tremendously important to build a future internet that all of us wish to stay in.

Danny: Thanks again, for becoming a member of us. If you have any feedback on this episode, do e mail us at podcast@eff.org. We read each email and we study from your whole feedback. When you do like what you hear, observe us on your favourite podcast participant. We have bought lots more episodes in retailer this season. Nat Keefe and Reed Mathis at Beat Mower made the music for this podcast with additional music and sounds used under the artistic commons license from CCMixter. You will discover the credits for each of the musicians and links to the music in our episode notes. How to repair the Internet is supported by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation's program in the general public understanding of science and know-how. I'm Danny O'Brien.

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