

CARNEGIE COUNCIL *for Ethics in International Affairs*

Ethics Matter: A Conversation with Online Activist Ricken Patel

Ethics Matter

Ricken Patel, James Traub

Transcript

Introduction

JAMES TRAUB: Good evening. I'm Jim Traub, and welcome to Ethics Matter.

Our guest this evening is Ricken Patel. Ricken's career, I think, incarnates the principles behind the term "ethics matter." After having compiled the kinds of sterling academic credentials—number one in his class at Oxford, Harvard Kennedy School—that allow people to write their own ticket, Ricken, instead, went to some of the most difficult and dangerous places in the world—Sierra Leone, Liberia, Sudan, Afghanistan—and in those places, lived in small places with poor people.

When he came back, he worked with a series of activist organizations, ultimately culminating in the creation of *Avaaz*. *Avaaz* is an online organization whose 20 million-plus members—

RICKEN PATEL: Thirty million now.

JAMES TRAUB: Thirty million members. By the end of our conversation this evening, it's going to be 32 million members.

In any case, the important thing is that Ricken essentially created a way to leverage the capacity of the Internet to enlist people in a series of campaigns, including campaigns to curb political corruption in Brazil, to curb sexual abuse in India, to protect elephants and lions in Africa, to save the Great Barrier Reef in Australia. In many of these cases, *Avaaz* has been extraordinarily successful in doing so.

Ricken was *named* by my own organization, *Foreign Policy* magazine, as one of the Top 100 Global Thinkers. He is a social entrepreneur and, I would say, beyond that, he is a moral entrepreneur.

Ricken, thank you so much for being with us today.

RICKEN PATEL: Thank you for that introduction.

Remarks

JAMES TRAUB: My sense, just having read about you, is that you are someone who always knew that your life and your career would be guided by matters of social justice. Was that the water that you drank? Is that in your DNA? How did it come about that you have lived the life you've lived?

RICKEN PATEL: I think I was a weird kid. What I would attribute it to is that my mother gave me tremendous, overflowing, unconditional love. And I think I had enough; I had some to give. She also was absolutely blown away by anything I did. If I just built some blocks somewhere, she would be, "Oh, it's beautiful," and was blown away in a way that I think built my—

JAMES TRAUB: So there's a message to all you moms out there: Go overboard.

RICKEN PATEL: I think she built my ego in a way that I believed myself capable of doing things in the world. Ego would become a problem later on, but I think it was helpful to believe in your capability to change the world.

And my brother was a big nerd. He was 10 years older than me. By the time I was three and four, he had talked for hours about the [Cold War](#) and the structure of the human cell and everything. He just made me real excited about the world.

That's who I blame.

JAMES TRAUB: But you also went to a Cree Indian school. These were really, really marginalized folk, I gather. My impression is that also had something to do with your budding sense of social justice.

RICKEN PATEL: Yes. I lived right next to—in Canada we call them First Nations people, the Cree people—and went to one of the only schools in Canada run by a First Nations tribe. Despite a tremendous number of resources given to this tribe as a result of the [treaty](#) signed by the government, people lived in shacks, with doors that had huge cracks. They lived in tents inside homes. The amount of alcohol abuse and drug abuse—just horrific social conditions that, for me, were an education in a number of things. I was the only kid at the school that wasn't either white or First Nations, so I got a lot of racism and bullying early on as a result of that.

But also it was a big lesson in culture. I read [Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee](#) when I was young and just fell in love with the experience of the Native American peoples and saw the contrast between this noble picture that had existed previously and the one I was living in day by day. For me, the difference was culture. That culture had been systematically destroyed of that nomadic people. I think that has really informed how I see the world and its problems since.

JAMES TRAUB: So you were sort of precociously "conscientized."

RICKEN PATEL: You could say that.

JAMES TRAUB: I also read—Rick went to Balliol College in Oxford—I read that, in addition to whatever thesis you wrote, you wrote a second thesis whose title was *What's Wrong With the World and What To Do About It*. Are you at liberty to tell us now what you discovered was wrong with the world and what to do about it, at the tender age of—whatever it was—20?

RICKEN PATEL: Sure, I can unveil the nature of the thesis.

I think when I went to college, my ambition was to come out with a coherent world view. All of the existing liberalism and democracy and socialism and capitalism and things were belief systems none of which fully resonated with me—

JAMES TRAUB: Just so people have a sense, what year are we talking about now, when you were in your final year of university?

RICKEN PATEL: 1999. I wanted to act in the world, but I wanted to act with authenticity so that I felt like I wasn't the tool of some belief system that had been handed down to me. That's really what I went to college hoping to pursue.

Oxford was a little different. There was a lot of sports and a lot of drinking and a lot of stuff. The culture there—

JAMES TRAUB: This is not our American received idea of Oxford. We think people go to Oxford to study great ideas.

RICKEN PATEL: No, no. That's what I thought, too, but the culture there was different.

But by the end, I felt like between Oxford and then Harvard, where I was kind of doing the same thing, the thing that I hit on that really did it for me was the idea of the *res publica*, which is Latin for "the public thing." It's the things that we hold precious and in common—our ideals, our values, our earth, our children—and the protection and sustenance of those things. That was the thing that I felt, "Ah, that feels right. That feels like the thing I want to dedicate myself to."

JAMES TRAUB: That's a long way from the kind of marketplace ideology. When I think about that moment, that neoliberal moment, when people sort of worshipped the marketplace—not that they don't now—it sounds like you were trying to define a way of thinking that wasn't just confined by this marketplace ideology.

RICKEN PATEL: Yes, I think, especially in the 1990s, that belief system was waxing, in the sense of, I think, a misunderstanding of the *invisible hand* and of the application of that individual pursuit of self-interest. I think I was reacting a little bit to that.

I think that has actually waned a lot since then. Activism is cool now. People respect pursuing the public good—again, reasons for hope.

JAMES TRAUB: That's a very nice, optimistic thought, that there actually is moral progress in that regard.

RICKEN PATEL: I think so. That's what I'm seeing. Maybe I'm in a bubble, but that's what I'm seeing.

JAMES TRAUB: Let's talk about your bubble, though, for a second. Why did you then decide to go to these incredibly godforsaken places and actually live like a real person and not in a bubble in one of those places?

RICKEN PATEL: I was in college, I remember, and I hadn't yet reached this point of clarity about what was the authentic thing to be doing in the world, and I still had to specialize and choose what my graduate studies would focus on. I thought, "Well, there are some things in the world that I can't live without doing something about." Mass civilian death in war felt like that kind of standard.

I had read *Human Rights Watch* reports about what was going on in *Sierra Leone*, and I thought, "I think I'm going to focus on that professionally."

Then I had some sexy jobs where I was a speechwriter for *Kofi Annan* during the *Millennium Summit* and things like that. I saw that path going into the United Nations and the world *you're* in, in a way—that New York high-achieving world. I felt it wasn't going to be good for my soul; I was going to get drawn into that competition for status and advancement. I felt that I was young and I needed to

do stuff that was good for my soul. I thought I was going to choose a life, and not a career.

I had read about this young woman in Sierra Leone who had defended the voting booths, when the military were coming to attack people. She said, "We are your mothers, your sisters, and your daughters. If you're going to kill us, do it now. But, remember, the world is watching." She had a CNN camera on behind her.

I really respected this woman, [Zainab Bangura](#). She was both brave and principled, but also smart about how she did things. So I wrote to her and I said, "I want to come and learn from you." That was my next step.

JAMES TRAUB: So you were there, and [Liberia](#) and [Sudan](#) as well.

RICKEN PATEL: Yes.

JAMES TRAUB: Basically, all places that either had humanitarian interventions or desperately needed humanitarian interventions, all places that had monstrous civil wars.

RICKEN PATEL: Yes. I think it was civilian protection that drew me to those places. But while I was there, I felt I went on a deeper journey, really getting involved. I helped Zainab run for president of Sierra Leone, which is a crazy thing. If you think election politics is crazy in the United States, in Sierra Leone it's a whole other level.

I think I felt like a physician-in-training for body politics, if that makes any sense. These were acute patients on the operating table, countries that had collapsed—every kind of failure, economic failure, state failure, environmental failure. I feel that watching these things in progress and learning from people there about how it happened was teaching me to understand how these processes work so that I could also look at our societies and governance and see the early stages of these pathologies at work.

JAMES TRAUB: But you must really be an optimist, because anybody else who would have the experience—I mean, I've been to all these places, myself, and they are not places that make one feel hopeful, though I have to say both Sierra Leone and Liberia are in much better shape today than they were when you were there. Nevertheless, the moral you drew from that is, "These places can be better. What can we do to make them better?" as opposed to, "These places illustrate how human nature is as ruinous and self-destructive as it is."

RICKEN PATEL: Yes. People sometimes ask me if I'm an optimist. I feel like I call things like I see them. I feel that a lot of our press and political class is incompetently cynical. They're actually not realists.

Take Sierra Leone. Anyone would have written off Sierra Leone at the time. I helped a young woman run for president who had absolutely no chance. She failed miserably. But we set up an example in that [election cycle](#) that led to her and her entire campaign team becoming half of the cabinet in the next government. Now we have a far more stable, somewhat less corrupt government in Sierra Leone.

It's just my cold, hard math experience of the world that smart, dedicated, sustained effort yields results, in one direction or another.

JAMES TRAUB: Is there some principle you learned about economic development or about

governance when you think about these catastrophically wrecked countries?

RICKEN PATEL: The thing that I look at the most is democratic development. I think a lot of us who do issue-based organizing and activism—it's part of the problem with the public sector that it's very siloed. Particularly in the United States you see this. Our NGO community, our civil society, it's all environment/water person-Montana person. Yet there are these institutions that connect us all. Their health determines the success or failure of most of the things that we care about.

So our media and our civil society and our politics and our institutions and our rule of law, I think, are the things that we need to pay the most attention to in our social-change efforts.

JAMES TRAUB: But you chose not to—I suppose people whose trajectory is similar to yours, many of them, would wind up working for the United Nations. You worked for NGOs while you were there. But you made a very different kind of choice. When you came back here—and now I'm jumping forward several years—you created this activist organization, which ranges, in a very unusual way, over the whole world of issues. Could you talk a little bit about how it is you came to create Avaaz?

RICKEN PATEL: Sure. I think there's a way in which I've always dreamed of something like Avaaz. I remember, when I was a teenager, I was on vacation with my family. I was 17 or something. I said, "I've got it. I know what I want to do," and I described something like a global movement of citizens working for the world we all wanted—

JAMES TRAUB: You were an unusual 17-year-old.

RICKEN PATEL: Yes, I was a weird kid.

But we didn't have the Internet back then, so it seemed like it was going to be bloody hard work to build that. But then, when I saw MoveOn.org in the United States pioneering this new model of Internet organizing, for me it put it together. I said, okay, this global movement can be built using these tools. And I haven't looked back.

JAMES TRAUB: The idea from the beginning was always to not be issue-specific, to put together this kind of vast army of people who would be available for whatever things they believed in, for the whole range of world issues.

RICKEN PATEL: Yes. There's a way in which a lot of people who try to do social change speak to the policy. The policy is over here and people are over here. People actually—they care about policies, but what they most respond to and where they're at are values, something deeper that connects all the different policies. I think real movement-building and organizing speaks to values. That's where I feel the magic of Avaaz is.

JAMES TRAUB: What would you say are the values that are core to Avaaz?

RICKEN PATEL: It's an interesting process to try to access that. I think one of them is this idea that every human life is equally precious, that regardless of what passport you carry, every human life is equally precious. That's a radical idea in today's world. The implications of accepting that—yet it's one that most people would say, "Yeah, that sounds pretty right to me."

JAMES TRAUB: But most people's focus is national. They think about their own country. So part of the implication of that is to not focus just nationally.

RICKEN PATEL: Right, and to see the way in which we're connected.

I think there's a whole set of other values that are about hope and about effectiveness and about bringing a degree of honesty and sincerity to our public life. That's what I feel connects Avaaz. People in this community span every demographic group. We have as many 70-year-olds as we have teenagers. It's men and women; it's rich and poor. There's no demographic.

But there's this thing that seems to knit people together that is this hope and this belief in the possibility of a better world.

JAMES TRAUB: Could you take just one or two specific campaigns and take us through first, perhaps, how you decide to do this as opposed to that, and second, once you've done that, what organizational things you do in order to actually leverage change?

RICKEN PATEL: The first thing to say is that every campaign is utterly different. Part of what I love about the way this community works is—a lot of the public sector is very mission- and mandate-focused: "I'm a human rights lawyer, and what I do is write letters and deliver them to my targets. Whatever problem happens, what I do is write a letter and deliver it to my target." I find the world is a very holistic place and our problems are very interconnected, and if you want to fix our problems, you have to be very holistic about how you address them and you have to be very flexible in what kinds of tools and tactics you use.

To give you a couple of examples, in Syria, when the [uprising](#) was breaking out—actually, even before it broke out—we looked at what we thought was going to happen and we said, "We think they're going to black out and crack down." That's the dictator's playbook, right? It's, black out, kick out all the journalists, and then crack down on what's happening. We thought, "How do we stop that?" And we thought, "Break the blackout."

So we raised \$2 million to \$3 million online and we got a large amount of satellite equipment and phones in to the opposition movement in Syria—the nonviolent opposition movement—and enabled them to get information out. So [al-Assad](#) couldn't completely black out.

Then we saw that, while they were getting stuff out, the media didn't know what to do with it. They were like, "What's this video? Is it Homs yesterday or Cairo of three weeks ago?"

So we played a middleman role where we verified the content. We trained the activists in how to do verifiable content and we played a verification role with the media.

That was how we helped in Syria.

JAMES TRAUB: That's something beyond also just a kind of publicity campaign. You actually were engaging in technical assistance there as well.

RICKEN PATEL: Absolutely.

JAMES TRAUB: Let me go backwards. What's the process whereby, whether in the case of the Syrian campaign or another, you say, "This and not that"?

RICKEN PATEL: That's one of the other fascinating things about this movement that I'm in love with, that it really draws on the wisdom of crowds. Everything we do is polled and tested with a randomized sample of our community. It doesn't matter what I think is the right thing to do, at the end of the day. I have the power of suggestion and my team has the power of suggestion. That's a very important thing. Leadership is important, to go out, listen to experts and partners, and say, "This is a

smart thing to do." But at the end of the day, it's our community, and a randomized sample of our community that represents the whole, that makes all the final decisions about what we do.

JAMES TRAUB: I assume it's not a coincidence, though, that the kinds of campaigns Avaaz has undertaken sound an awful lot like the kinds of concerns and commitments you have yourself.

RICKEN PATEL: That's true. My experience is that it's pretty aligned. Part of the reason for that is, honestly, that there has been a growth trajectory for me. For example, I came out of a human rights conflict kind of background. Those are the things I most cared about. When we started running Avaaz campaigns, a lot of people cared about saving whales and protecting oceans and lions and elephants and things like that. At first, I was like, "Really? Genocide in [Sri Lanka](#) versus bans on whale hunting?"

It was over time that I consistently learned to say, when the community disagrees with me, I need to first look at myself and see what I have to learn. That's what took me into the conservation movement, which is a hugely powerful movement that articulates our relationship to our planet. I think it's very wise and very deep, and I've learned from that.

This is where I feel I have learned a deep respect for the wisdom of the crowd. I don't think that all crowds are wise—

JAMES TRAUB: It's easy to use the word "crowd" meaning this is how people think. But obviously you have a self-created, self-defined crowd. It's a particular kind of crowd.

RICKEN PATEL: Yes. I think there are two crowds that I am increasingly convinced of the wisdom of. One is all humanity. If you take a global opinion poll of everybody, you can get things where you think, "This country is pretty wrong about this issue," like most Chinese people think the [Dalai Lama](#) is a wolf in sheep's clothing. I think most Chinese people are wrong about that. They have bad information. But for most issues, if you polled the entire world, you might find a couple of things that you disagree with them on, but on the vast majority of things, you have quite a radical consensus for change. That's one.

The other crowd that I really believe in is the crowd of the Avaaz community. These are 30 million people who will sign a petition or donate \$10 when no one is looking. It's a purely altruistic kind of engagement. I think that is a very interesting crowd as well.

JAMES TRAUB: I want to come back to that, because it's an interesting question as to how much altruism is required to donate \$10 or to indicate your preference for something.

But I want you to explain the kinds of tactics you use. That is, for so many of the things you do, you are basically using the force of embarrassment to make people do things that they're trying very hard not to do. The Syrian one isn't quite similar to some of the, say, environmental issues or wildlife issues, where you really have to use public pressure. Talk a little bit about that.

RICKEN PATEL: I think one of our core what we call theories of change—how you actually change the world—is the soft power of legitimacy, that in today's world, legitimacy matters—it's not just how many troops you have or how much money you have—that democracy is functioning and that the ability to withhold and bestow legitimacy is power in international politics, especially in multilateral fora, where you have disagreements, where you have one country sitting at the table arguing for a climate agreement and others arguing against. For that one country to be able to say, "The people of the world are with us. Your own citizens are with us," we see, time and time again, has a gentle

pressure on processes.

JAMES TRAUB: Not so gentle, necessarily. Sometimes you're engaging in sit-ins or all sorts of public events that are designed to really put public pressure on people.

RICKEN PATEL: Absolutely. Sometimes we will be very sharp. For example, when Hilton Hotels was considering signing up to a code of conduct on sex trafficking where they would train their 80,000 workers worldwide to become eyes and ears for an anti-trafficking movement, and they were dragging their feet a lot—it was a big deal; Hilton was being used as kinds of brothels in China and other countries—we had hundreds of thousands of people sign a petition and donate to promise to put ads in the hometown of the CEO, where his four daughters lived, targeting him and saying, "Why wouldn't you do this? Why wouldn't you save these other young girls that are in this crisis?" He responded instantly to that.

I had a friend who worked with him in Hilton, and they said it was like a nuclear bomb went off. They called us and said, "It's outrageous that you're doing this. We need time. Our lawyers need to assess." We said, "You have three days or the ads go up." They committed within three days.

JAMES TRAUB: So this is sort of blackmail for justice.

RICKEN PATEL: All we were doing was telling the truth.

JAMES TRAUB: That's what I meant to say.

Are there kinds of issues that really are amenable to this and kinds that are not? Are there failures you've had that have told you you can't do this kind of organizing for this kind of issue?

RICKEN PATEL: Yes. Where I see us as existing in an ecosystem of social change, where you need the longer-term, issue-based organizations—like, [Greenpeace](#) is an evangelical organization to a degree. It kind of took the environment when it was a fringe, leftie, green issue, dragged it out of the wilderness, and made it into the mainstream. It deserves a lot of credit for that.

The Avaaz model isn't very effective at doing that. We're not the evangelicals of social change. We look at the gap between where people are and where the world is. I think that's just one of many pieces in which others—elite movements, government representatives and leadership, political parties, academics—they all play a role in social change. I think, a bit like the way the media does, we play a force-multiplier role on those social change efforts to try to enhance and drive the strongest ones and inhibit the worst ones.

JAMES TRAUB: One that was occurring to me is this whole climate change question. One of the geniuses of Avaaz is these 250-word super-blunt messages. The super-blunt message about the environment is titled "[30 months to save the world](#)." What it says there is, "We have 30 months until the Paris summit," which is an important environmental summit, "the meeting that world leaders have decided will determine the fate of our efforts to fight climate change. It might seem like a long time—it's not. We have 30 months to get the right leaders in power, get them to that meeting, give them a plan, and hold them accountable."

I have to say, that sounds incredibly grandiose.

RICKEN PATEL: I think the issue and the moment call for that level of thinking. We are in a planetary catastrophe that is unfolding right now. Unless we think at that level and plan at that level

and organize at that level, we will not get this job done.

It's interesting. We tested different versions of that email. That email, with that particular language, has raised \$4.5 million, which is off the charts for us. Usually it's around \$2 million, if it's a really good email. I think it's because citizens said, this sounds right.

JAMES TRAUB: This is a case where there has already been an enormous amount of organizing and public pressure and organizations and so forth. But you are running against profound self-interest on the other side. Why is there reason to think that if Avaaz does this kind of organizing, it will be able to achieve outcomes that so many other organizations have not yet been able to achieve?

RICKEN PATEL: Again, I feel like I've been at the very core of the climate movement since 2007. In the lead-up to [Copenhagen](#), our community, 95 percent of the people, voted to spend 100 percent of our energy on the Copenhagen Summit—

JAMES TRAUB: Presumably that's an example where you didn't succeed.

RICKEN PATEL: I would say we got a deal on finance in Copenhagen, but not on ambition and not on legal binding, the nature of the treaty. So it was one-third of what we were going for.

I have watched our efforts. I feel like I've been right in the middle, involved in everything that Greenpeace, Oxfam, everybody around the world is doing on climate change. From what I can see, there's stuff that works; there's stuff that doesn't. The plan that we have on climate change I talk about with ministers for climate change, I talk about with the organizers of the Paris process, the heads of the UN process. It is the right plan. This is how we get this done.

The thing that might sound grandiose in that is "let's get the right leaders."

JAMES TRAUB: Yes, that one did strike me.

RICKEN PATEL: One of the interesting pieces of Avaaz is that we're not a charity. Donations are not tax-deductible to us. So we can be political. It's one of the few organizations in the world that's not a political party, but can be political.

JAMES TRAUB: Are you trying to elect people in India? My impression from one of your India campaigns is that the idea is "give money, and we'll contribute that money to the kinds of candidates who are prepared to stand up against the sexual abuse of women."

RICKEN PATEL: Not quite. What we've promised to do there is—it's astonishing how many Indian politicians have been convicted of sexual assault and of various types of crimes against women and are unrecalcitrant about that behavior and those activities. What we promised to do was inform women voters in their districts about their records. So not quite partisan.

In Germany, for example—Germany just had an [election](#) in September—we really need strong climate leadership from Germany. They're a powerhouse. They're driving the Europeans. The Europeans are global leaders in climate change. [Merkel's](#) previous coalition partner, the [FDP](#) [Free Democratic Party], was a very strongly right-wing industrialist-aligned party that was a real barrier to climate change. We focused on campaigning against the FDP so that they wouldn't make it past the cut of the voting system, and so Merkel would be forced to partner with the [Greens](#) or with the Left Party [[SPD](#)].

I don't know how much we contributed to that, but that was indeed what happened. The FDP didn't make the cut. Now Merkel is forming a coalition with them [the Greens and SPD] . That's better for climate change.

That's just smart thinking. I think people in the non-profit sector can sometimes make a moral principle of not being political. I find that just bizarre. People aren't political, because the government is indirectly funding them by giving tax deductions on donations that they get. So they silence their voices. But individuals want to say things politically. Politics is where we win and lose the major fights for our world and our planet.

JAMES TRAUB: As you said, your insight from that time you spent in all those wrecked countries was that it's really, in the end, about politics and governance. It's not about technocratic things.

RICKEN PATEL: Yes, they're just being flooded with donor money to build governance, but if the politics is wrong, you lose the game.

JAMES TRAUB: Right.

Let me ask you a different thing. You insistently say, and I think you reaffirmed just now, that the people of good will fundamentally agree on the most important things, and the problem is to find the leverage so that they can express their collective political will. But I wonder if that's actually so. I know one of the campaigns that Avaaz took up was a no-fly zone in [Libya](#). That was an issue that really divided the activist community. Your friends in humanitarian organizations would say that's a bad thing.

What gives you the feeling that these are consensual issues and that, in fact, the issue really is not people of good will disagreeing, but not being able to do what everybody agrees is right?

RICKEN PATEL: First of all, I would say I don't think all people of good will agree on everything. I think people of good will agree far more than we think they do, because our media and our politics are incentivized to focus, exaggerate, and exacerbate the conflicts that exist between us. That's part of the political culture we live in. If it bleeds, it leads. If there are 99 people who think one thing and one person who thinks another, the media will take that one person and stack them up against one other person and treat it as a debate. It makes for better media. If you're a politician and you want to get elected, you're going to want to try to exaggerate the differences between you and the other person.

JAMES TRAUB: For example, on this issue, which you and I were talking about before we sat down here, of humanitarian intervention, [Libya](#) being one case, it's a profoundly divisive issue inside the progressive community, or however you wish to describe the world of Avaaz itself. Aren't there many issues of which that is true?

RICKEN PATEL: I haven't found that. We've run now 2,500 campaigns, every one of which has been randomly polled and tested. On everything from conflicts in the Middle East, in [Iraq](#), to governance in the United Nations and things like that, there has been an astonishing degree of alignment. I think we are much more aligned as people than we think we are. That's the first point.

The second point is I think you're right that Libya was a contentious issue amongst activists and amongst the progressive left. Our members were not so divided about it. I think that's because people could see what was about to happen to Benghazi and they wanted to have it stopped. That's where people were.

I think the left, and especially the hard left, has a very strong allergy to U.S. action, to governmental action, to military action. Frankly, I think that sometimes gets in the way of their making a wise judgment about when and where the use of force is legitimate.

JAMES TRAUB: So in that sense, it's important to bear in mind that even for your 30 million members, it's a self-selecting community which tends to select out for people who have a certain set of views.

RICKEN PATEL: Well, one of the interesting things about the community is that it has built through all of these 2,500 campaigns. In a time when the Internet is dividing everybody into little tiny pieces of their own world, all circulating the things that confirm their own opinion of everything, we're taking everybody who cares about any one of these things, from sex trafficking to whale hunting to [Israel-Palestine](#), and putting them all into one community. And we always have one message for the whole community. So there is a collective view that's emerging from that.

JAMES TRAUB: Israel-Palestine, for example—Avaaz has been a strong supporter of Palestinian statehood.

RICKEN PATEL: Yes, absolutely.

JAMES TRAUB: I take it that's an issue where, for example, here on the Upper East Side you probably have a lot of people who otherwise are liberals who would say that's not a good thing; it's a bad thing.

RICKEN PATEL: I'm not so sure. We ran opinion polling in the United States of both Americans and of American Jews and found that the overwhelming majority thought that the Palestinian people had a right to exist in a state.

I think that's a classic example where—I think our perceptions, for example, of the Jewish community in the United States, are that it sits in a certain place. But my feeling about that is that you have a very powerful lobby group in Washington, [AIPAC](#) [American Israel Public Affairs Committee], that takes a particular position on things which is driven by a few of their very large donors, and that they are actually out of step with Jewish Americans.

JAMES TRAUB: They certainly don't have 30 million members also, so in that sense you represent a much broader gauge of opinion.

RICKEN PATEL: Of global opinion, yes.

JAMES TRAUB: Could you talk a little bit about campaigns you have either going on right now or that you see coming around the bend?

RICKEN PATEL: Yes. I feel like there is a zeitgeist rising in the world right now of a perception of a war on women. We're connecting all of the different ways in which women's rights are being assaulted in different parts of the world. [Nick Kristof](#) wrote a beautiful book called *Half the Sky*. I think [Jimmy Carter](#) is coming out with a book soon on this issue. We feel like there's a climate of energy in the world to say, enough is enough, we're not going to tolerate this type of treatment of women in our society any longer, and we want to see it change.

What we're trying to do is move from individual campaigns around the woman in Iran that was going to be [stoned](#), [Sakineh](#), and the 15-year-old rape victim who was going to be [flogged](#) in Maldives

—we've run individual campaigns on those, and we're connecting them to broader social-change initiatives. So in India, we're advocating for the government to institute a \$1 billion public education [campaign](#) focused on male shame, on the theory that it's men's own shame at the things that have been done to them that tends to make them violent and tends to make them exploitative and things like that.

So it's taking it to another level of the kind of culture change we need to see in our societies.

Questions

QUESTION: David Musher.

What are the problems of online activism? In what ways might it be hijacked?

RICKEN PATEL: I would say the key problem that I've seen is the way in which there can be a masquerading of activism. There are a few online petition sites that are basically commercial sites that are harvesting email addresses and selling them. So you start a petition for a cause you care about, get all your friends to sign it, and the site isn't investing in the social change. It isn't investing in your campaign. It's just harvesting the email addresses. I think there's that kind of movement in the sector that we need to be wary of—the privatization and manipulation sector. Because this is big money. If Avaaz was a private organization, we would be worth hundreds of millions of dollars. So that's one thing that I worry about.

I don't know whether it could be successfully hijacked, in the sense that my experience of this sector is that it's fiercely meritocratic. If you don't serve people well—we have seen lots of people—[Al Gore](#) tried to launch a climate movement online and all kinds of rich people are trying to buy movements, where they buy the email addresses and then they say, "I have a million people in my movement." It doesn't work, because they don't know how to serve people effectively, and the list dies. It's a fiercely meritocratic sector.

If Avaaz stopped doing the things that people wanted it to do tomorrow, I think you would see another Avaaz very quickly rise up. There are low barriers to entry here. So I'm not sure about hijacking.

QUESTION: James Starkman. Thank you for a wonderful talk.

You know the old saw: you can give a starving man a fish or you can teach him how to fish. I was wondering whether you pursue that in the activities of Avaaz on a local level.

Also, in the [fight](#) between Sunni and Shia, which dates back to about the sixth century, what can a consensus in Avaaz do about something of that sort?

RICKEN PATEL: Those are great questions. In terms of teaching people how to fish, I feel like leadership by example and participation—about 30 to 40 percent of the people that participate in our community have never taken any kind of political or activist action before. I think what they report to us is an experience of finding hope in the world and finding a sense of empowerment. Our experience is that that's an entry drug, that they go further. All of the stats show that once people start signing petitions, then they start writing letters and sending messages, then they start donating, then they start getting together offline. It takes people through this ladder of engagement.

That empowers them, I think, to start movements and engage in movements across the board.

Sunni-Shia split: I feel like it's a multifaceted problem that begins with us taking responsibility for our own complicity, going to the British, the French, the Americans. We have always stoked and manipulated these splits—been manipulated by them as well. But an understanding that that's what's going on, that when [Tony Blair](#) is touring the Middle East and talking with these Arab leaders, whipping up fear and engagement with Iran—that's a part of the puzzle that we need to take responsibility for.

But there is certainly fertile ground for that, and deep animosity. What we have focused on is trying to get religious leaders from both sides to generate a counter-narrative of tolerance and engagement. But it has not been very successful. Syria—even moderate Sunni religious leaders are saying, "Let's go do jihad in Syria." It has been a tremendously polarizing thing.

So I guess I would say that there's a lot to be done, and we have failed so far to do it.

JAMES TRAUB: Has Avaaz taken a position on what should be done in Syria or is that something you've kept away from?

RICKEN PATEL: We've taken several positions, in the sense that we've argued first for a negotiated solution. There is no military solution to this conflict. Much as we might not like al-Assad, he cannot be militarily defeated. And he has a decent domestic constituency of support. That's part of the reason why he can't be defeated. He is no tin-pot dictator.

So we need to have a negotiated solution. We believe that that negotiated solution involves all parties internationally—the United States, Russia, Iran—coming to an enlightened view of their interests in the region and aligning on what needs to be done, and then exerting pressure on both of the domestic parties to come to the table and make a deal.

The controversial piece of that is that we have at times advocated for humanitarian corridors and for support to the opposition. We actually did give support to the opposition. In the early days when they didn't have any money, we funded them to be able to travel around the world and meet with world leaders. We seconded some of our staff into the opposition to build their aid effort.

So we have also advocated supporting the opposition, not because we advocate their military victory, but because we think it's a highly asymmetric conflict. Currently al-Assad believes he can win, and if he doesn't abandon that belief, there's no chance of a negotiated solution.

QUESTION: Susan Gitelson.

You're so enlightening on so many issues. Could you take the one you ended with, the situation for women, for example? All women, and I hope all men, just shudder when they read about rape of innocent people, honor killings, all these terrible things. Even, as you know, in our own Congress, there's a debate going on about how to save women in the armed services, whether you can really rely on the chain of command or there are people outside who have a broader view.

Another issue—you could be here all night — inequality in this country has become a very serious issue. It has always existed, let's say, in India or almost anywhere. How can you do something about it? How can you persuade the top 1 percent or whatever to share more, to support food stamps for hungry people here?

RICKEN PATEL: No small questions.

On the war on women, I feel that it's movement building. Honestly, speaking very frankly, I feel that the feminist movement has been strangled by internecine conflicts and petty, damaging processes and fighting, making the perfect the enemy of the good and things like that. I see a new feminist movement rising that is women and men, that is low-drama, that is effective, that's results-oriented. I think that movement is part of what's really going to change the world. [Eve Ensler](#)—I don't know if you know her—and [One Billion Rising](#) I think is a very promising piece of the feminist movement, the new feminism.

Secondly, I feel that, as I said before, connecting these individual instances of outrage to a coherent view about the kind of change we need in our societies—I think there is legislative and political change, but at the end of the day, we have the laws to protect women. It's right down the line, from the politicians to the police officers on the line: They are not enforcing them. They're not taking it seriously. So there's a deep culture change, I think, that needs to happen that we have begun campaigning for. I hope that mass public education programs can influence that.

On inequality, I think different countries have radically different experiences with success on this issue. I think it's about the health of your political institutions. The United States, for example, the famous Citigroup [memo](#) said that the United States is verging on a plutonomy, the rule of the very, very rich. It's not even the rule of the business community or the rule of the middle class; it's the rule of the extremely rich that have the capacity to fatally compromise the democratic processes of the nation.

As a Canadian, my perspective on the U.S. government is that it's in a process of near-state failure. The legislature is completely captured. You can have 80 percent of the country behind a certain vision of gun control, but the gun manufacturers don't want that law, and they own the politicians. So they buy the votes.

It's legal here. Things that are illegal in every other developed democracy, that are called corruption everywhere else, are legal here. They've legalized hyper-corruption. I think that's the core problem with the United States. When you've addressed that problem, which will take a long time, then you can start to redress the impact of public policy decisions on the inequality issue. I feel it's about getting big money out of politics. That's how we fix the inequality problem.

QUESTION: My name is Hila Katz.

I wanted to see if you could walk us through the first few steps that Avaaz would take once, for example, you decided on going on a campaign. What would be the first phone calls? It sounds like you guys have a core group that coordinates all these major campaigns. How long does it take to plan a campaign? And especially if there are issues that are burning, how does Avaaz maintain its authenticity and ethics as you move forward? How do you authenticate information?

Then, to top that off, since you guys do handle so many international affairs, how do you really manage to break through cultural divides, cultural habits? As a Canadian and as Americans, we approach things from a Western point of view. If you're dealing with Africa or the Middle East, who do you work with in order to get to the masses and the people over there?

RICKEN PATEL: A lot of things there, but I think the core of it is, how do we ensure our campaigns are accurate and legitimate and rooted, when we have to move so quickly?

I think part of it is hiring really good people. I think part of the magic of the organization is that it's deeply grassroots, but our team is some of the most outstanding social-change professionals in the

world. President [Obama](#)'s deputy counsel has become our [general counsel](#). He left the White House to join us. Senior advisors to presidents [Lula](#) and [Dilma](#) in Brazil, the [prime minister](#) of Japan's senior advisors are joining us. We're training them in how to serve a community. But they are very effective social-change leaders, and they do a great job.

We have a very high ethic of professionalism. We pay good salaries. It's a professionalization of the sector. This is not kind of volunteer, "it's okay to not do a good job because we're doing non-profit stuff." We aim to set the highest standard of any organization anywhere. We take our job very seriously. That's how we train and manage and staff.

In terms of the local engagement, most of our campaigns involve an interaction with experts and an interaction with targets and an interaction with partners. We have different training programs on how to do those excellently.

It's very complex. I think it's a skill that has to be developed.

QUESTIONER: How long does it take?

RICKEN PATEL: It varies by the campaign. It could be anything from six months to 12 hours, honestly. We're a bit like a newspaper, in the sense that if we get something that we need to move on right away, we'll move in 12 hours. But some things we see coming down the road six months from now, and we'll plan to that time.

JAMES TRAUB: Give us an example of a 12-hour one.

RICKEN PATEL: When [Haiyan](#) hit, for example, we knew that this was a tremendous humanitarian tragedy, and also that this devastation was brought to you by climate change. It's the warming of the oceans that is contributing to these increasingly terrible storms. We have, simultaneously with Typhoon Haiyan, the world's only major [climate summit](#) going on this year in Warsaw, a sleepy place that no one has heard of and there has been no press about.

So we have worked with the Filipino negotiator at the Warsaw Climate Change Conference. He has started a campaign—

JAMES TRAUB: Is this the one who is now [fasting](#)?

RICKEN PATEL: [Yeb Saño](#), yes. He has started a [petition](#) on our site, which now has going on a million signatures, and tomorrow he will take that petition, along with a group of people we've organized, and deliver it to the climate change negotiators there, saying, "Fund the money you pledged to fund for the [Climate Fund](#) for the world that would help recover from things like Typhoon Haiyan."

So that's something where, as soon as it hits, you know this is going to play out this way and you start organizing for it.

JAMES TRAUB: I want to come back to something you said earlier, which is that for somebody to make the \$10 donation and to indicate a preference is a meaningful and important act of commitment. I know the whole idea of deliberative democracy is really fundamental to you. What's the answer to the claim that as a model of behavior, this is nothing like deliberative democracy; this is just, push a button and you've expressed a preference, that it's nothing like political activism?

RICKEN PATEL: I think the preference is the first stage of the campaign. It's an ability to take from

where people are at and say this is what we feel about what's going on in the world and this is what needs to happen. As I said before, it's not quite an evangelical movement. It's about closing the gap. Our mission is to close the gap between the world we have and the world most people want. So we're working from that beginning of already held beliefs and preferences.

The thing that I feel is deliberative about our model is that there's an ongoing conversation between the staff and the community. When we test something and it doesn't do that well, we will poll and ask people, "What didn't you like about this?" We'll get a lot of comments back, and we'll try something different and test that. So there's a kind of high-technology deliberative process going on here that I actually think is very effective at getting to solutions that are quite deliberative.

Our campaigns are not shouty; they're not angry. I aspire for them to be wise. I think that's what our process of trying to generate not just a kind of 51 percent mandate from our community—our minimum threshold is 80 percent. When you try and look for that level of deliberative consensus, I think you get outcomes that, if you did a pure deliberative model and you took 20 people and stuck them in a room for a week, you would get something quite similar.

QUESTION: Do you ever find that there are instances where you would work alongside a [Gates Foundation](#) or an [Oprah Winfrey Foundation](#)?

RICKEN PATEL: In terms of just partners that are foundations?

QUESTIONER: Partnering in any way.

RICKEN PATEL: Yes. Almost every campaign we run is partnered with somebody. We're only about 120 people in our team and we're covering a vast terrain of issues. There are people who have been working on these issues for 7, 10, 20 years that have a great deal of expertise. Again, they often are slogging it out by themselves on an issue. When they manage to create an opportunity, the environment/water/South America people don't come and help the human rights/Papua New Guinea people when they create a moment of opportunity. It's all siloed.

So being able to have this mobile, flexible, fungible resource that can deploy quickly when there are great moments of opportunity or need I think is a force multiplier for social change globally. We get a lot of love from people because we usually are able to help in ways that matter.

QUESTION: Are you able to work with scientists and people on the climate change issue so it becomes an apolitical thing, more science-informed, and therefore publicly impressive that you could mobilize forces to handle the situation in the Philippines, but also in the middle of this country, as we saw this [weekend](#)?

RICKEN PATEL: I think we see scientists as a key constituency to drive change on the climate issue. For example, when the [IPCC](#), the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which is the big group of 10,000 climate scientists, issued their initial [report](#)—they report every four years—in September, we worked with them very closely. Our members lobbied newspapers all around the world to say, "When this report comes out, this is a front-page issue. Don't you dare cover the, 'Oh, climate change scientists say this and climate change scientists say that.'" This last report said 97 percent of climate scientists are agreed that climate change is man-made and catastrophic.

I think we also had a lot of love going on with the scientists, because they really feel that the media is not always conveying the vast—you don't get consensus like this in science, ever. It's as good as it gets. And our ability to help get the media to tell that story has been a crucial collaboration.

JAMES TRAUB: What do you make of the fact that despite what is this, as you said, powerful scientific consensus, an amazingly large fraction of Americans do not believe that global warming is caused by human activity?

RICKEN PATEL: I once looked at a graph of people who believed that global warming was a crisis and was man-made. It really climbs after the 1992 [Earth Summit](#). It really climbs up, and 60 to 70 percent of Americans feel that way. Then an industry consortium spends \$5 million on an ad campaign that questions the science and you see it drop.

JAMES TRAUB: But is that also because when the economy is good, people think we can afford to do the right thing, and when the economy is bad, people don't want to believe in a thing which, if it were true, would force them to do things that they don't want to do?

RICKEN PATEL: It's possible. I haven't seen evidence for that thesis. In the mid-1990s, the economy was booming and getting better, and you still saw that decisive drop in response to the ad campaign.

I think people's economic reality can determine how willing people are to put their money where their mouths are on it, but I've definitely seen the power of information operations by the fossil fuel industry. That's, I think, the crucial driver of why we're having trouble.

JAMES TRAUB: Thank you so much. This has really been extraordinary. I think someone who has the mastery both of the content of all this and also of the process of social change, and has the commitment to social change that you have, is something really rare and extraordinary. Thank you so much for spending time with us.

RICKEN PATEL: Thank you. Thank you for good questions.

Audio

A brilliant student, Ricken Patel could have had a stellar career in any field he wished. Instead he chose to live among the poor in some of the world's most dangerous places, and ultimately founded Avaaz, a successful activist organization with more than 30 million members. Learn more about Patel and Avaaz in this remarkable interview.

Video Clip

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