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Al Gore and the Internet

By Robert Kahn and Vinton Cerf

Al Gore was the first political leader to recognize the importance of the Internet and to promote and support its development.

No one person or even small group of persons exclusively "invented" the Internet. It is the result of many years of ongoing collaboration among people in government and the university community. But as the two people who designed the basic architecture and the core protocols that make the Internet work, we would like to acknowledge VP Gore's contributions as a Congressman, Senator and as Vice President. No other elected official, to our knowledge, has made a greater contribution over a longer period of time.

Last year the Vice President made a straightforward statement on his role. He said: "During my service in the United States Congress I took the initiative in creating the Internet." We don't think, as some people have argued, that Gore intended to claim he "invented" the Internet. Moreover, there is no question in our minds that while serving as Senator, Gore's initiatives had a significant and beneficial effect on the still-evolving Internet. The fact of the matter is that Gore was talking about and promoting the Internet long before most people were listening. We feel it is timely to offer our perspective.

As far back as the 1970s Congressman Gore promoted the idea of high speed telecommunications as an engine for both economic growth and the improvement of our educational system. He was the first elected official to grasp the potential of computer communications to have a broader impact than just improving the conduct of science and scholarship. Though easily forgotten, now, at the time this was an unproven and controversial concept. Our work on the Internet started in 1973 and was based on even earlier work that took place in the mid-late 1960s. But the Internet, as we know it today, was not deployed until 1983. When the Internet was still in the early stages of its deployment, Congressman Gore provided intellectual leadership by helping create the vision of the potential benefits of high speed computing and communication. As an example, he sponsored hearings on how advanced technologies might be put to use in areas like coordinating the response of government agencies to natural disasters and other crises.

As a Senator in the 1980s Gore urged government agencies to consolidate what at the time were several dozen different and unconnected networks into an "Interagency Network." Working in a bi-partisan manner with officials in Ronald Reagan and George Bush's administrations, Gore secured the passage of the High Performance Computing and Communications Act in 1991. This "Gore Act" supported the National Research and Education Network (NREN) initiative that became one of the major vehicles for the spread of the Internet beyond the field of computer

science.

As Vice President Gore promoted building the Internet both up and out, as well as releasing the Internet from the control of the government agencies that spawned it. He served as the major administration proponent for continued investment in advanced computing and networking and private sector initiatives such as Net Day. He was and is a strong proponent of extending access to the network to schools and libraries. Today, approximately 95% of our nation's schools are on the Internet. Gore provided much-needed political support for the speedy privatization of the Internet when the time arrived for it to become a commercially-driven operation.

There are many factors that have contributed to the Internet's rapid growth since the later 1980s, not the least of which has been political support for its privatization and continued support for research in advanced networking technology. No one in public life has been more intellectually engaged in helping to create the climate for a thriving Internet than the Vice President. Gore has been a clear champion of this effort, both in the councils of government and with the public at large.

The Vice President deserves credit for his early recognition of the value of high speed computing and communication and for his long-term and consistent articulation of the potential value of the Internet to American citizens and industry and, indeed, to the rest of the world.

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