



SPEECH BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE FRENCH REPUBLIC

Inauguration of the e-G8 Forum

Les Tuileries (Paris) – Tuesday, 24 May 2011

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Maurice Levy – Mr President, you're on! You said, why not every year before the G8, in any case, speaking for myself, I am prepared to take up the challenge and I hope my friends will do so too.

If it's OK with you, we will now have a brief question and answer session and, if I may, I will start with a question born out of everything we have seen on the Web these last three weeks. Bloggers, tweeters and facebookers have spoken and, basically, what they are saying is this: you wanted to have a discussion about the Internet at G8 level and they basically have two reactions to this. The first: "It's fantastic, brilliant." Here is a Head of State and here are the Heads of State of the leading industrialized countries getting interested in this sector that is part of their everyday lives and which is extremely important. You have a second reaction, which is: "Oh no! You're joking! They're not going to meddle in that, are they? The things they could end up doing if they get involved in that!" What is your reaction to these two reactions from Internet users?

PRESIDENT – You know, when Internet users start to get wary, when they're scared, they are like all people who are inevitably reluctant in the face of any initiative. One of the main problems with our democratic societies is the lack of trust. But if, as Head of State, I took initiatives only when people were happy, only when people were trusting, quite frankly, I might as well stay in bed all day. And that goes for any issue, but especially this new world that is the Internet. I felt we needed to break down this artificial wall of distrust. You can't have a virtual society on one side and a real society on the other. The same people, at different moments in their lives, express themselves on the Web and in real life. And I thought, 'We have things we need to discuss.'

At a time when your development is reaching maturity, what measures do you need to give you encouragement, what taxation, what minimum rules are you prepared to accept or refuse? The question that grabs me, the freedom of creation – you are creators – how do we pay for it? What do we do about the question of intellectual property? How do we solve the question of monopolies? Maurice Lévy, what if the Heads of State were to stay in their club talking amongst themselves with their experience of the Internet generally being their experience of the electoral campaign? There you have maximum risk.

If we get together, if we listen to you, if we try to understand as I have tried to do in France, to talk to this world about which I knew so little, from the outside anyway, suddenly I see business people just

like other business people. I see men and women who are creators, who are not outlaws, who create growth and who want to live in a world with values that are universal values. Why be wary? Where's the risk? Do you think that everyone will lose his or her identity just because they come to talk with Heads of State and Government? Far from it! All revolutions taking the first steps towards maturity need, just like someone digging a tunnel, to shore it up, to strengthen it, to firm it up to prepare for the second step. Image concerns aside, I felt there was no risk involved in taking this initiative. It was not all that easy to get the Heads of State and Government to free up time to talk about the Internet when we have Japan and the unprecedented nuclear crisis, when we have the Arab revolutions, when we have the financial crises, when we have world growth to support, when we have so many subjects to talk about. And yet I thought it was an acknowledgement for you, acknowledgement of your importance and your influence, and that you're never wrong when you appeal to the responsibility of your partners when, to tell you the truth, I wasn't very impressed with the misgivings, which actually drove me to confirm the holding of this e-G8.

Maurice LEVY – That is you all over. If there had been a loose consensus, you would have dropped it. Shall we maybe move on to the first question.

QUESTION – Mr President, the digital world is growing daily as a force that is reconfiguring the way modern economies work. What, in practical terms, do you think governments can do to assist this process for the digital economy to become a driver for growth? Thank you.

PRESIDENT – Well, it's not an easy question because, first of all, to tell you the truth, we tried to keep up. We tried to understand what was happening. The massive scale of the changes in relations with consumers and in relations with the public. There are two things that are fairly easy to do – well, fairly easy, classic in any case – investment in digital infrastructure. In France, we decided to put in 4.5 billion euros because, without this infrastructure, no matter how ingenious you are, there is no possible contact between millions of Internet users and you. The second thing is that we decided to considerably develop our training and education system, which brings me to say that, for the first time in our history, our universities are now independent. Infrastructure and training, we are investing our all in these two areas.

Yet there is much more to it than that, because the arrival of the digital age means we have to behave in new ways. I will only take one example here, and that is transparency. I have long thought that there are no longer any secrets when it comes to running a country, that everything is out in the open. But with the Internet, everything is out in the open immediately. And that changes an awful lot in the way we run our countries and our governments. What I mean by that is that we have had to massively speed up our response time, because any decision is immediately global, any controversy is immediately global, any economic move has repercussions worldwide. I am sure that a Head of State who was Head of State ten years ago and became Head of State today would not recognize the console used to run a State.

Lastly, and this is the entire point of our meetings, we are trying to make the most of the exponential growth potential that you represent. Basically, we are trying to avoid any measures that could stop this growth and trying to take our cue from the measures that have enabled this growth to occur. We're not quite there yet. And I think the same holds true for all my fellow Heads of State and Government. We are listening, we are all ears, and hesitating as to which decisions to make.

For example, in France, we decided to set up a National Digital Council. I promised the leading Web players in France that the Government would not take any decisions without

asking their opinion first. So we may disagree, but first they will give their opinion and, in return, they have promised to play the dialogue and responsibility game. So I can't give you a conclusive answer to your question. Maybe in a year's time I might be able to answer more clearly. Here, we are really in a realm of mutual discovery. We see these two worlds, we are trying to bring them together without losing your youth, without losing your exponential potential, without losing your vibrancy and, at the same time, getting the message across to you that you cannot exempt yourselves – how can I say? I know the word is not popular with you – from minimum values or minimum rules. So that is the meeting point and the point of balance we will try to find. It's really about keeping everything that makes you special in everything you bring and, at the same time, understanding that there is a basic minimum of values, of rules that should not prevent your development, but that we need to continue to move forward together towards much higher growth rates.

QUESTION – Mr President, you said yourself that everybody saw the importance of the Internet in the Arab revolutions, which started in Tunisia. Yet many bloggers felt they weren't getting as much support as they would have hoped from France. Today, dozens of bloggers are in prison in Syria, Bahrain, Libya and Yemen. What is France doing for them? What can France do in the future for these cyber-dissidents? And do you think that the defence of a free Internet could become part of the foreign policy arsenal for democratic countries?

PRESIDENT – Thank you for asking me that question. Just one point on which I disagree. I don't think it started with Tunisia. Don't forget the Iranian Internet users. It's not because it didn't work. To put it clearly, it's not because the revolution via the Internet in Iran unfortunately did not culminate in the departure of Mr. Ahmadinejad, but they're the ones who started. The Internet played a considerable role in Iran. And I hope, one day, that the Iranians will also have the right to live freely.

Secondly, the free Internet. Well, it's clear now that it's a criterion for knowing whether you are looking at a democracy or a dictatorship. From this point of view, it's an advanced sign of dictatorship or an advanced sign of democracy. Is the Internet free or isn't it? There's the line. And all those who seek to lock down their country's Internet fall in with the dictators.

You say we didn't do enough, and it is perfectly within your rights to think so. But I will be very open with you. The Jasmine Revolution, the Tunisian revolution ... we were surprised when it happened, I readily admit that. I wonder who in the world wasn't surprised. I'm not trying to use that as an excuse, but it was a learning curve and we have changed French policy in this area. Up to that point, let's be honest, left or right, our entire foreign policy was based on one word, "stability". And in the name of stability, we preferred two Germanys instead of one; in the name of stability, 80 million Europeans found themselves behind the Berlin Wall; and in the name of stability, we tolerated dictatorships. Things have changed because the people, the Arab peoples took charge of their own lives. And it had a lot to do, you see, with the decision I made to take action in Côte d'Ivoire so that the Ivoirians' democratic will could prevail; to take action in Libya, because if we had not intervened in Libya, Benghazi would have been massacred by a tyrant. The situation in Syria is unacceptable.

So now, the Internet has become a gauge of credibility for a democracy and a gauge of discredit for a dictatorship. This is just the start of a phenomenon, which can but grow and blossom and I think that dictators who seek to gag a people, now with the Internet, they will no longer be able to do that and hear nothing from the international community. Things have

changed much more than we imagine. And believe me, I am well aware of that and it had a lot to do with our decision to intervene in Libya, which was not a very easy decision.

QUESTION – Mr President, I would like to know your opinion on the significance of placing the Internet expressly on the G8's agenda. In what way is the G8 a suitable forum for discussing the future of the Internet? Thank you.

PRESIDENT – It's perfectly simple, because I don't believe that minimum rules should concern just one country. It would be an extraordinary contradiction to say that the Internet dispenses with borders, that the Internet dispenses with territories, that the Internet expands space, and to carry on as if legislation, rules and values were merely national. And I thought, basically, the Internet is very powerful in the most powerful economies. What is the G8? It is a group, aside from China, of the leading economies in the world. Could we not try to harmonize our proposals between the Internet and ourselves on an international level rather than simply on a national level? What's the point of national regulations or a national discussion on an Internet that has no borders? It doesn't make any sense. And I hope to start with the G8, one day go to the G20 and eventually end up at the United Nations General Assembly, because it is a global phenomenon. So, global values, basic global rules, otherwise it makes no sense. That's why I wanted to take it to the G8.

I felt that for us, Heads of State and Government, it would do us good to look at your world. It could give some who need it a younger outlook, it spices things up a bit, it makes a change. You see, I believe that the Heads of State and Government should talk in the future tense, not just in the past tense. We are bearers of our countries' history, our countries are not blank pages and, whether we like it or not, we are part of a historical process. Yet we often talk about the past, we often talk about the present and not enough about the future, and you are the future. I wanted there to be this meeting between the future and the Heads of State of the present. There were those who told me, "They'll think you want to control them." Do you think that I think I could? That makes no sense and, at the same time, I think that it's important for you to be heard, to be listened to, because many of those I have met are concerned that we might clumsily or because of our lack of understanding make decisions that complicate, if not risk killing off the work of your businesses. So there was this global aspect and then this desire to discuss, support each other, see if we could find a common language. I believe it has been really useful, and the fact that there are so many of you here bears witness to that. But what my colleagues were concerned about, they all said to me, "But what is going to happen exactly? What are you going to do? What are we going to say?" I said, "We'll see." You can't play everything out in advance. You need to give it some space to breathe too.

QUESTION – I was glad to hear you acknowledge that the government does not own the Internet, yet we see governments trying to claim sovereignty there. A United States official calls the Internet an 8th continent, a new land, and what makes it free and open is its very structure of being distributed and open. So as you go to the G8, I have one small request. I think this discussion is wonderful. I think this discussion about principles on the Internet and shared understanding and potential is very much what we need. But I would ask the governments to take a Hippocratic Oath for the Internet that is first: do no harm!

PRESIDENT – Honestly, it is not very difficult to respond to that question. Not to harm you, why do you think we would want to harm you? You are a potential for growth, extraordinary knowledge. I like your idea of an 8th continent, but what do you mean by harm? I will truly watch out for that.

But to talk about security from terrorism, is that harming you? Do you say that “you are the creators, what you have created should be respected, but also respect fellow creators”, is that harming you? To say “you wanted this 8th continent to be the continent of freedom and openness, but be careful not to create new monopolies”, is that harming you? To say “there are sacred universal values, such as the protection of children from the moral turpitudes of certain adults”, to speak of that, is that harming you? I don’t think so.

I think harming you would be not to acknowledge that you are responsible, competent, intelligent people, citizens, citizens of the world, but citizens and leaders. Harming you would be to refuse to even talk about the problem out of fear that you wouldn’t understand. I think that you, who have understood the future so well, you are capable of understanding that. So if you want me to take an oath not to harm you, that’s not a problem. I can even tell you that you’re nice, that I prefer sunshine to rain, that I like companies that make money better than those that lose it, that here is a nice place to live. Ask me to make stronger commitments.

What I can tell you is this, and I’m convinced that for my fellow G8 Leaders, it’s the same. We are perfectly aware of the power that the Internet represents, and at the same time of the fragility of this ecosystem. And that we should not take measures that complicate the development of this system, that I do understand. And I think that we could do that with the best intentions. Therefore, we need to be careful. I think that in this market that you’ve created which has not yet stabilized, we really need to be careful before taking decisions. I think that the idea of definitive rules cannot apply to your sector. That we need to move forward with a great deal of pragmatism, experience, that we should opt for not acting rather than doing something wrong in a sector that is growing and therefore not stable. That is the oath that I’m ready to take and you as well, in coming here today, which I’d say is a good sign, because if you thought this wasn’t a good idea, you wouldn’t have come. I really think that it’s extremely important for us to continue to engage in dialogue and to respect one other. And what we, the G8 Leaders, want is not to make mistakes in this world, your world, which is under construction and extremely sensitive, extremely fragile and extremely powerful at the same time, so as not to disrupt and destabilize it.

QUESTION – How do you think the Internet can change the work of the government and administrations?

PRESIDENT – You know that today, as a Head of State, my staff spends more time looking to see what’s being said on the Web, than what’s being said in the press. This is a considerable change. In the past, when I was minister for the first time, we waited, we say in France for a major evening newspaper to come out to see what was being said. Now, the evening newspaper, it’s yours and it is out there every moment of the day. It’s there at 3 in the morning, it’s there 24 hours a day, there are no more Sundays, there are no more weekends. There isn’t even a labour day in France anymore, a day where there is no press, but there is still the Internet. This has completely changed everything - and it’s a positive evolution -, causing every country to do less navel-gazing, to display less national narcissism, because information is shared globally. For us, this change has been absolutely tremendous, but it has not yet reached its end. This means we are trying to understand, we are trying to adapt, we are trying to keep up as much as possible. I think that given these circumstances, we should have a considerable amount of humility and that there are many more changes to come.

QUESTION – Like every year, this year you’re going to meet with a group of African Heads of State at the G8 Summit. Since the year 2000, you’ve done this. Mr President, can we count on you to explain to them that the Internet is a growth driver as well as a wonderful tool to ensure that democratic governance develops and takes root and that as a result, it is not a sector full of enemies. We can see, in many countries, that there isn’t investment in the infrastructure that is able to develop these sectors and very often, to use the words of the man who said “do no harm”, they block development of this sector. Mr President, can we count on you to get this message across?

PRESIDENT – The African continent will be home to two billion people in 30 or 40 years. Of the 2 billion people, over 70% will be under 20. Africa represents the world’s youth. Who would be so crazy as to think that young Africans will not be the first ones to want to develop the Internet? You can count on us, I will tell them, they know that anyway. I’d also like to tell you something, in Africa, like anywhere else, the old way of doing things is passé. Nobody can control or stop the Internet, except for North Korea for some time to come, with its nonsensical idea to transport its country back to the Middle Ages. But Africa is 12 kilometres from Europe via the Strait of Gibraltar. The Internet is going to spread like wildfire and with the Internet, aspirations for growth, aspirations for knowledge and aspirations for democracy. Those trying to stop this will be swept aside, I am totally convinced of this. I’d like to add that for the development of Africa and especially for all its children who need education, the medium for disseminating knowledge for African teachers that the Internet represents is absolutely colossal. Do not doubt for a minute the power of the revolution under way.

Finally ladies and gentlemen, before leaving you, I would like to tell you how much I appreciate the fact that you agreed to attend this meeting. It wasn’t easy for us to open ourselves up, but I imagine that it wasn’t easy for you to accept his invitation and participate. We’ll try to make sure that nobody is disappointed.