

An informal interview with  
**Anil Dash, director of Expert Labs,**  
an independent project administered by  
the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS),  
and funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

—November 2009—

**GP:** This is Ginger Pinholster. I work in the Public Programs Office at AAAS, the science society, and I'm speaking today with Anil Dash. He's a pioneer in the realm of social media. He's an entrepreneur and technologist, well-known for his influential blog, Dashes.com. He's also the founder of Six Apart, and most recently, he's become the director of Expert Labs, which is an independent effort to help policy-makers tap into a broad range of expertise. So Anil, why don't we start there? Can you tell me a little bit about the new venture?

**AD:** Absolutely. I'm very excited about Expert Labs. It's a new project that's being supported by AAAS and run under its auspices and is funded by [the] MacArthur Foundation. What's been really exciting is that Expert Labs has this mission of helping people in the policy world, in the government world, to connect to the experts that are out there, whether that's in the rest of the government, in the public sector, the private sector and especially the community of researchers and scientists that so many of us at AAAS have deep connections to.

I think a lot of us have thought for a long time that this country has such potential to just tap into the experts that are out there among us. If we could take advantage of that, there's huge potential. So what we're doing at Expert Labs is making a new set of Web technologies to help the government do just that.

**GP:** So as I understand it, you're going to leverage open-source technologies to try and provide a tool that policy-makers can use to solicit expertise on different topics?

**AD:** Exactly. I think a lot of us look around, and if you use a social network like Facebook or Twitter or even just e-mail, it's very easy to talk to your contacts and say, you know, 'We've been thinking about buying a pair of headphones, or a new grill for the yard, and which one should we get?' You know you've got that one friend that does great barbeques every year and they're the expert on this topic.

Well, if we take that model, there's no reason we can't apply it to much more complex problems when people who are subject-matter experts are out there. So when there are different policy initiatives and different questions to be answered, we can provide tools that will work as easily as e-mail or Facebook or other social networks do, but be available across the government and also across the research community.

**GP:** For the technorati who may be logging onto this little video, are there some examples of the types of technologies that you're talking about – some models that you might be looking at as you go through this project?

**AD:** Definitely. There are companies and independent organizations that have done this model for technology development that we're learning a lot from. One example that I love to point out is Obvious. The Obvious corporation years ago was started as kind of an incubator. They were going to try a bunch of different technologies, see what kind of stuck to the wall for helping people to collaborate. Of the experiments they did, one of them became what is now called Twitter. So they were able to spin that out and make that a huge success, something that's become part of popular culture and the media. Granted, that's a traditional entrepreneurial startup model, but we think there's a lot to learn there.

A little closer to home here on the east coast in Boston, there's a group called YCombinator and they are an angel-funding firm in the venture capital community. But they've been able to provide a lot of resources for entrepreneurs who have an idea and really need not just funding but organizational support, learning how to advocate for their technology and get it adopted.

And while both of those have been very, very successful in the business world, we think this model is going to apply even though we're a non-profit, non-partisan organization [at AAAS] because we're going to take those learnings and put them into a context where what we're delivering is an ability to improve our society, improve our government, and that is just as much of a motivator for creative minds as any of the traditional venture capital models and startup models have been as well.

**GP:** I was reading some of the materials that you sent to me and you used the term cloud computing and also cloud expertise. Can you explain what you mean by those terms and also how they apply to policy-making?

**AD:** Sure thing. So cloud computing is a really, really big trend in the technology industry right now, and there's a lot of different ways to define it, but I think the simplest way to put it is, assuming that the use of a computer's computational ability will be available and accessible through the Internet and that it will have this cloud – this giant collection of computers or Web servers available for our use. A lot of commercial companies have made this kind of technology available. Amazon and Google and Microsoft all have different cloud computing offerings. And this has been a very, very big push for the federal government as well with services like Apps.gov being a Web site that really encourages the adoption of cloud-computing technologies across the government. The advantages you get [are] efficiency, scaling resources, basically solving a problem once for a large class of people instead of having to solve the same problems over and over and over for the same set of tools.

Now, you know, Dr. Alan Leshner here at AAAS has been a great leader in creating the idea of 'cloud expertise,' which is directly parallel to cloud computing. And what cloud expertise is supposing – and I think the idea has also been called, you know, the wisdom

of crowds – is that all of us together are smarter than any one of us alone and we can tap into the knowledge of the communities we’re members of, or even communities we don’t know the members of, if we broadly pose questions and expose them to all the possible people who either know the answers or know where to find the answers a lot more quickly. So that idea of cloud expertise is a fundamental premise for, you know, even why we’re called Expert Labs – it’s the idea that experts are out there. If we can just get them connected, we can solve problems a lot more efficiently, a lot more intelligently and a lot more quickly.

**GP:** Very cool. So how soon can we look forward to some of these tools and how will folks be able to track your progress?

**AD:** Well, we’re hoping to be up and running with some experiments the rest of this year, 2009. But I would expect spring of next year is when we’re going to start to see tools more broadly available. We’re going to try and get the word out everywhere we can about the tools. Obviously, you know, first and foremost, we hope you’ll come to ExpertLabs.org and check out what we have running there. You can subscribe by e-mail or for a Web feed to your news home page or whatever else you want to do there. But you can follow us on Twitter. You can add us a friend on Facebook. Whatever way you want to connect to us, we want to deliver that information to you.

We’re going to be very, very aggressive about getting the word out that technologies that make our lives richer and make it more fun to connect to our friends like social networking also have these really practical uses in problem-solving in very important areas of society, and that they can still be as easy to use as those tools that we use on the weekend for sharing pictures from, you know, a family gathering.

**GP:** Just before I let you go Anil, yesterday you were telling me a little bit about how you got started in your field, and sort of, where you get your inspiration. Do you mind sharing that with viewers?

**AD:** Sure, absolutely. My background is that I’ve been a technologist since I was a kid. I was definitely one of those kids you’d see in junior high school, tucked behind a keyboard, hacking away, and making some good mistakes and learning from them.

But you know, years later, about 1999 or so, I became a blogger. At that time, the term ‘blogging’ hadn’t really been coined yet, but there was a very small community of us who were interested in not just sharing our ideas online – although that was an important part of it, that culture of publishing and sharing – but also that we realized the Web was going to become more social, and a way to collaborate in some really interesting new ways. From that early community of the first bloggers came some amazing innovations. If you have ever read a blog, or posted on one, or left a comment on a Web site, put a photo up on Flickr, or sent an update through Twitter, it’s actually a very small community of people that a lot of those original ideas came from.

I've been very privileged to be around a lot of them while they came up with these new ideas and it's been a huge influence for me. It made me realize that technology at its best can really help serve the cause of connecting people together, helping them communicate better, helping them solve their problems.

One of the things that came out of that was, I guess, I joined Six Apart as its first employee, and it was a company that we created to make blogging tools, but also to help people community online more generally. It's become a very successful company and it was a great learning experience about, not just being an entrepreneur, but realizing that technology change is also cultural change and societal change, and there is a very strong moral component, a very strong social obligation to these tools.

So what's really exciting to me is to take all the lessons I've learned in spending pretty much my entire adult life online, and to bring them to bear for Expert Labs, and especially to bring it back to that community of innovators and say to them, 'The greatest place you can put your efforts in helping people connect through the Web is by focusing them on these open technologies that are going to make our government better, make our society better, advance scientific research, and I think frankly, make people feel more connected to those social institutions that are supposed to be serving them.'

Those are all really exciting goals.

**GP:** That is exciting. Thank you, and thanks for your patience with me as I figured out this technology!

**AD:** No problem at all.

**GP:** Bye-bye.

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