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ICANN69 | Virtual Annual General - ICANN After 20 Years of Involvement: A Conversation with Departing Board Member Chris Disspain  
Monday, October 19, 2020 – 17:00 to 17:30 CEST

**BRAD WHITE:** Welcome. I'm Brad White, ICANN's Director of Communications for North America. This session is going to commemorate Chris Disspain's nine years on the ICANN Board of Directors. Chris's board term expires on Thursday, but we're not just commemorating Chris's tile on the Board. We're also acknowledging his 20 years of involvement with ICANN, which is quite a long time.

He's well-known not just to the ICANN community but to many others across the Internet ecosystem.

In a few minutes we're going to do a live interview with Chris where we will explore some of his many contributions to ICANN. But first I want to introduce ICANN board member Maarten Botterman, whom you just heard in the opening welcome ceremony, who will say a few words.

Maarten.

**MAARTEN BOTTERMAN:** Thank you, Brad. Thank you, Chris.

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*Note: The following is the output resulting from transcribing an audio file into a word/text document. Although the transcription is largely accurate, in some cases may be incomplete or inaccurate due to inaudible passages and grammatical corrections. It is posted as an aid to the original audio file, but should not be treated as an authoritative record.*

So in saying goodbye to Chris, we say goodbye to the last sitting board member that was with us in that role all the way through the first round of new TLDs and the transition, to someone that has played an active role in the early days of ICANN and has worked from the outset with passion and conviction to help make this all work.

Almost everyone knows about Chris Disspain's role in bringing country top-level domains into the ICANN world before he came to the Board, yet few understand what he went through to do that, or nor do many understand the legitimacy that the country code brought to ICANN at that point. Chris gave a video interview about that struggle for ICANN's History Project, and if you haven't seen it, I suggest you check it out. It will open your eyes to a critical period in ICANN's history.

During his Board tenure, Chris has chaired and participated in dozens of Board committees, working groups, and caucuses over the course of nine years. He has also served as vice-chair of the Board from 2017 to 2019, and during his tenure, amongst others, he has done jobs such as being liaison from the Board to the IANA transition and more recently to the EPDP.

This session is about him, so I will keep it short. If one thing is clear, it is that Chris cares about ICANN, and I've appreciated the constructive contributions, learning from his experience. He

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stood always ready to help and provide his suggestions and input to making things better or work better.

So, Chris, your contributions have been remarkable and will not be easily forgotten. You make a difference. So on behalf of the ICANN Board of Directors, thank you for all the good things you have done for the global Internet community. No doubt we will meet again also after this week.

So music is your first love. And, you know, you can check -- "you can check out anytime you want but you can never leave." So, please.

BRAD WHITE:

Thank you very much, Maarten.

As Maarten mentioned, the list of Chris's contributions to the Board and to ICANN as a whole are extensive. His dedicated work has helped shape ICANN's standing both inside and outside the Internet ecosystem.

With that, I want to turn it over to Göran Marby, President and CEO of ICANN, who would like to say a few words.

Göran.

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GÖRAN MARBY:

Thank you. Chris was actually one of the first members I met from the ICANN Board when I, back in 2015, started to engage with the Board about the potential (indiscernible) as President and CEO. And he basically told me that I have to be a little bit of a lunatic to accept this job. And I think that the interactions I had with him over the years has proven that that was right.

But I really want to thank Chris for all of his support, all his patience, all his knowledge that he shared with me over the years.

When he was the vice-chair of the ICANN Board, he was, by Cherine's measure, responsible for my happiness, and it was a very happy year.

Chris, to quote, "You think you can leave but we will drag you back in in some shape or form." I understand there is a bidding contest for you in different parts of the ICANN community, and I'm holding the bets for that.

Thank you, my friend. It's a real pleasure.

BRAD WHITE:

Thanks, Göran.

Before we begin our interview with Chris Disspain, in the name of full transparency I need to confess that Chris and I are good

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friends. We first met soon after ICANN hired me more than a decade ago.

I want to tell you a story about Chris from those very early days because I think it punctuates the type of man that he is.

In 2009, I had been hired to work in the newly opened Washington, D.C. office of ICANN by the man who established and ran that office, an Australian named Paul Levins. Some of you long-time ICANN-ers may recall him.

Soon after I started, the ICANN Board hired a new CEO, and Levins stepped aside so the new CEO could hire his own selected leadership team, which, as most know, is not an unusual practice.

So in 2009 when ICANN36 rolled around in Seoul, South Korea, Levins had already announced his impending departure but had not yet left the organization. This meeting, ICANN36, would be his last meeting.

What surprised me as a newcomer to ICANN way back then was that nobody, none of the execs, not the new CEO, no members of the Board, no one publicly acknowledged his departure let alone his contributions to the organization. Some were afraid if they did so, it would not sit well with the new CEO, so fearful silence ruled the day.

But Chris Disspain would have none of it. During the Public Forum, Disspain took to the microphone to detail Levins' contributions to the organization, including his successful negotiations with the U.S. government that led to the Affirmation of Commitments, the precursor to the IANA stewardship transition.

Chris said it would not speak well for ICANN as an organization to allow Levins to leave without acknowledging his service. He was the only person to do so. And the response when Chris finished speaking was a standing ovation.

After the session, I caught up with Chris in the hallway, and I introduced myself, thanked him for his kind words about my boss. What followed was an 11-year friendship.

I tell this story because it says a lot about how much Chris cares not only about the myriad of issues that ICANN faces but most of all about the people who make ICANN what it is.

In those early days, Disspain would always make his way to the staff work room during meetings to chat up fatigued and

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exasperated staffers. He didn't really talk about how much he cared about us. He showed it through his actions.

Chris is by no means perfect, though he'd probably dispute that point, but he does recognize the importance of human respect.

So, Chris, I don't know, I don't know if I have any more good things to say about you. Should we just stop now or do you want to continue on with the interview?

CHRIS DISSPAIN:

You've demonstrated that I'm not perfect, Brad. How could I have a friend like you if I was perfect?

[ Laughter ]

BRAD WHITE:

Okay. Then I guess we'll go on. I guess we'll go on with the interview.

As Maarten mentioned, you're perhaps best known in the community for helping to bring the CC community into the ICANN world. Talk to us about what was involved in that effort on your part.

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CHRIS DISSPAIN:

Well, first thing to say is it wasn't just me. It was a lot of people. Bart Boswinkel from the Netherlands, Bernie Turcotte from Canada, Peter Dengate Thrush from New Zealand. It wasn't just me. But what was involved is persuading the ccTLD community at the time, which was very cynical, that it would be a really good idea to have ICANN -- to have the ccTLDs, rather, have a supporting organization under the ICANN structure. And that was a complicated and difficult thing to do given that most of the of the CCs attended ICANN to ensure that nothing happened.

So, yeah, I mean it -- I -- it wasn't me on my own by any stretch of the imagination, but it was a -- it was a challenging time, especially as we were also in the midst of ICANN 2.0 and it was a part of the restructuring of ICANN, ICANN 2.0, that led to the ability to the CCs to have the supporting organization. And of course now we're in ICANN 3.0. So things have moved on yet again.

BRAD WHITE:

I think you're being -- I've talked with enough people in the CC community, I appreciate what you're saying, but I think you're being overly humble. I know you were a major force in making that happen.



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You said that one of your standout memories was being the Board's representative to liaise for over a week with ICANN Legal and independent attorneys on codifying the recommendations of the Community Working Group and the Cross-Community Working Group into the new bylaws. Why was that such a source of pride for you, Chris?

CHRIS DISSPAIN:

Well, I haven't -- I haven't practiced law for a very long time, but you can't take the legal blood out of a qualified lawyer's veins, and so I think it was partly the challenge to flex, after quite a long period of time, my legal muscles. But also I think the trust -- I mean, I think one has to respect the trust that the community and the Board places in one. And Becky Burr was representing the community and I was representing the Board, and then there was the ICANN Legal team and external ICANN legal, Jones Day, and then the community legal people all in a room together bashing these bylaws out.

And I just think for me it was a privilege to be asked to do that, especially given how important a foundation that the bylaws are for ICANN.

I don't doubt for a moment that those who know the bylaws backwards and understand the challenges that exist in respect

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to some of the timings in place when the empowered community is supposed to act, they will rue the day that they let us loose on of them. But they are what they are, and I just think it was a privilege to be asked to help with that.

**BRAD WHITE:** Chris, do you have any regrets after nine years on the board, 20 years of involvement with the organization?

**CHRIS DISSPAIN:** It would take me longer than we have to answer that question, other than to say, as I know you know -- and you will tell me it's a cliché -- this is all about people, and the people are the most important thing. And so my regrets revolve around the times that I haven't necessarily respected other people's views as well as I might and perhaps have been shorter -- shortened and bad-tempered. I'm not alone in that, let me say. But those are the sorts of things that I regret.

I don't regret any of the work that we've done. I don't regret any of the efforts that we all made. And, in fact, I learned a very long time ago that as individuals, we're often very bad at recognizing when we do things really well, very good at recognizing when we do things badly. And one of the things I'd like to encourage us all

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to do is to remember just how amazing we are to get done what we get done.

So that's not about regret, but certainly measures to take with me.

BRAD WHITE: So I'm allowed to think that I'm amazing?

CHRIS DISSPAIN: Well, there's an exception to every rule.

[ Laughter ]

BRAD WHITE: I referenced earlier the 2009 meeting in Seoul. That was the meeting where the board gave its thumbs up to the fast track for internationalized domain names or IDNs.

You were heavily involved in that effort. Tell us about it.

CHRIS DISSPAIN: It was -- so I've told this story before, and I apologize to those of you who have heard me tell it.

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We were at an APTLD meeting in Abu Dhabi. And it was 2007. And it just became abundantly clear to Theresa Swinehart, Janis Karklins, and me in that room that there was this extraordinary level of passion amongst those in that room who were Arabic speakers at least, and possibly others --

I'm getting messages, Brad, that people can't see my disco ball. So I'm going to change -- there we go. There's the disco ball, for those who want to see the disco ball.

BRAD WHITE: I'm pleased.

CHRIS DISSPAIN: My apologies. My apologies, for those who want to see it.

Janis, Theresa, and I had a tremendous amount of passion for the need for internationalized domain names.

And the technical stuff was all happening away in the technical community, where it's supposed to be. But nothing was happening with respect to the policy side of it. And so we decided that -- the three of us decided at the time on the back of an envelope that we could probably figure out a way that the ccTLDs at least, as opposed to the gTLDs, could put together something that would allow for internationalized domain names

to exist in ccTLDs and that we could do that more quickly than normal policy development process.

So we started the fast track. And that was, in fact, if not the first, certainly one of the first proper cross-community working groups, because we got the GAC to send people to come and be in it, and the GNSO had people in it, and the At-large had people in it, and SSAC had people in it. And so it was truly a cross-community working group, although it was the ccTLD or ccNSO Fast Track.

Yes, it was incredibly important to many people. There was a lot of passion. And the joy -- and I mean that. It's not a word I use lightly -- the joy that was expressed by people once we got it done was extraordinary. And it's reflected by the fact that in that room in Seoul when the board agreed, yeah, people stood and cheered and cried. And it was amazing.

BRAD WHITE:

I remember that meeting. I was at that meeting. And I have never seen a room come alive at any ICANN meeting as much as that room came alive at that time.

I'm curious, once the fast track was proposed, once it was on the table, was there much push-back?

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CHRIS DISSPAIN: No, there wasn't push-back. There was concern that the -- there was concern in some of the gTLD world that there was a competitive advantage for the Cs to go first.

There was concern about the -- in the technical community that we might push the button too soon and the issues of confusing similarity wouldn't be dealt with, et cetera. And I respect those concerns. And I think that -- I think we sort of reached a happy medium. I know that some don't agree. But I think we reached a happy medium and satisfied the need whilst at the same time keeping the technical disruption to a minimum.

BRAD WHITE: Chris, there were, of course, some lighter moments during your tenure with ICANN. And I recently learned of one that you told me about when you lost a new cell phone during an ICANN meeting in Cape Town, South Africa back in 2004, so 16 years ago.

Tell us that story.

CHRIS DISSPAIN: Okay. It is one of my -- it is one of my defining memories.

It was Cape Town. It was -- the hotel was next to a canal. And I can't remember if I was getting out of a water taxi or getting into

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a water taxi, but my brand-new, sparkly Motorola RAZR -- and those of a certain age will remember just how extraordinarily fashionable the Motorola RAZR was in those days, and apologies to the Nokia users -- leapt spontaneous out of my hand, bounced on the concrete, and ended up in the canal.

And the -- the taxi -- the taxi boat driver very graciously immediately ripped his shirt off and dived into the canal in a desperate attempt to find my phone. And I rather stupidly found myself following him, although I didn't dive in. I gently lowered myself in.

And it was only after I'd been in the canal for about ten minutes that I realized that I was standing waist deep in water in a canal in South Africa, and that there probably -- that probably was not the most sensible thing for me to be doing before the staff and ICANN meeting.

So I got out and bought myself a new phone.

BRAD WHITE: You must have really loved that Motorola RAZR phone.

CHRIS DISSPAIN: I did. I loved that Motorola RAZR phone very much. And -- I did, indeed.

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Is that from ICANN?

>> I have been instructed to give this to you.

CHRIS DISSPAIN: I've got a gift.

BRAD WHITE: Open that up on camera so we can see what you got there.

CHRIS DISSPAIN: Well, apparently, Brad, you've asked for me to be given it. So I worry about what's in this box.

BRAD WHITE: It's a chance. But let's go for it. Let's live life on the edge.

CHRIS DISSPAIN: Okay. Let's do that. I've got glitter and everything. It's wonderful.

Oh, it's bubble wrap.



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BRAD WHITE:                    You need bubble wrap, buddy.

CHRIS DISSPAIN:            (Laughing) oh, my God! I don't believe it. Oh, that is amazing.

BRAD WHITE:                    Can you please hold that up.

CHRIS DISSPAIN:            Oh, that is extraordinary.

Look at that. That is a Motorola RAZR. Oh, my God.

BRAD WHITE:                    It's used. It's 16 years old, of course it's used.

CHRIS DISSPAIN:            It's very, very impressive. Thank you, I am overwhelmed with excitement.

BRAD WHITE:                    I want you to know that we employed the help of the South African water recovery team to get that puppy to you.

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But I'm suggesting that waterproof plastic bag from this point forward just to be on the safe side.

CHRIS DISSPAIN: It's -- it comes in a plastic bag here. So I'm going to test it. I'll test it by dropping it in the bath tonight. How about that?

BRAD WHITE: That's very good. That's very good.

CHRIS DISSPAIN: Thank you so much. That's just wonderful. I shall treasure it.

BRAD WHITE: You're very welcome, my friend. The South African authorities have asked me to convey to you that they prefer you not to bring it into the country when you come to South African.

CHRIS DISSPAIN: Fair enough, I promise I shan't.

BRAD WHITE: What we're dealing with, light subject matter, what were some of your more vivid memories? I know that you have a great

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many friends that you only see or often only see at ICANN meetings. What are some of your most vivid memories that are on the lighter side like that?

CHRIS DISSPAIN:

In the old days, of course, it was a bit easier to catch up with people at ICANN meetings, because there were fewer people. And I used to have a standing -- when Diane Schroeder was the -- I think at the time the CFO, and then various other roles at ICANN, we used to have -- I used to have a standing agreement that we would have one night at an ICANN meeting, which was called "get Diane out of the office" night. And we put together a table of 12 or 15 people and had dinner, just so she could actually leave the venue and have a meal out.

And some of those nights are very precious memories, dinner on the rooftop of -- that we had in Marrakech. Of course, in the more latter years, Brad, you will recall the occasional boys' nights out that were had at various wine-drinking establishments. Although, you never kept your end up very much, because you don't really drink wine. You're more of a martini drinker.

But you've hit on perhaps the most important point, which is the point about people and friendship. And as I said earlier, yes, it's

a cliché, but it is important. And people matter. And it's a joy to be able to know people and to be able to see -- I mean, even if it's only remotely, to see them from all over the world. There's something very special about that. And it teaches you things.

I speak a lot more slowly than I used to because I learned very early on in this world that not everybody can keep up with the speed at which English-speaking people talk. It's about -- the international -- the people you meet internationally, the people you meet from all over the world that have this one thread in common, which is -- amongst many, they may have many in common, but the one thing they definitely have in common is this ICANN thread. It's a very, very special thing and something which I think we all should treasure, I think.

BRAD WHITE:

That's interesting.

Chris, when we were prepping for this session -- and this is where I'm going to put my director Ted on the spot and see how quick he can be -- when we were prepping for this session, we ran across some pictures I'd like to ask you about.

In this shot, which is clearly a failed attempt to make you look angelic, it looks like you said something which actually distressed an angel.

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CHRIS DISSPAIN: No, I think the angel looked like that beforehand. I'm not entirely sure.

I can't remember. I think -- well, I know that was taken by one of the participants and became a meme at some point, whatever. I'm not entirely sure I know what "meme" means. But anyway.

There are a number of photographs that can be found, if one searches the Internet very carefully, of a number of ICANN board members, including me, in interesting positions because of the backdrops that tend to sit behind you.

There's one somewhere around of me with smoke coming out of my head. Or at least it appears to have.

So, no. But, yes, I'm quite fond of that with the angel.

BRAD WHITE: I've actually seen smoke coming out of your head in real time.

CHRIS DISSPAIN: Real time, yes, indeed.

BRAD WHITE: Let me ask you about this next shot, where you're clearly weighing the (indiscernible) of how to deal with GDPR.

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Is this part of your normal condemn plaintive process? Because you're clearly deep in thought.

CHRIS DISSPAIN: It's important that you understand that the decisions that the board makes don't just get made on the fly. We all make -- we make these decisions after very, very careful consideration. And each individual board member has their own way of contemplating the things and the decisions that they make. And mine is to lie on chairs in public and have my photograph taken.

BRAD WHITE: Chris, we're -- we're about running out of time. We've got to close out this session.

Any final words you want to add?

CHRIS DISSPAIN: No, other than to say I am still on the board until Thursday. So that's good.

That I respect and -- everyone in this community. I've enjoyed enormously working with everybody.

I have no idea what happens next. I don't know whether I'll come back in some other guise or not. I have no clue. But I do

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know that after 20 years, it's been a great journey and a great ride. I've enjoyed myself enormously, and I very much hope that one way or another, we'll bump into each other again.

BRAD WHITE: Thanks, Chris.

I should add that --

CHRIS DISSPAIN: Thank you.

BRAD WHITE: -- Chris has written a blog about some of his most memorable ICANN experiences over the past 20 years. That's going to be posted on Thursday on both [icann.org](http://icann.org) and [CircleID](http://CircleID). And I'd like to encourage you to check it out. We touched on some of those remembrances in this session, but it's still worth checking out.

Chris, your contributions to ICANN have made it so much more than it would have been without you. Thank you for that.

CHRIS DISSPAIN: I have -- I do have a request before we go, which is that I would really appreciate -- I don't know if the techies can hear me. But if

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there's a way of capturing the chat, which I have seen going on in the background, but I haven't been able to read because I've been too busy talking to Brad, and I know will disappear the moment this meeting closes, if there's a way of capturing that chat so that I can read the messages, I would appreciate that enormously.

Thank you.

BRAD WHITE: We'll see if we can make that happen, Chris.

You're --

CHRIS DISSPAIN: If you can't, Brad, no one can.

BRAD WHITE: There you go. That's not true, but let's go with it.

Your contributions to ICANN have made it so much more than it would have been without you. Thank you for that.

And most of all --



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CHRIS DISSPAIN: Thank you, mate.

BRAD WHITE: -- thank you for your friendship.

CHRIS DISSPAIN: Thank you, mate. Appreciate it.

BRAD WHITE: All right, my friend. Take good care.

With that, we'll close out this session.

Thank you, everyone.

**[ END OF TRANSCRIPT ]**