

Internet Governance — Challenges and Lacunae

During IGF 2008, with the participants from hundreds of countries, there was no dearth of opinions, wishlists and suggestions.

NIDHI SHARMA

"There are various concerns as far as the code of good practice for reform of Internet Governance and its successful implementation is concerned. Governance in 21st century has to become more participative. Resources and access to them is a major challenge because most people do not have do no have access to them. There has to be a systematic issue of access to Internet. And the best measures to solve these are regulation and information. The problems are not only related to cost."

With these words, Mr Hans Armfelt Hansell from the UN Economic Commission in Geneva put forward the biggest challenge in the face of good Internet Governance during the Internet Governance Forum at Hyderabad.

The necessity of a public-private and south-south partnerships

He further explained that public private partnership can play an essential role here and responsibilities have to be clearly defined, especially concerning developing countries to create a win-win situation for all. His thoughts

were shared by Sylvia Cadena, of the Information Society Innovation Fund from Australia, who called for a strong collaboration between both sectors and between the developing and developed nations in order to achieve the dream of good Internet governance.

Taking the situation of a developing country like India, which has the additional responsibility of such regional diversity and huge economic and digital divide, making content available to everybody to bridge this divide and make Internet Governance a success is a challenge.

An expert trainer coming from a developed country many times doesn't understand the issues been faced by developing regions in terms of access to content, multilingualism, infrastructure and so on. Exchange of knowledge between regions facing the same challenges is then paramount to overcome the digital divide in a sustainable and efficient way.

A myriad of challenges to bring Internet to the next billion

"As we move towards having the next billion connected,

and the billions after that, one thing that is certain is that these users will come from non-English speaking economies. As such there will be some critical challenges to overcome e.g. the ability to navigate content in a language they understand (in other words the need to have internationalized domain names). Then there is the issue of the content itself, and whether it is available in a language they understand (in other words, being able to achieve a truly multilingual Internet). These issues include the question of computer literacy levels, and whether these users will have the basic education to be able to read and write content. It is also important to ensure that the content that is available can be accessible by all, including by persons with special needs and disabilities." These were some of the views expressed by Rajnesh Singh, Regional Bureau Director, ISOC, as far as content availability is concerned.

The need to have digital content accessible by all, and this includes people whose primary languages are other than those commonly used on the Internet today, people with special needs access, and people with low literacy rates is paramount. The real value of knowledge (by way of digital content in this instance) is realized when we share and learn from each other's experiences, and contribute back to the pool of knowledge.

The journey to reaching the developed stage of enabling Internet Governance and

"The least developed countries are suffering from serious digital divide. Its not that they are not online.They have to catch up."

SYLVIA CADENA — INFORMATION SOCIETY INNOVATION FUND

unleash the potential of Internet in all spheres is not that easy. There are a whole set of challenges that we need to overcome, lot many lacunae that we need to fill. The experts from various fields brought out the issues at stake, which can be summed up under the following categories. (*Please see Box*)

It has become obvious from the above points that one has to ensure that one understands who the target audience is, and what their needs are. Then content can be tailored to suit, but the important thing to keep in mind is that it is critical that those challenges are met and overcome so that digital content is not just available, but it is read, understood and put to good use.

Dialogue and consultation to overcome these challenges

Thankfully we have been moving to an era of multi-stakeholder based dialogue, discussions and consensus. As such, public-private partnerships are all the more important to realize common goals, objectives, and aspirations. Each party in such a partnership will come with certain skills and strengths,

and the best way forward will always be one in which all parties contribute such skills and strengths to produce a better and more cohesive output/deliverable. Even if the IGF is not a decision-making body, it can give guidelines to

decisions makers to implement the right policies in their countries.

From an Internet governance perspective, the discussions that took place in the IGF are important for every Internet

user, and for the most part, are a global public policy issue. As such, it is important that a summary of these discussions are made available to the world at large, and disseminated as widely as possible, so that appropriate input

is received from all communities, to the widest extent possible. Remote participation at the IGF meetings also play an important role in achieving this. It was good to see the efforts put into providing remote participation facilities during IGF 2008, and I hope this can be further expanded for future meetings.

There is also a need to pursue Internet governance dialogue at the local and regional level. These local and regional forums would also allow wider participation (particularly when language may be an issue at global meetings). The output of local and regional forums can then feed into global forums such as IGF.

The IGF shows that the process has matured and that the discussions are now moving to the next level, where actors involved on Internet issues can discuss practical solutions and best practices for the challenges faced in the Internet governance space.

But we need to stress here that new platforms need to be created and we have to use the existing ones to bring together not just the supreme of society and decisions makers, but also the people at the grassroot level. Because if we do not have them at the scene of action to get the words from the horses mouth, our efforts will remain futile.

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Technical challenges

- >> Research on alternative technical solution to internet infrastructure
- >> Increase the role of mobile as info vehicle
- >> Adhering to international technical standards and maintaining a technologically competitive edge.
- >> Limited service penetration related to service and equipment access cost.
- >> Emphasis on technology deployment in phase with users needs
- >> Power shortage problems that need to be resolved with inventive solutions (solar panels for example)
- >> Foster the use of multi-functional devices such as mobile phones with Internet capacity

Capacity building

- >> To give network operators the sufficient training and information to fulfill the mission of connecting all the territory
- >> Improving computer access and teaching in schools, especially in rural areas and giving students basic computer knowledge
- >> Collaboration platforms have to be established to foster Internet usage and impact
- >> There should be collaboration platforms. What you are dealing with. The reality may be different from the imagination that we have.
- >> Services like e-government, telemedicine and e-commerce facilities are attractive for the population

Content

- >> Standardize the means and medium to meet regional languages like standardisation of keyboards of all vendors;
- >> All citizen services have to be made also available in the mobile platform
- >> Suggestion to insist on uniformity in formats across different states in the same areas
- >> Translated content to be made available in regional languages
- >> Prioritise and support use of open source software
- >> Services and content has to be made available and accessible to disabled people

Markets & Competition

- >> Bring down state monopolies and facilitate the entrance to the telecommunications market to new actors
- >> Establish an independent authority to regulate the telecommunications sector.
- >> Research alternative infrastructure ownership and sharing models
- >> Understanding of commercialization channels and procedures to access to state of the art experimental equipment (low cost low power)
- >> Bring down inter-country barriers and restrictions to cross border connections to unleash innovation and competition.
- >> Bring down license fee for ISP /Telecom companies to encourage investment and competition

Policy & Regulation

- >> Create a corpus fund like USOF (Universal Services Obligation Fund); in which each operator gives a part of its revenue to incentivise the connectivity in underserved areas;
- >> Create an integrated or unified license for services for multiple services;
- >> Focussing the ICT policy in rural areas and offer government services ton expand Internet's utility in these zones
- >> Legislation should not hinder technological advancement
- >> Work closely with neighbor countries governments to unleash competition and foster connectivity



In Tilonia Village in Ajmer district in Rajasthan, communities associated with Barefoot College, has taken the responsibility to find and manage all the information related to the quality, quantity and other relevant details pertaining to drinking water in the adjoining areas. The barefoot communities have these information for last many years and they crunch the data through computers as well. Recently learning with Barefoot College, Digital Empowerment Foundation has been working out an application called NeerJaal which would manage the entire information related to drinking water in villages. NeerJaal is also supported by Department of Science & Technology, Government of India. More at <http://www.neerjaal.org>