

Issues on Internet Governance

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Internet has been associated to a space of liberty, where citizens from around the world are able to communicate and exchange freely without interferences. The cyberspace is seen as an unregulated and decentralized network that is almost impossible to control. As a consequence, people around the world take this communication facility for granted.

However, an insight into the mechanisms and organisations that shape the way Internet works is paramount to understand that clear rules have to be established for its operation and to anticipate the next challenges the web will face. These challenges include its continuous growth, its interoperability and other threads such as the protection of freedom of expression on it, cyberterrorism and illegal activities such as pornography and drug trade.

Internet does not belong to anyone in particular and its governance involves a set of actors comprising "governments, the private sector and civil society that have to agree on shared principles, norms, rules, decision-making procedures, and programmes that shape the evolution and use of the web". The last Internet Governance Forum (IGF) held in Hyderabad gathered all these stakeholders to discuss about

the future of the Internet and how to expand its outreach to reach the next billion users. The two main issues discussed on Internet Governance deal essentially with the management of the network in technical terms to allow it to continue to grow (1); and with the legal regulation of its content and activities (2).

Technical matters with political repercussions

Discussions about the management of the network can seem very technical and this is one of the reasons why national governments and civil society lasted so long in

getting into this debate. It is said to be the 'narrow' part of Internet governance as it deals essentially with the internal functioning of the web.

However, technical matters on the Internet determine the way in which the system works and have political consequences as they determine the networks' openness and freedom.

As Internet was created mainly outside the sphere of national governments and grew very fast during the last 15 years, it created his own governance system where a variety of actors distributed among themselves the essential tasks and responsibilities for the networks' operation (see box 1). These entities are in constant interaction to guarantee the Internet operability and stability and the



main Internet governance issues regarding these technical aspects are:

>>The domain names system -www.india.com for example- is the central control node point of Internet. The task of assigning the suffixes as ".com", ".org", ".edu" and country codes such as ".in" or ".fr" are currently undertaken by ICANN. The Internet penetration in countries using other scripts than the Latin script is also a challenge. The domain names system will have to be adapted to a multilingual Internet to

Internet Governance Institutions (Box 1)

>> ICANN (Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers)

A non-profit corporation created in 1998 that and has an important impact on the expansion and evolution of the Internet. Its responsibilities include: Internet Protocol (IP) address allocation, protocol identifier assignment, generic (gTLD) and country code Top Level Domain name system management, and root server system management functions.

>> ISOC (Internet Society)

A nonprofit, non-governmental, international and professional membership organization that focuses on standards, education, and policy issues.

>> IAB (Internet Architecture Board)

An organization responsible for defining the overall architecture of the Internet, providing guidance to the IETF. It also serves as the technology advisory group to the ISOC.

>> IETF (Internet Engineering Task Force)

It is the protocol engineering and development arm of the Internet formally established by the IAB in 1986.

>> World Wide Web Consortium:

A membership organization composed by hundred of institutions created in 1994 to develop common protocols that promote Internet's evolution and ensure its interoperability.

open the way for all Internet potential users and let them use the network in their own language.

>> The Internet Protocol (IP) number, which is the identity assigned to each terminal connected to the network. This identification was designed to facilitate the recognition between machines and to track them on the web. This activity should be carefully realised as duplication of IP numbers can complicate the system operability.

>> The root servers, which are the facilitators, allow the domain name system to work. They match the domain names with the corresponding IP numbers and enable information to flow across the network.

>> The standardization and interoperability of Internet. With new devices accessing the network - such as mobile phones and PDAs - and constant technical



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innovations, some standards have to be established to ensure the network's cohesion and avoid any fragmentation.

With the growing importance of the web for business, governments, international institutions and civil society, controversies have been raised over the functioning of these different bodies. The princi-

pal target for critics of the way Internet governance is being practiced is ICANN (Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers), one of the principal institutions charged of the technical management of the network and United States influence over it (*see box 2*).

A fragmented decision-making over Internet content and activities

Regulating services and the content available on Internet is paramount as the web is gaining more importance, influencing the way people relate to each other, the way business is made and even the government's relations with their citizens. In fact, Internet's openness can also be used for illegal activities such as arms and drug trade; pornography, and new threats such as cybercrimes that are becoming more common. One of the main challenges is to maintain the security and safety of Internet without hindering its openness or users' privacy. Regulations over the Internet

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should also contemplate the protection of free speech, the business transaction security and issues relating to intellectual property among others.

These regulation tasks are given to national governments - in areas in which they have an historical role - that only have jurisdiction over their own territories. However, the activities that take place on the web are often difficult to track and countries are affected by actions realized beyond their boundaries, where they do not have legal authority. Therefore, national governments are not always able to take the necessary actions to counter illegal activities. It is not really surprising that until now, the international community has not been able to find common principles to regulate the web.

Nevertheless, and without any doubt, steps would have to be made in these direction if we want Internet to remain a safe place that can foster the development of nations and increase our understanding of each other.

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ICANN's controversy (Box 2)

ICANN is a private non-profit corporation that was created in 1998 and operated under contract with the US Department of Commerce. ICANN has the authority to manage the allocation and assignment of domain names and Internet protocol addresses. However, its ties with the US government have generated controversy and developing countries' governments accuse it of favourizing developed nations interests in the allocation of

highly coveted top-level domain names (TLD) and IP addresses. The dissatisfaction with ICANN played a key role in the development of a true multi-stakeholder approach to Internet governance that emerged from WSIS and that gave birth to the Internet Governance Forum (IGF). Some actors want its prerogatives to be given to a multilateral institution such as the International Telecommunications Union (ITU)