



'Soft Issues of Internet cannot be ignored'

It is not out of box to comment India still exploring to have a greater share in the global Internet hemisphere and that this country has little presence virtually and almost minuscule to know and talk about key issues in Internet governance. There are concern minds at policy domain who are worried over the marginal emphasis on soft issues that play a key role in Internet Governance. In forums, Internet power-users from academia, industry, government and elsewhere have talked much on issues on Internet infrastructure, spectrum allocation etc., but little emphasis on issues like censorship on Internet content, gender accessibility of Internet resources and the likes. The awareness level on various Internet issues is almost non-existent India's representation in various fora is practically not seen. In an interactive talk, Mr. Rajesh Aggarwal, Additional CEO, National Internet Exchange of India (NIXI), spoke on various aspects of Internet Governance in India to D-Content's Nidhi Sharma and Syed Kazi.

What could be the critical importance of the Internet as an ICT enabling platform and medium to augment various social-cultural-economic processes in a country like India?

Internet as an ICT-enabled tool has broken various social and geographical barriers, thus resulting in reducing the limitations of the mind and space. We first saw the elimination of stumbling blocks in the path of a knowledge society with cable TV expansion in 1990s after the Asian Games in India that gave people exposure to how life in the rest of the world is lead. As a result, they started demanding amenities and facilities. This is where public power comes into play.

And this is what Internet is doing today. The Internet has taken the revolution further. Content that was otherwise created by media houses is now no longer bound by anything as a result of computers. Blogging, Internet radios and many more such technologies, along with the advantage of forming our own communities has increased our social circle and networking sphere dramatically. Internet is the new ball game emphasizing on pull content and giving fillip to owned communities and social networking.

Internet is more of a knowledge medium and surveys conducted globally prove that the knowledge community has grown manifold with the rise in the use of the Internet. As far as economic growth is concerned, the whole field of e-commerce including B2C and G2C services, online tax and all others payments speak of the giant leap forward that we have been able to make. In fact, we can call ours a fundamentally changing brick and mortar social-economy because of digitisation and the Internet

revolution world wide.

The next big thing to happen is Internet serving as self learning application for any one. Once this happens, this will be a killer application.

What is the relevance of Internet Governance in India and South Asia?

Internet use in south Asian region is yet to grow geometrically vis-à-vis countries like China, Korea and Japan. The Internet population in the region is gradually growing. The numbers notwithstanding, overall penetration rates are still very low. There are policies in India and elsewhere to facilitate establishing more open policies with regard to Internet service providers (ISPs) obtaining licenses for international gateways. However, the emphasis is still low on issues like cyber security, content censorship, virus attacks, online frauds, spam volume etc. With regard to infrastructure policies, there are significant strides towards a dynamic bandwidth and Internet service provision, and leveraging wireless technologies and Internet telephony. There are room to address issues like Internet access, affordability, speed and interconnection, cultural diversity, local language content, gender aspect of Internet access in India and South Asia. There is need for inclusive Internet Governance mechanism, based on Inter-Governmental, multi-stakeholder mechanisms.

What could be the essential links between digital technology, content and Internet Governance?

We need education content which has been created by the student community, colleges, universities etc. We certainly need user generated content in sphere of live and business. Here, I want to pose

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an important question, why is India lagging behind when it comes to contributing content? Taking into account the huge population of India, our contribution towards providing content is not up to the mark. Take for example Wikipedia, or even YouTube. China and Korea are much ahead of us. The need for value added services content from private entities cannot be ignored which is largely missing.

Why can't all government information be available on Internet? This is still not the case with most states in this country. There is no circular clarifying that websites of various government departments to provide content in both Hindi and English, and maybe in regional language. And there is so much content which is simply not available. And I must say providing all relevant government information on the Internet is a vast pool of meaningful content for all. Here I would like to give the example of Maharashtra where at the end of every circular there is a note saying that the relevant government decision is on the specific website. This kind of practice must be replicated and promoted.

Another point I want to raise is in the sphere of Right to Information in India. People must get maximum opportunity to make optimum use of RTI. RTI itself can put 80 - 90 per cent information and queries on Internet. There should be a proper database.

There are hard issues and soft issues in Internet Governance. A balancing act seems to be missing.

As of now the approach is one or two dimensional - mostly focused on hard issues like bandwidth, spectrum allocation and so on. Whereas, there are criti-

cal soft issues that are missing focused attention including managing spam, gender biasness in Internet accessibility, Internet content censorship, etc. I think basic research and emphasis is missing in these key areas including producing masterly documents for reference and application.

What are the highlights of the steps taken by National Internet Exchange of India (NIXI) in outreach of Internet applications, its popularisation and delving on Internet Governance issues?

To begin with, we have tied up with the Sify cyber cafes for basic computer and Internet teaching. Under this initiative, 10 hours of basic Internet course is being dispensed for a minimal cost of Rs. 125 to a initial target of 10,000 people belonging to various groups, be it housewives, students, children and so on. Moreover, NIXI has tied up with Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) and Google to conduct training for safe surfing practices for 50,000 urban and well aware students. Here the emphasis would be on safe usage of sites like Orkut and facebook, besides issues like Internet bullying.

Importantly, we are holding a workshop for hands on training for designers on web related matters including web accessibility features for differently abled people. The notable feature is that people with disabilities will also be a part of this workshop. This is to encourage use of computers and digital content across all sections of society, especially the differently-abled people. NIXI has tied up with Centre for Internet Society and adopted five sites and making them differently abled accessible.

Along with Diplo Foundation, we are

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holding special course for openness and diversity as NIXI has sponsored research students on key aspects of Internet Governance. At another level, NIXI is looking at managing critical Internet resources. It has applied for NIR registration with APNIC for IPV4 and IPV6 allocation. As of now, all IPV4 addresses are made to be allocated within India including managing servers. Our Mumbai office has stepped into providing IPV6 name servers attach to .in domains. We are providing hands on training for select engineers in these aspects. NIXI has reached 500,000 .in domain registrations but scope remains wide.

Initiatives like local language IDN domain names by NIXI are a relevant approach towards spurring Internet based applications and outreach till the last mile and last community. However, this may not be enough!

Yes, our initiatives are aimed at giving a great thrust to Internet outreach and applications. As soon as ICANN opens the registration process, NIXI will be ready to have local language domain names like .bharat instead of .com. However, only having domain names do not serve entire purpose. There are bigger challenges like language compatible operating system, keyboard drivers, fonts, font converters, search engines, maps, and other compatibility issues. As of now, even an educated person face difficulty in converting English content into any other language on the Internet.

Advocacy and demonstration is equally important. During the Internet Governance Forum 2008 at Hyderabad, NIXI played a very active role while video casting all sessions and workshops in eight languages. NIXI ensured video

interactive participation and outreach of the event.

Often the talk is about more Policy thrust in various aspects of Internet Governance. The issue could be demand versus supply here, where community plays a key role.

Policy level thrust has to come from the public. As of now public demand is missing. We have to have a bottom up approach here. The demand has to come from the community. In India we still have the trend of community bonding and usage. I have seen it on field. Especially given that computers and Internet are still not economically viable for the common man and the rural areas still have a long way to go, community usage makes good sense in many ways.

Basically, the gist lies in the fact that we require serious research and pro activeness to address the real issues which hinder the penetration of computer and its utility across the country. Like I had mentioned before, there are few basic things like web accessibility, spam, censorship, gender issues which need to be addressed instead of obsession with issues like spectrum allocation, laying down fibre optics etc. though these are equally critical aspects. Realization that there is difference between Internet Governance and e-governance has to be there. Other countries are more thorough and detailed whereas in India there is still lack of serious focus on these aspects. Further, Computers and Internet might be there, but they are no use if people are not proactive and the right platform for motivation to make maximum use of them is not there.