

# Internet Governance and the developing world

The Internet that is taken for granted by so many needs to continue its evolution around the fundamentals upon which it was founded.

RAJNESH SINGH

More often than not, a certain word or terminology in common use often means different things to different people. The term "Internet governance" is one such term. Depending on who you talk to and their background, Internet governance may mean technical and/or public policy issues around the Internet to "control of the Internet" to "control of the Internet's infrastructure" to a wide range of issues relating to the use, scalability and evolution of the Internet as a

communications medium serving the world at large.

The Working Group on Internet Governance (WGIG) produced this working definition of Internet governance as part of their final report (cf <http://www.wgig.org>):

Internet governance is the development and application by Governments, the private sector and civil society, in their respective roles, of shared principles, norms, rules, decision-making procedures, and programmes that

shape the evolution and use of the Internet.

This is a very broad definition, and one that allows great flexibility into what may constitute Internet governance. So why does Internet governance matter, and more so, why does it matter for the developing world?

## Multifaceted Internet Utility

The Internet is now, for the most part, the communications medium of choice (in a great many forms) for a large part of the world. Why "great many forms"? Because the way we communicate, and the tools that we use to do so, have all evolved significantly since the Internet came into the public domain; and continues to re-define how we communicate. We have moved from an era of using the Internet to send simple text-based messages (email) to today where the same email is more a multimedia message and can contain pictures, video and voice, in addition to text. The Internet is also being used to make

"telephone calls" using Voice-over-IP (VoIP). Blogs, web portals, instant messaging and social networks are some more different forms of the way in which we have begun to use the Internet as a communications medium. The Internet has become an important tool to disseminate information and an advocacy tool. Even for politicians, the Internet forms part of their election campaign strategy, together with the printed media and television.

The Internet is also an important part of the world economy. The use of e-commerce is on the rise globally, governments are moving a lot of their services online to be able to better reach their citizens, and business large and small depend on the Internet as a tool in their daily activities. The Internet and its evolution as a global medium has also spawned some of the most recognised brand names in the world today. Google, Yahoo, eBay, and Amazon are just some of the names that probably would not exist were it not for the Internet.

## The Asymmetrical Issues

If the Internet is such an

Internet World Stats ([www.internet-worldstats.com](http://www.internet-worldstats.com)) reports that there are close to 1.5 billion Internet users today. comScore ([www.comscore.com](http://www.comscore.com)) an Internet research/analysis organisation reported in January 2009 that the global Internet audience (defined as 15 years of age and older accessing the Internet from home and work computers) has surpassed 1 billion users (note that the comScore

report excludes Internet access from cybercafes mobile phones and PDAs which probably represents the difference in numbers between the two reporting organisations). These numbers are growing rapidly and will continue to do so. The next billion and the billions after that will be online much quicker than the first billion; this then makes the Internet an important global public policy issue.

The Internet has become an important tool to disseminate information and an advocacy tool. Even for politicians, the Internet forms part of their election campaign strategy, together with the printed media and television



important part of (a large part) of the world, and because it will continue to be so as more users come online, then issues around the use and availability of the Internet are important for everyone, be they from the developed or developing world. The first billion Internet users have come predominantly from the developed world, and the next billions will come from the developing world. These next billions will have challenges and issues related to Internet access and use, and it is important that any discussions around Internet governance today take these into account to ensure an Internet that is for everyone, not only a select few.

The Internet that is taken for granted by so many needs to continue its evolution around

**The Internet that is taken for granted by so many needs to continue its evolution around the fundamentals upon which it was founded**

the fundamentals upon which it was founded. These fundamentals relate to the concept of user centricity, where the Internet user and how they use the Internet should be the primary focus of decisions and developments on the Internet. Another defining feature of the Internet's success has been the open nature

of its technical standards, and the innovation this has allowed. This innovation have been key to a large number of new technologies that have evolved out of the Internet, and it is important that this continues so that we keep finding new ways to do some of those old things cheaper, better and faster.

### **The Larger Picture**

So what does Internet governance, as we know it today, cover? It covers the Internet today, and how it will evolve tomorrow. It covers a secure and stable Internet available to the world at large, and one which contributes to socio-economic development. Sometimes, Internet governance is looked at as laws enacted by Governments, however, it is important to note that Internet governance

**We have moved from an era of using the Internet to send simple text-based messages (email) to today where the same email is more a multimedia message and can contain pictures, video and voice, in addition to text**

is not limited to government activities - it is every Internet user's concern, no matter what their background. It includes social and cultural norms and must cover all sectors of society. Therefore, it is important that deliberations and decisions around Internet governance are transparent and democratic, and include input from all stakeholders.

### **I. Issues relating to infrastructure and the management of critical Internet resources**

Telecommunication infrastructure, broadband, convergence, VoIP, technical standards, administration of names and numbers, root server system, international domain names (IDNs)

### **II. Issues relating to the use of the Internet**

SPAM, cyber security, cyber crime, critical infrastructure protection, network security, national policies and regulation

### **III. Issues which are relevant to the Internet, but with**

### **impact much wider than the Internet**

Authentication, privacy, consumer protection, intellectual property, e-commerce, freedom of information and media, competition policy, dispute resolution, unlawful content

### **IV. Issues relating to developmental aspects of Internet governance**

Cost of access, universal access, capacity building, national infrastructure development, content accessibility, FOSS, cultural and linguistic diversity, social inclusion

These deliberations and decisions also need to be forward looking and take into account the next billions of users and their needs and challenges. This is why it is critical that the developing world plays its part in deliberations and discussions around Internet governance.

**Key Public Areas in Focus**

A common question that is asked by some from the developing world is "But what exactly can I contribute to during Internet governance discussions? Where do I fit in?". If we look at the WGIG report, it identified four key public policy areas for further investigation and discussion. These are outlined below with some topics that fit into each of these areas. (See box)

The above demonstrates the wide nature of topics that fall under Internet governance,

and it is not hard to pick at least some topics of concern to the developing world. The topics presented are non-exhaustive and continue to expand as discussions during events like the Internet Governance Forum (IGF [www.intgovforum.org](http://www.intgovforum.org)) progress. The IGF meetings provide an annual forum for discussion and debate; however its best use can only come about if there is appropriate regional input. In the past, calls have been made to regionalise and localise Internet governance discussions. These can play a very important role in defining and deliberating on local issues of most concern, developing a regional position on such issues, and then submitting these as valuable regional input for consideration at global events.

**Limited Participation of the Developing World**

Thus far, holistic participation by the developing world has been lacking during global Internet governance discussions, however this is slowly changing. This lack of participation has been in part due to a lack of knowledge about the discussions themselves, part of it is perhaps due to a degree of uncertainty in what contribution to make, and part of it due to a lack of resources to be able to attend such meetings. Various organisations are now making a concerted effort to improve developing world participation at such events, and going forward perhaps further opportunities and resources will be made available for greater inclusion. Developing countries themselves can do much to help this along. One important step that can be taken is to

look at the range of topics under discussion globally, identify those that are of high priority to them, and initiate discussions around these at the local level. This prepares them for appropriate input to regional and global discussions. Another valuable step would be to try and ensure multi-stakeholder input into local discussions (government, service providers, private sector, civil society and user groups) so that the output from local discussions are balanced and representative of all sectors of society.

Rajnish Singh is an entrepreneur and Internet advocate, and is currently involved in establishing the Internet Society's Regional Bureau for South and Southeast Asia. The views expressed in this article are his own, and not necessarily that of the organisations he works for. He can be reached at [rajnish.singh@gmail.com](mailto:rajnish.singh@gmail.com)



**Yes!** Please send me one year at the special new subscription rate of Rs 500

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

INSTITUTION: \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS: \_\_\_\_\_

STATE: \_\_\_\_\_

COUNTRY: \_\_\_\_\_

I WISH TO PAY BY: CASH  CHEQUE/DEMAND DRAFT  CHEQUE/DD NO  DATED: \_\_\_\_\_

Send this form to Ravi Kanta, Digital Empowerment Foundation,  
3rd floor, 44 Kaalu Sarai, New Delhi - 110 016. +91-11-26532786