

What is the Future for Internet Governance?

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Subject Areas: Business and Society; Electronic Commerce

Article Type: Viewpoint

In March 2014 a number of news reports came out indicating that the U.S. plans to give up its control over the Internet.^{1 2 3} The headlines imply that that the U.S. will relinquish its dominant role in governing the Internet, but in reality it is only considering changes in oversight over a single governance agency. The risk at this time is that the new governance structure is unknown. The U.S. should have a major stake in governing the Internet in the future, but there are a complex set of issues, and a large number of global perspectives, that must be considered as the Internet grows and evolves in the future. Whatever decisions are made regarding Internet governance, it is clear that any changes may have significant implications for worldwide communications and marketplaces.

The Internet provides a global communications system and marketplace for over two billion individuals and an increasing number of businesses and government agencies worldwide. It is so ubiquitous and easy to use that we often forget that there are protocols and regulations that determine how it operates and how it is used. The Internet was developed in the U.S. in the 1960s and after fifty years it has truly evolved into a global system, but this global growth has also led to calls for change in how the Internet is governed. Understanding the debate requires an understanding of several issues. How have Internet technology, usage, and governance evolved in the past fifty years? What are the benefits of global Internet governance? And why might it be better for the U.S. to continue to retain a dominant role in the future of Internet governance?

The Evolution of Internet Governance

The Internet has changed quite a bit since its creation in the late 1960s.⁴ The underlying technology, users, and governance agencies have all evolved through several stages.

From the 1960s through the early 1970s Internet technology was in a developmental stage. The basic concepts (for example, packet switching and TCP/IP) that could potentially be used to create a global information sharing system were developed. These innovative ideas were implemented in the late 1960s in a system where mainframe computers were able to electronically transfer data. Many of the earliest users were university researchers. In the second stage, from the mid-1970s through early 1990s, large U.S. institutions such as the Department of Defense and National Science Foundation provided funding and the number of users steadily grew. Network speeds increased and new applications were developed. During these early stages the Internet was controlled and funded as a U.S. government program.

The commercialization of the Internet in the mid-1990s was the beginning of a third phase of Internet development. There was an explosion of activity as individuals used the Internet for e-mail and Web access. Over the next two decades, the Internet became a legitimate platform for online interaction, and access to content, services, and retail products, for users in all corners of the world. Global revenues for all forms of e-commerce and e-business are measured in the

trillions of dollars. The rapid expansion of this global system led to changes in Internet governance. One component of this evolution was the creation in 1998 of a semi-private body, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), to deal with conflicts and establish policies including management of domain names. Change is coming because ICANN's current contract runs through September 2015 and it will not be renewed.⁵ Overall governmental regulation has grown since the late 1990s as new laws and regulations regarding Internet use and e-commerce activity are enacted in many countries. It appears that debate on this issue will occur in the next year and the goal is to create a proposal for a new global Internet governance structure sometime in 2015.

Reasons to Globalize Internet Governance

Internet users come from nearly every country in the world. These users and their countries have widely differing views on government, economic, and cultural issues. What are the arguments for establishing a new era of global Internet governance? The European Union (EU) provides one perspective on this debate.⁶

- Weakened confidence in the network's governance after revelations of U.S. surveillance
- Preference for globalizing essential Web functions including assignment of domain names and proper routing of Internet traffic
- Russia and China have pushed for more government control of the Web
- Potential to utilize other languages for domain names, etc.

Reasons to Maintain US Internet Governance

On the other side of the debate, what are the arguments for maintaining U.S. control over the governance of the Internet? A number of concerns have been raised by U.S. Congressional Representatives.⁷

- Changes could open the door for a more repressive approach to managing the Internet and more censorship
- Increased governmental control could stifle innovation
- Concerns about the impact of new governance policies on Internet security
- Concerns about efforts to give the United Nations or other governmental bodies control over the Web
- Any change may create risks for U.S. users and organizations

Conclusion

The overall conclusion is that Internet governance does need to consider the needs of a wide range of global users, but it is very risky for the U.S. to give up too much control given that many critical components of its economy and defense utilize this information infrastructure. Strategic U.S. industries such as food production, water management, energy, transportation, and defense rely on the Internet for communications and coordination. In the end, maintaining an open and innovative Internet is paramount and the U.S. must continue to play a significant role in Internet governance to protect its interests and the interests of all people wanting an open, innovative, and uncensored Internet. At this time it is impossible to know the best solution because the details of a new multi-stakeholder governance model are not known.

¹ Nagesh, G. (2014, March 14). U.S. Plans to Give Up Oversight of Web Domain Manager. *Wall Street Journal*.

² Woollacott, E. (2014, March 15). US Government Cedes Control of the Internet. *Forbes*.

³ Timberg, C. (2014, March 14). U.S. to Relinquish Remaining Control over the Internet. *The Washington Post*.

⁴ Laudon, K. C., & Traver, C. G. (2014). *E-commerce: business, technology, society*. Boston: Pearson.

⁵ Woolacott, 2014.

⁶ Robinson, F., & Schechner, S. (2014, February 11). EU Pushes to Globalize Internet Governance. *Wall Street Journal*.

⁷ Nagesh, G. (2014, April 2). Opponents Circle Web-Oversight Plan. *Wall Street Journal*.