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The Path Towards Centralization of Internet Governance Under the UN - Part 1

Essay by Anonymous, December 2, 2008

PART 1 OF A 3 PART SERIES

This essay is the first of a three-part series (2, 3). It focuses on the steps of a possible roadmap for centralizing Internet governance under the UN.

INTRODUCTION

As part of the Tunis Agenda for the Information Society that resulted from the United Nations (UN) World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), governments agreed to set in motion an Internet Governance Forum (IGF), mandating it, among other tasks, to: “Discuss public policy issues related to key elements of Internet Governance…”; “Identify emerging issues…”; “Discuss, inter alia, issues relating to critical Internet resources”; and “Help to find solutions to the issues arising from the use and misuse of the Internet…”

People familiar with this version of international Internet governance* primarily fall into two camps: gung-ho-ers and nay-say-ers. There is a third group as well, who share some characteristics of both camps.

In the gung-ho group are people who are excited about the prospect of Internet public policy taking place under the United Nations (UN) umbrella. This group includes: many individuals from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) who enjoy having their voices heard in international discussions on Internet governance; some government officials who embrace the idea of shared control over the Internet; and assorted academics who see a new field of study emerging and relish being at the forefront.

In the nay-sayer camp are people who believe that there is much hype, but little substance, in the talk of international Internet governance. This group includes: various technologists who see the distributed approach to Internet control as natural and who shun restrictive regulation; some government officials who believe a single government can and should go it alone; select academics who see governments as still operating quite independently when it comes to steering the Internet; and many business people who view the whole discussion as a lot of hot air with little chance for substantive impact.

There is a third camp who see the UN process as pointing to UN control over the Internet and do not accept the legitimacy of this campaign. This group views the UN’s treatment of Internet governance as falsely lending the appearance of being ad hoc and auspiciously adaptive; to this group the activity seems more akin to an orchestrated, top-down plan that amounts to a roadmap for UN takeover of Internet governance. Whether this group is supportive of centralized Internet governance is not the point here – rather, the issue is that they disagree with the process because they see it as a sham.

This series of essays is written from the point of view of a person in the third camp. The essays

tell how, despite its semblance of spontaneity, the UN's Internet governance activity actually bears the markings of a well-mapped out plan: a plan for establishing a permanent, international body to oversee global Internet policy – in other words, centralized Internet governance.

The compilation suggests that the UN course so far can be seen as pursuing the same incremental steps that international strategists follow when wishing to establish a permanent body with authority to deal with a given area. The box below outlines these steps.

Steps for establishing a permanent, international body with authority

1. Launch Study – Suggest the creation of a study group to figure out how best to treat issues; this group should report back after a set time.

2. Be Inclusive – Open discussion in a way that elevates likely supporters and dilutes the power of those who stand to lose.

3. Avoid Conclusions – To seem innocuous and disarm those fearing change, limit results with an inconclusive final report; make it clear that more work is necessary.

4. Receive Commission – Set in motion processes to (a) facilitate dialogue, and (b) promote information exchange ("cooperation") among relevant agencies.

5. Stay Mainstream – Initiate work on non-contentious issues. Be perceived as a facilitator responding to demand, not a driver pushing centralization.

6. Celebrate Harmony – At the end of the time period set for discussion, call attention to achievements in bringing groups together and navigating through rough terrain; show how the process has materialized.

7. Salvage Cooperation – Use the lack of response in the cooperation process to draw attention to the need for leadership.

8. Become Established – Watch collaborators in a decision-making group successfully advocate keeping the momentum going by establishing a permanent body to continue the process in an institutionalized fashion.

9. Expand Authority – Assume additional functions to expand authority over time.

TO FOLLOW

The second essay in this series describes the application of these steps in the context of UN Internet governance as some would have it. The third essay highlights some reasons for concern and suggests that participation in the process may nonetheless be the best way forward given those reservations.

** The term "Internet governance" deserves an explanation. Because the UN's Working Group on Internet Governance defined the term for the purposes of UN discussions, and because the UN's moves in this area are a main concern here, this paper uses their wide definition: "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 broad definition is interesting because it means that UN work on Internet governance is not limited to Internet*

addressing and routing (e.g., matters handled by the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, or ICANN) or matters relating strictly to the seven layers of the Internet's infrastructure (dealt with by groups like the Internet Engineering Task Force, or IETF); rather, the definition allows UN work on Internet governance to expand outward and encapsulate anything relating to the evolution or use of the Internet.

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