- PDF
- Send to a friend

The Path Towards Centralization of Internet Governance Under the UN - Part 3

Essay by Anonymous, December 4, 2008 in response to The Path Towards Centralization of Internet Governance Under the UN - Part 2

PART 3 OF A 3 PART SERIES

This essay is the third of a three-part series (1,2). It focuses on the steps of a possible roadmap for centralizing Internet governance under the UN.

The first essay in this series introduces the idea that the course of Internet governance may be following the same incremental steps that international strategists follow when wishing to establish a permanent body with authority to deal with a given area. The second essay details the steps as applied to recent moves for Internet governance under a UN umbrella. This final essay discusses reasons for concern and suggests that participation in the process may nonetheless be the best way forward given those reservations.

REASONS FOR CONCERN

There are at least three reasons for serious concern over what appears to be a roadmap for centralization of Internet governance under the UN, as described in the previous two essays. First, there is no place for true dissent. Second, unless institutionalization carries a commitment in advance to recognize civil and political rights, it is risky to assume that the end institution will consider these values foundational for the policy framework of the information society. Third, as ubiquitous computing blends the physical and virtual worlds, an overarching UN body coordinating Internet policy will be empowered with an extremely broad mandate.

• No place for dissent

Whereas dissent would normally be an option, the roadmap for institutionalization will allow for no obstruction: Even voices of dissent can be translated into expressions of support, cited as evidence that the process is inclusive.

Arguably, stakeholders are being used to give the appearance of democracy and to legitimize the process of establishing a permanent body to deal with Net-related, public policy issues at the international level. Participation in effect is a contribution toward centralized Internet governance.

People who disagree with what is taking place face a paradox: The very act of organizing opposition can be captured and used by proponents of central control as evidence that the UN process is inclusive and legitimate, providing for dissent and serving as a necessary center for debate. In other words, dissenters' voices may add volume to the discussion on international Internet governance and lend it legitimacy. This would-be opposition group thus confronts the quandary that it may be counter-productive even to come together. For them, the question is whether to resist a force that is advancing, or to join it so as to infuse its ranks and influence its direction.

One therefore wonders if taking the discussion elsewhere is even possible. Just as dissent within the official forum is used as confirmation that the process is inclusive and therefore a good one, dialogue involving people beyond the elite insiders could also inappropriately be cited as proof that the public is interested in institutionalization. On the one hand it is unappealing in any way to be part of a process that distorts dissent and repackages it as support for institutionalization; on the other hand disengagement might boil down to a choice to forego the opportunity to influence the direction of Internet governance.

• No guarantees for democracy and human rights

Centralization might be acceptable if it had guarantees for democracy and human rights as its foundation, and if it provided appropriate redress in case of a violation. At the moment it does not have these commitments. Rather, the objective seems to be to promote centralization rather than to hold freedom as the paramount concern.

The Internet Governance Forum (IGF) has structured discussion in such a way that it does not give preeminence to foundational principles like those found in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This lack of elevation would seem to suit those who favor the centralization of Internet governance under the UN: For them, the strategic stance at this stage is to have the IGF be inclusive and politically agreeable to the UN's wide membership, with a view to obtaining a permanent mandate. However, if there is no attempt to recognize fundamental values at this stage, it is risky to assume that the end institution will consider them foundational in building a policy framework for the information society.

It is unappealing to think that in participating in discussions of the IGF, one is contributing to the establishment of such a standing institution, especially when at the outset it is impossible to know what shape this institution will take and what principles will guide it.

• The inside-out likelihood of online rules applying to the physical world

The matter is particularly pressing given the pace of technological change and the difficulty of changing international decisions once agreed. As the Internet infuses the information society and people find themselves living in a ubiquitous computing environment, global rules for Internet interactions will extend into the realm that used to be thought of as the distinct, real world. In that sense, international Internet governance must be understood as an early form of global governance that reaches into countries, local regions, neighborhoods and homes.

Given the pervasive role that the Internet will play in the future Information Society, a permanent international institution with an expansive mandate would essentially represent a significant step toward global governance.

Governments have already agreed on numerous treaties and have accepted standards that arguably add up to a framework for governing the Internet. These international rules will likely serve as the default ones the more that the virtual world bleeds into the physical world. For example, a person using a networked device to receive location-based services may be exchanging information with entities in several jurisdictions at once, even as he is trying to obtain information about a physical place immediately in front of him – perhaps even his home. Such services will be facilitated by global rules crafted to enable e commerce and security, and these global rules will, in an inside-out way, end up extending to that person's experience with his local surroundings.

In other words, the question of centralization is not merely an esoteric one for people specialized in the technical workings of the Internet. Rather, it concerns everyone as the implications come to their doorsteps and even reach inside their homes.

CONCLUSION

Certain actors have been pushing for centralized Internet governance under the UN's umbrella. The road map for this centralization arguably began with a move to position the UN as the arbiter of all actors in the information society, with governments placed on the same level as corporations and non-profits, and other stakeholder groups. The idea is that, once this multi-stakeholder forum is made permanent, it will stand as the logical point for coordinating Internet policy. Central coordination can gradually turn into administration, with decision-making functions subtly added. This international Internet governance has potential to evolve into global governance generally as the Internet increasingly infuses the physical world.

Centralization appears inevitable given the course so far, particularly since participating in discussions about this trend – even if to dissent – is interpreted as evidence of demand for a permanent place for global dialogue, and since disengagement prevents one's voice from being heard. If fundamental freedoms are to be the founding principles of future society, they may need to be enshrined in this early stage of international Internet governance. Perhaps the best chance of enshrining these principles lies in flooding the IGF dialogue with the message that these values must be the bedrock of any system for Internet governance.

All Institutions Essays

New Institutions

- Understanding our Knowledge Gaps: Or, Do we have an ICT4D field? And do we want one?
  by Michael Best
- Bring in the Human Rights
  by Rikke Frank Jørgensen
- A Brief Overview of U.S. Public Policy on OER from California's Community Colleges to the Obama Administration
  by Carolina Rossini, Erhardt Graeff

Traditional governance

- Realising the Value of Public information
  by Richard Susskind
- Global Constitution-Building
  by Herbert Burkert
- Muddling Through Internet Governance
  by Kenneth Neil Cukier

View all thematic areas »

Source URL: http://publius.cc/path_towards_centralization_internet_governance_under_un_part_3#comment-0