

Who controls the Web?

Introduction

Assume that you have been appointed to a task force of 5 or 6 computing professionals within your organization. You have been asked to examine the current issue outlined in the article below. Your team has not been asked to make specific recommendations to solve the problem. Rather, you have been asked to make recommendations that will help the Government decide what next steps they should take.

Prompts

1. What is/are the problem/problems here? Is there an underlying fundamental problem?
2. Who are the major stakeholders and what are their perspectives?
3. What are the major ethical, legal, and security aspects associated with the problem?
4. What are the intended and unintended consequences of existing computing solutions? Consider the consequences on individuals, organizations and society within local and global contexts.
5. What recommendations do you propose that may lead to potential solutions?

The Internet is theoretically borderless. Is it therefore open and free? Some countries such as China are famous for regulating the Internet. However other countries such as America also attempt to regulate the Internet, with policies against the free nature of the Internet. There are three groups at play in terms of regulating the Internet: governments wanting control, corporations wanting profit and individuals wanting freedom.

Until 1998 one man managed the Internet: Jon Postel. Now there are many organisations that control the Internet and this can impact the level of access users have. For example, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) was created in the private sector in America to assign domain names. The power of ICANN could be used for economic or political gain and there are many criticisms of ICANN. In March 2014 the US government announced it was detaching from ICANN, leading to media headlines “America’s Internet surrender.” One member of Congress said this “will allow countries like China and Russia, that don’t place the same value in freedom of speech, to better define how the Internet looks and operates.”

Why is the international community not managing the Internet? The Internet is a critical information infrastructure for every country with a predicted population of 3.4 billion by 2016. It is difficult to get multiple parties to agree on Internet regulation and governance. An example of this was in 2012 at the United Nations International Telecommunication Union (ITU) conference in Dubai. 193 countries looked at changing some of the global telecommunication rules that exist

in an international treaty. Fifty-five of the attending 144 member states chose not to sign and it was evident countries have different priorities, for example some nations have unreliable electricity supplies. Finding delegates who understand the issues of Internet management and regulation is yet another challenge.

Most of the rules discussed at the ITU conference have not changed since 1988 so need updating to fit today's Internet environment. The conference became a discussion on freedom of speech and the openness of the Internet and it became clear that there were two sides developing.

There was a Western group that wanted to make sure there were no United Nations rules on cyberspace, because it would damage Web business and allow governments to put limits and checks on the internet. This group argued that the new UN agreement should simply not mention the internet at all because it is a service that runs on top of telecoms systems. A second group, including China, Russia and some Gulf States, wanted the UN to set up rules for stronger control by governments.

Different member countries have different ideas. Russia and China also expressed their aim of taking control away from the US. Developing countries feel economically disadvantaged because they say Western countries dominate the Internet. African states supported Arab proposals that countries should be rewarded with websites and Internet services for the amount of Internet traffic they create. Russia and China also want more cyber security laws and more control of domain names, and Russia wants a United Nations body to replace ICANN.

"The Internet has given the world great economic and social benefit during these past 24 years. All without UN regulation", the leader of the delegation said. Greater government control on the Internet could mean even more control in places such China, Iran and other nations. Therefore the United States, along with the United Kingdom and Canada, refused to sign the United Nations treaty because they want private companies to drive Internet standards. "Internet policy should not be determined by member states but by citizens, communities, and broader society" the US ambassador said. The US was joined in its opposition by 55 other countries. All said they would not sign the proposed final text, meaning that although a number of other countries will sign it, the treaty cannot be implemented.

However Mr Al Ghanem, director general of the UAE's Telecommunications Regulatory Authority, said the treaty was technical “and not about human rights or freedom of speech”. He said there was concern that the treaty would change the Internet.

The failure to reach an agreement in Dubai could mean that there will be regional differences in Internet use. "Maybe in the future we could come to a fragmented internet," said Russia's Ministry of Telecom and Mass Communications. It is clear that Internet governance requires a balance of numerous factors, and the challenge is in sharing control while maintaining stability, free speech and technical innovation.

New:

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