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### Who should run the internet?

# A plaything of powerful nations

**Internet governance is under attack; it may have to mend its ways to survive**

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NETHEADS build, run and protect the internet. They often profit from it too. More than 2,000 of them from more than 100 countries descended on Nairobi this week for the latest Internet Governance Forum (IGF), a conference organised under United Nations auspices. The ponderous official theme was the internet "as a catalyst for change", with a lot of nodding to WikiLeaks and the Arab spring. The reality outside the



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conference hall, the UN headquarters in the Kenyan capital, was more striking. Kenyans nowadays often go online on their mobile phones. Surfing the web is getting faster and cheaper by the day. The internet is no longer a geeks' affair in the rich world, but woven into the fabric of business and life even in the poor one.

The IGF is not a typical UN meeting with a carefully staged agenda and much diplomatic protocol. All participants had the same right to take the floor. Government suits had to listen patiently to the complaints of internet activists. And the end of the shindig was not marked by a finely tuned communiqué, but by a workshop dedicated to what the organisers should do better.

All this makes the IGF an unusual grouping. It is in effect a poster child for what insiders like to call the "multi-stakeholder" model. All involved have a say and decisions are taken by "rough consensus". This approach has worked for the internet so far, but it is increasingly under attack. Governments now want to be given the last word on contentious issues rather than being merely treated as just another stakeholder.

The multi-stakeholder approach dates from the beginnings of the internet. Its founding fathers believed that more openness would be both more secure and better for innovation. What is more, since the internet is a network of independent networks, it is hard to construct a form of governance that allows anyone to dictate things from the top.

Until the early 2000s most governments were happy—at least in Western countries where most internet users lived. They had no problem with the network's standards being set by such organisations as the Internet Engineering Task Force, which is open to everybody. Nor did governments balk when America in 1998 set up the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), also based on the multi-stakeholder model, to manage the internet's core: its address system.

Yet as the internet has become a global medium attitudes have changed. At the World Summit on the Information Society 2005 in Tunis, many participants pushed for the UN and one of its agencies, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), which co-ordinates the radio spectrum among other things, to take over the running of the internet. The effort was resisted by America and other Western countries. The compromise included the creation of the IGF.

Now some countries are at it again, even more forcefully than before. In most places the internet is now a crucial driver of the economy. More importantly, says Shawn Gunnarson of Kirton & McConkie, a law firm, the Arab spring has shown governments that social-media networks can become powerful tools for the organisation of political protest.

China, Russia and others have proposed an "International Code of Conduct for Information Security"—an attempt to strengthen the role of governments. Some of the same countries have launched a renewed push to get the ITU more involved when the treaty that defines its remit is up for renegotiation next year. India, Brazil and South Africa have called for the creation of a "new global body" to regulate the internet. Against all these efforts, the OECD, a club of mostly rich countries, felt compelled to hold a high-level meeting in June to defend multi-stakeholderism.

The most immediate power struggle is taking place inside ICANN—between the body's board and its stakeholder panel for countries, the Governmental Advisory Committee (GAC). Governments, even many Western ones, have long been unhappy with ICANN, which they think is not sufficiently transparent or accountable. The tensions came to a head when the board moved last year to allow many more "generic top-level domains", as the suffixes of web addresses such as .com or the just launched .xxx (see article (http://www.economist.com/node/21530956) ) are called. Officials are particularly worried about the introduction of controversial new domain names such as .jesus.

In June the board and the GAC at last agreed on a procedure to weed out unwanted domains. After all applications for new domains have been filed, countries can issue "early warnings" to signal that they object to a new domain. But only if the GAC as a whole does not like a suffix must the board take these objections into account—and then issue a detailed explanation if it overrides them. "Nobody really knows how this will work," says Kieren McCarthy, who runs .Nxt, an online source of internet punditry.

If even ICANN cannot command the respect of its stakeholders, the entire multi-stakeholder model may be in danger. That is why the American government, long an ardent defender of the model, is expected to put a lot of pressure on ICANN to change its ways when a decision is taken next year whether the group should remain in charge of running the physical infrastructure of the internet's address system, which—as critics keep pointing out—is still controlled by the American government.

Yet some experts argue that ICANN—and thus the multi-stakeholder model itself—can firmly establish itself only when it is underpinned by a proper constitution, complete with a bill of rights for stakeholders and a separate board of review (or supreme court). ICANN, they say, resembles the kings and parliaments of old whose power is coercive and unconstrained. Only if internet governance has a "constitutional moment", declares Viktor Mayer-Schönberger, a professor at Oxford University, will it avoid becoming the "plaything of powerful nations".

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