Unpacking Internet Governance – And Finding Red Herrings

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The Internet seemed to come out of nowhere. Governments didn't plan it, international institutions hadn't even discussed it, and industry largely also didn't expect it. Most remarkable in its growth, was the seeming absence of governance of any kind. The US government certainly wasn't in charge, except for some minor areas, like domain names. Other governments, conservative to different degrees, were horrified to discover a lack of content control that they could do almost nothing about. The telecom companies, which carried the traffic, were too busy selling bandwidth at growth rates of 500% per annum, to worry that here, for the first time, significant technological innovation in telecommunications happened outside their control, and even without their significant involvement. The ITU first learnt of the power of the Internet, when its X.400 email standard was summarily rejected. Now, Wi-Fi, a wireless Internet, you might say, is seriously undermining Bluetooth and 3G, both technologies in which the ITU and telecom companies have made huge investments. Once, the ITU ruled telecom: progress took place at the rate at which lawyers in Geneva could hammer out agreements. For governments, telecom companies and the ITU, the situation now is akin to that of a leader of the French Revolution, who, looking out of the window, said, "There go my people. I better find out where they are going, so I can lead them there."

The Internet has not only managed furious numeric growth rate with hardly a hitch, it has exhibited rapid technological progress as well. E-mail, chat, the web, e-commerce, file sharing, are just some of the innovations that we have seen in the last two decades, and each have had profound impact. Once, the postman was a much-awaited daily visitor, now who uses paper and envelopes to send letters? The publishing industry once published vast quantities of glossy pamplets to distribute at exhibitions. Now, few people bother to even visit, let alone pick up the "raddi" (http://www.india-gii.org/wiki/index.php/Raddi). While e-commerce is transforming the way business is done in industry after industry, file sharing in perceived as a serious threat by the huge entertainment industries. And technological progress on the Internet is showing no signs of slowing down. RSS (Rich Site Summary) has recently made it far more attractive to keep track of news electronically, rather than to peruse several paper newspapers and magazines.

Perhaps the most remarkable attribute of the Internet, is that nobody seems to know who runs it. Our only experience of authority is our Internet Service Provider,

who may be lazy, and maintain poor service levels and security, or authoritarian and prevent access to certain services. But most people do not perceive the ISP to be a serious problem, and if they do, they usually can switch to a better one. But other than the limited role that the ISP plays, who governs the Internet?

That most people are completely stumped when asked this question, indicates, according to me, how well the Internet is run, and cheaply at that. The governments and international bodies seeking to take charge of the Internet would do well to learn from the model of governance that the Internet practices, instead of seeking to enforce their obsolete models of centralized control and command. If it ain't broken, don't fix it.

Problems of the Internet

This is not to suggest that the Internet doesn't have problems: 1. Poor countries pay for traffic in both directions, when connecting to rich countries like the US. 2. We all receive far too much junk mail, or spam. 3. There are too many viruses and worms floating around the Internet.

That the ITU has not been able to sort out problem 1, is an indication of how little the genuine problems of the Internet seem to matter to the ITU: asymmetric bandwidth pricing is hardly such a big problem that some negotiation, and the setting up of local, national and regional bandwidth exchanges couldn't quickly take care of. Spam could easily be brought under control, if governments, globally, were to hold ISPs liable for the spam emanating from their network. The same, I would submit would work for viruses: a few fines, and ISPs would quickly tighten their security. There could be a couple more genuine problems that don't occur to me at the moment, but other than that, we have a bunch of red herrings.

The Red Herrings

Foremost among them, is the whole discussion of domain names, and who should control them. Internet traffic is routed using IP addresses, similar to phone numbers on the telecom network. People came up with the clever idea of allowing people to use groups of alphanumerical characters instead of these large numbers, with computers automatically making the conversion. Such a big deal should not be made about who uses which name to represent a specific IP address, and frankly, most of us don't care. We just use google to find whichever company or individual we are looking for.

Many issues being brought into the Internet Governance discussion relate to support for the Internet – how different segments of society may be helped to get onto the Internet. That is fine. It is to be welcomed if international organisations and governments engage in this. But for that, they do not need to be governing the Internet. Likewise, governments see in the Internet ways of better interacting with citizens, and becoming transparent. Again, this is welcome, but that can be done without anyone taking over the Internet.

Governments and conservative members of society would like some curbing of the pornography and other objectionable material on the Internet. However, all these years we have been exposed to this uncontrolled information, and the sky hasn't fallen

on our heads. Can we not swallow this bitter pill, given all the benefits that the Internet provides? Proponents of free speech have long known that lots of terrible content is also able to take shelter under their umbrella, but none of us want to sacrifice our fundamental rights because of this.

Another reason brought forward to justify the involvement of governments and international institutions in Internet governance, is to promote a different direction for its growth, so that it better addresses the needs of the disenfranchized. Again, this is a red herring. The Internet basically is nothing but a large number of computers, taking to each other in a language called TCP-IP. This language merely allows reliable communication between any two computers on the network. What the two computers do with this facility, is entirely up to them, just as you can use the telephone to talk business, or to gossip. Just because you want to start a different kind of conversation on the phone, doesn't mean you need to take on the phone company, particularly when it is making no effort to censor you.

How is the Internet governed?

My objective is not to discourage interest in Internet governance – but how does one get involved? Arguably the only significant governance the Internet enjoys, is that of bodies like the Internet Engineering Task Force. These people manage a process that ensures that the Internet keeps acquiring new abilities at a furious pace, which leaves policy-makers and the legal system far behind. The bureaucrats at international decision-making bodies such as the UN must wonder how it maintains this speed, in a process that is remarkably inclusive, consensual, and transparent. When presented with a problem, and conflicting suggestions for improvement, the IETF doesn't take decisions in favour of one approach or the other: if even after thorough discussion, there is a difference of opinion on how a certain objective is to be achieved, all the variants can be tried out, without fear of doing any serious damage. In characteristic modesty for an engineering body, the standards that the IETF encourages the Internet to follow are published as "Requests for Comment." If after some experience with the variants, one stands out, a new RFC, pointing this out, supersedes the earlier one, and the discussion moves on to other objectives.

Gender and Internet governance

If more women wish to get involved in Internet governance, all they need to do, is to join the mailing lists run by the IETF and others. Of course, to understand what is being discussed there, you need some understanding of the technology. For your postings to be treated with respect in such fora, you need a keen understanding of the issues, and the willingness to spend time discussing them. My simple question is, how many people are that interested in technology? How many people seek to understand the electrical wiring in the house before a problem has arisen? As an engineer, I am resigned to the fact that most people get glazed eyes as soon as the "t" word is mentioned.

At fora such as the IETF, women are undoubtedly underrepresented, as is the case in most areas of technology. In the case of information and communications technology, though, this is particularly distressing.

ICT is a new profession. It is one thing to have to deal with a gender gap in a profession which has had a long time to build up prejudice, quite another to see a gap build up in front of our eyes. In India, women occupy less than 20 percent of the professional jobs (Gender, Information Technology, and Developing Countries: An Analytic Study By Nancy Hafkin and Nancy Taggart, United States Agency for International Development, June 2001), and I bet the percentage falls as you go up the ladder.

Noteworthy is, that women were pioneers in this profession. Countess Ada Lovelace was programming before the digital computer existed, when it was just a concept put forward by her friend Charles Babbage. The first working digital computer, Eniac, had mostly women programmers. In other words, this is a profession in which women actually abdicated their leadership role.

ICT is particularly important as a profession for women, because many in developing countries have difficulty combining life in a traditional household and bringing up children with work outside. IT would allow them to work from home, at their convenience.

ICT professions have a good future. The industry is changing quite rapidly, and growing furiously as well. It is highly labour-intensive.Provided you are always willing to learn new things, ICT skills should keep you from being unemployed.

Certainly, the question of how more women can be encouraged to work in the ICT sector needs addressing. In the process of solving that problem, we will surely find increased involvement of women in forums that deal with Internet governance issues. But tinkering with the Internet before understanding its working may be a bit like killing the goose that lays the golden eggs.