

Internet governance
A tale of community structure and individual initiative *

As far back as a WGIG¹ Open Consultation February of this year², the Chair's³ closing summary recognized the two opposed sides in the Internet governance debate. Now there is wider acknowledgement, for instance in the UN Secretary General's [op-ed](#) piece for the main Washington, DC, newspaper, prelude to the Tunis summit a week and a half following.

On one side, the Internet community argues for the informality and flexibility necessary for innovation – that is, for individual initiative – to flourish. On the other side, some governments call for more formality and the stable base – that is, for community structure – upon which ongoing operations and change can both occur. When stripped of rhetoric, at base these two opposites fairly characterize the two positions, I submit.

Upon a little reflection, it is clear that *both* sides are right, each in its own domain.

How can this be? With a working model to look from, we may be able to give ourselves purchase on the problem and thus a way forward. The history of the creation of the Internet, interestingly – particularly the dynamic used by the IETF⁴ – presents a model:

INDIVIDUAL INNOVATION, COMMUNITY CONSENSUS

For a network to operate, its pieces have to conform to some standard. But to introduce innovations, which may make for a better network, some of those standards must in effect be broken, to be re-assembled as a renewed, better network. That is the essential tension, in fact played out between the sides in the Internet governance debate. The IETF moved artfully back and forth between the two opposites in this simple, dynamic cycle, in fact with great frequency across time.

During standardization, the IETF coalesced as a more formal community, to decide on a common approach – “rough consensus.” In a next half of the cycle, but now for innovation, the IETF once again broke apart into its constituent individuals,

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Dated: November 7, 2005 Revision 1.21 November 9, 2005 Notice added February 22, 2006

¹ Working Group on Internet Governance, organized by Markus Kummer and later with his secretariat

² Final session, February 16, 2005

³ Nitin Desai

⁴ Internet Engineering Task Force. Some will recoil at the IETF as a case example. You will see the IETF as tainted, on the side of the ‘individualists.’ Let me suggest that rather than recoil, you take heart. The IETF so skillfully combined the formal with the informal. Rhetoric and ideology about the IETF aside – rhetoric that would paint the IETF only as an individualistic enterprise – I hope you see this tension emerge from the text. We do need a model to visualize the complexities.

some of whom would propose new approaches – “running code” – eventually to be considered, in yet a *next* cycle and a new standardization half of the cycle. This simple cycle, artfully executed countless times, produced one of the greatest runs in the annals of human innovation.

Simple to picture perhaps, but ... the *social* complexity here is obscured because the same individual switches back and forth, from wearing an entrepreneur hat to wearing a hat in a hierarchy for consensus, repeating the switch back and forth again and again. To move ‘governance’ beyond the IETF *by itself* – which is how we came to the present conundrum – means institutional separation of roles, but nonetheless continuing to hand off between the opposite halves of the cycle.

In a global world with numerous cooks for the stew, there is a constant handing back and forth, between groups more concerned with stable operation and other groups more concerned with innovation and change. That is socially more than complex – seriously complex – with all the natural political ramifications alongside.

The IETF is by no means alone in employing this fundamental cycle, for innovation forward in a network infrastructure. But the IETF did operate the cycle with a transparency and artfulness that presents us opportunity to understand this socially complicated back-and-forth.

The two sides in the Internet governance debate have each championed a half of the basic cycle. Of course, they are both right. Our challenge is to fathom how we put the two opposites together, institutionally – and particularly with *dynamic processes* that make for workability. The processes deliver the payoff.

The purpose here is not to tease out those answers – that is the task and hopefully the mission of the gathered protagonists, both the Internet community and the several governments. Rather, the purpose here is to lay down a picture from which the protagonists might proceed, one that accurately acknowledges the correct propositions from both sides, then allows them to formulate a way forward.⁵

VISCERAL OVERLAY

But this is not the whole story, is it?

It is not a surprise that the dynamic complexities require effort to grasp or then to institutionalize. But this debate is also overlaid with an entirely visceral struggle – the struggle for ‘who shall control.’⁶ The gentle description would be that this is an ‘evolution’ toward broader Internet institutions; a not-so-gentle description tells of anger at a perceived bully and rising voices to quash the bullying perceived. When taken from the view of the party accused, the picture becomes ‘preserve ground hard-won and protect one’s economy, indeed protect ideals to benefit a wider world.’⁷

⁵ A couple of the initial, detail considerations are in a brief note attached at the end.

⁶ Cries that there cannot be control do not and have not prevented the struggle.

⁷ Those on opposite sides of this transaction may have perceptions that are entirely incommensurable, one to the other. The point here, of course, is not to blame or exonerate but to understand, for a way forward.

When buried under this wholly visceral struggle, any detail about the real complexities in dynamic handoffs becomes impossibly blurred, inaccessible to useful analysis. No wonder there is difficulty to move the discussion forward.

These two pieces are separate issues. One – the complicated social handoffs – operates at the level of how (in part) we communicate with each other. The other – the response to perceived bullying, then pushback – deals with how among others we *use* tools for communications, as we address the larger questions in our lives.

But the very process required to make workable the social handoffs is *also* the process typically promoted to allay perceived bullying. In the face of the sense there is bullying, individual initiative takes the form of ‘free speech.’ Community structure focuses on protocols agreed all around, in this case by a global community, to ensure a voice for all those speaking freely, along with legitimated steps to find compromise and agreement among them.

If we can solve one problem – either social handoffs or perceived bullying – we can solve the other.

In a real sense, the history of humanity is the extremely long trek, the struggle, to escape bullying and to put in place a community respectful to all. Not all governments subscribe to this goal, at least in their actual practice; to say otherwise would be unrealistic. But the message of ‘free speech’ – accompanied on the other side by adherence to community rules and a process that respects all – is the linchpin regime.

Here of course we will not go further on these topics of fundamental political organization. Our purpose instead is to be clear that the regime – the ‘code’ of behavior – at stake in this visceral struggle over ‘evolution,’ or perceived bullying, is identical to the regime at stake in the narrower challenge to expand Internet innovation-and-stability.⁸ The regimes at stake in both are identical.

To put the same point, but in terms popular at the moment: The values and tenets that underlay the creation of the Internet, such as openness and a voice for everyone, are the starting point both for governance and for a world beyond perceived bullying. If we are committed to such an Internet, then we have the foundation to solve both problems.

ACTION

We need a framework to see where we are in this evolutionary process. That has been the purpose here. But knowledge by itself, without action, is unrealized potential, at least in this case.

What action is indicated?

⁸ Those who would like a fancy description might say that one or the other of the regime for the ‘Net and the regime for life in general is a meta-regime of the other.

The present Summit discussion focuses on the possibility for a ‘Forum.’ If you try to use the picture above, you will want a forum that puzzles out how to implement the regime there. That means sorting out how to instantiate the two opposites – and particularly the process by which they hand off across time, back and forth to each other. Since that work is not yet done, other topics such as spam, crime – even positive steps ahead – will inevitably wait until this prior machinery is in place to tackle them.

Those in both camps of the debate, especially those at either extreme, have everything at stake. Each side – where both are correct – reaches its aim only when a successful dialog forward is put in place. A framework for the next steps in this discussion could be the most important work of the summit.

The downside? There are already large alternate roots. Several cases could be cited. The largest is Chinese with already 70 million using ML.ML.⁹ Again, that is only the largest case; there are others also of significant size. Each is a small down payment on what lies ahead, toward real balkanization, unless addressed.

The upside? We could succeed to create an Internet regime born out of the (complicated) realities – along the way, we could successfully evolve its institutions. Then the many hopeful, prospective works brought forward at the summit would have a sound foundation to proceed.

⁹ Multilingual.Multilingual, in this case CN.CN using Chinese characters.

NOTE: Considerations, to start the next step. Or, some little lessons learned so far.

1. Note on the rhetoric: The current catch phrase is ‘stability and security,’ paid due homage by both sides. With a clear view, we see that the essential tension is in fact between a stable base, and the prospects to change it. And it is the governments that tend actually to argue on the ‘stability’ side. Though ‘stable and secure’ originated with proponents on the side of flexibility, their mantra really refers to the possibility for change.

Of course, operation itself, of the network standardized at a given moment, does utterly depend on stability. But that is on the other side, opposite the change agents.

2. Technology and policy makers: So long as governance of the Internet was all within the IETF, those making the decisions understood the technology. We come to see though, in a devolved regime with others who are not engineers, how important it is for policy makers to come up to speed on the technology about which they would make decisions.¹⁰ Until there is some technical literacy, the enterprise stymies.

Engineers may, as well, find value in learning the essentials of political organization. As with any devolution and specialization, clear identity for the separate pieces is important. That is to say engineers do not become policy makers, at least as a matter of course, nor vice versa. But understanding each other is vital, especially in a complicated dance of change.

3. This summit has evolved the UN definition of participant to include actors besides the states. As those distinctions develop from the initial taxonomy of states, private sector, and civil society, there will be an even better fit. Already it is clear there needs to be a category for participation from the knowledge side of societies, such as academics and scientists. Other categories will emerge.

¹⁰ Such as the remarkable efforts already, by a set of community participants – if I start to list them, I will miss one ...