

Rally for less U.S.-centric Internet gains momentum

October 3 2005

While U.S. dominance of the Internet is clear, and the use of English prevails in cyberspace, there is increasing pressure from both industrialized and developing nations alike to break up at least some of the world's sole superpower's hold over the World Wide Web. The question remains, however, whether U.S. predominance can indeed be scaled back in a systematic way or whether indeed U.S. agencies and corporations will be willing and able to cooperate with a global consensus, if there is indeed one.

That was certainly the single-biggest issue that came to light after two weeks of debate in Geneva at the world summit on the information society hosted by the International Telecommunications Union, which concluded Friday.

The U.N. agency's head, Yoshio Utsumi, said at a news briefing to conclude the latest round of talks that the ITU could handle the responsibility and have the technological capability to take control of the Internet "if we were asked to," adding that the international organization would be the most appropriate body to have such a role.

The problem is, however, that there is already a deep divide on whether or not the United States can or even should relinquish the dominance it currently has, while there is also fierce debate on whether or not the United Nations would be up to the challenge of taking on the task.

The Geneva talks was the one last time ITU member nations officially

gathered before the final information society conference in Tunisia, which will take place from Nov. 16 for three days.

Under the existing system the Internet is managed by the U.S. government as the private California-based Internet Cooperation for Assigned Names, or ICANN, is ultimately responsible for the system and is in turn ruled by regulations drawn up by the U.S. Department of Commerce.

Specifically, there has been increased criticism over the fact that ICANN has the final say in how domain names are assigned worldwide. Some international critics argue that in order for a country to be assigned an Internet domain name such as .jp for Japan or .fr for France, governments must effectively go to the U.S. Commerce Department for approval.

So while member nations of the ITU including the United States have broadly agreed that there is greater scope for using the Internet to help developing countries prosper and meet the goals to reduce poverty by 2015, the rift over how that objective can best be met appears to be widening with time.

The politicization of Internet control has intensified as the European Union made clear at the latest meeting on the one hand of its backing of the ITU and the United Nations, as it argued that other governments and international agencies must work together with ICANN when it comes to assigning domain names.

In part given the fact that the head of the ITU is a Japanese national, the Japanese government too has made clear its support for the U.N.-led initiative, thereby siding its support for the EU proposal. Given that Japan is the world's second-largest Internet user following the United States and the EU and Japan combined make up a significant part of

global Web use, their joint opposition to continued U.S. dominance could well be the single-biggest source of friction at the upcoming Tunis conference. At the same time, while there are 13 principal routing servers that ICANN is connected to worldwide, only three are based in Japan and Europe, while the remaining 10 are located across the United States alone.

The Japanese media has pointed out that the existing domain-naming system has reached its limit, especially as many point out the need to come up with new names such as .asia to meet the ever-changing needs of Internet users worldwide without having to resort to the United States as the final arbiter of whether or not such names are appropriate.

In addition, the financial daily Nihon Keizai Shimbun pointed out that a U.S.-led Internet naming system inevitably becomes focused on the English language, whereas much of the growth seen in the World Wide Web these days comes from non-English-speaking developing countries. Certainly, objection to the dominance of the English language on the Web, particularly in assigning domain names, is a common complaint from both developing and industrialized countries alike where English is not the native tongue.

For its part, the United States has made clear its opposition to changing ICANN's role in naming domains as it continues to argue that now is not the time to change the system as it could lead to confusion while arguing that the United Nations would simply not be able to handle the responsibility.

Meanwhile, the ITU's Utsumi stressed the need to reach a consensus at the upcoming conference, stating that "if we wish to build a just and equitable information society, this summit cannot be allowed to fail."

Copyright 2005 by United Press International

Citation: Rally for less U.S.-centric Internet gains momentum (2005, October 3) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2005-10-rally-us-centric-internet-gains-momentum.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.