

Net control at question

February 9 2006

Born in the United States, the Internet has long since become global -- but tensions have also grown over U.S. control of the core infrastructure and governance of the Net.

The United States in large part has eschewed this argument, with U.S. diplomats and others in the American Net community defending U.S. involvement in the Net as benevolent and not a case of actual control.

But for many other nations it is almost an issue of an affront to national pride that the influential Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (which controls the root infrastructure of the Net) is based in the United States and answers in large part to the U.S. Department of Commerce.

In the arguments against international control are questions over how the collaboration, interoperability and common principles of the Internet can work in an increasing globalized era, where many separate national demands are being made on the infrastructure and governance of the Net.

"The Internet came from the same culture, started out with one language, now it has become global, this has led to tension on the U.S. role," said Tom Galvin, partner, 463 Communications, moderating a panel Wednesday at the Congressional Internet Caucus "State of the Net Conference."

Derek Wyatt, a member of the British Parliament, said, "There is

nothing wrong with ICANN," adding that it has to be located somewhere, and that somewhere is California.

Wyatt believes that the Net is both globalized and "fragmented" at the same time, citing an oft-used example of how individual users throughout the world tailor the Net to their own needs and usages.

He cited how during a recent trip to Nepal a local entrepreneurial tour guide handed out cards with her homepage and e-mail address.

Joining Galvin and Wyatt was Grant Aldonas, a partner with the law firm of Akin Gump and a former undersecretary for international trade at the U.S. Department of Commerce; Andrew Graham of the U.K. Based Oxford Internet Institute; U.S. Ambassador David Gross, who serves as the U.S. Coordinator for International Communications and Information Policy; and Brian Cute, vice president for government relations at VeriSign.

Addressing the topic of U.S. government "ownership" of the Net, Gross said "I don't know anyone (in government) who thinks that. In the administration, I don't know anyone who speaks about (the U.S) owning the Net."

He added, however, "We think ICANN has done a good job."

For Aldonas, the "assumption about the U.S. and everything we say" about the Internet abroad is skeptical. He added that U.S. government officials (of both parties) "have been clear" about the United States not controlling the Net, but that these statements have "gotten no traction."

Gross believes that some of the debate over U.S. control and governance of the Net stems from the larger issue of concerns over the U.S. role in the world economy.

Oxford Institute's Graham negated, in part, a potential international consensus on such issues as Net infrastructure, noting that "the architecture of the Net works because it is simple" and because of that it has grown on a global scale to encompass anywhere from 800 million to nearly 1 billion users.

Musing on the question of the Net's role in the developing world, the panel was unanimous that this is an even more important issue than governance of the Net.

VeriSign's Cute said that thus far the fostering of Internet usage for education and economic development in the developing world "has been an enormous missed opportunity."

For Gross, however, there is hope, with the U.S. diplomat noting that "the two fastest areas of Net usage are in Africa and the Middle East."

Aldonas added that broadly available Net access in Africa will be economically empowering, giving small farmers and entrepreneurs more information about their markets.

Wednesday's panel comes amid a continuing debate about Net governance that reached a recent head with the November meeting in Tunis, Tunisia, of the World Summit on the Information Society, which has been holding an ongoing discussion on the issue of Internet governance.

The WSIS-Tunis round of discussions on Net governance resulted in a decision to establish an Internet Governance Forum under the jurisdiction of the United Nations. The IGF is expected for formal launch early this year and will encompass not only government officials, but other stakeholders in the debate, including civil-society groups.

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