FROM THE STANDARDS BLOG

THE ITU AND ICANN: AN INTERNET GAME
OF CAT AND MOUSE

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Once upon a time, there was something new called "the Internet," and it was an unknown quantity. While some guessed what it could become, most did not. Famously, Mark Andreessen - of Mosaic, and later Netscape fame - and Tim Berners-Lee, founder of the W3C, did, while Bill Gates did not. At a deeper technical level and less publicly, those that helped create the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers - or ICANN - did, and the standards analogue of Bill Gates - the International Telecommunications Union - or ITU - did not.

The result was that ICANN came to control a small but vital piece of the Internet, called the name domain root directories, while the ITU, a venerable global telecommunications standards organization existing under the aegis of the United Nations, and tracing its origins to 1865, did not, although perhaps it could have laid claim to those essential elements had it appreciated their future importance at the time.

And that road not taken, as Robert Frost once said, has made all the difference.

The way in which the future control of the root directories of the Internet was decided has become almost the stuff of legends (some accounts claim that the assignment to ICANN was almost haphazard, while other versions, such as this one, see more deliberation in the process).   By some lights, the ITU would have been the logical home for the directories to reside, but regardless of your favorite interpretation of the actual events, the ITU did not seem terribly interested in the root directories at the time. In any case, the ITU lost out.

In recent years, the ITU has seemed determined to reclaim what it may regard to be its wayward child, and allegations of such an intent were particularly rife in the run up last November to the second global meeting of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). Then, it seemed, the ITU was making a play to scoop the directories from ICANN's grasp, under cover of championing the cause of internationalism.

That cause was being championed by a number of countries that resented the rights retained by the United States Department of Commerce to influence the management of the root directories. Those rights derived from the fact that the Internet itself had been created under the auspices of the US Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA). But the ITU's challenge passed, and its effort was in any event obscured by the firestorm of protest over the insistence of the Bush administration that the US maintain its attenuated - but symbolically important - control over ICANN.   (You can read much more about the issues and events in this issue of the CSB.)

Now, it seems, the ITU is testing the waters again, as suggested by a press release issued by the ITU on the occasion of the 17th ITU Plenipotentiary Conference, an event that is "expected to attract some 2,000 participants, including 80 ministers, from over 150 countries representing both government and the private sector as well as regional and international organizations."

See if you agree, based upon the following outtake from that press release. I've emphasized the lines that support this interpretation most obviously:

ITU and the internet

The Tunis phase of the World Summit on the Information Society recognized that the internet has evolved into a global public facility, and that its governance should constitute a core issue of the Information Society agenda. Moreover, it called for a multilateral, transparent and democratic international management of the internet, with the full involvement of governments, the private sector, civil society and international organizations.

Proposals on the table underline the fact that the internet has spawned new challenges that could ***threaten the security and stability*** of telecommunication networks. For this reason, ***a number of countries*** call for ***ITU to contribute constructively to the work on internet governance and advocate a stronger ITU role*** in enhancing network security and stability, in countering spam and in the smooth management of critical internet resources ***including Internet Domain Names and addresses. Proposals have also been made for the increased internationalization of the internet***, in particular the ability of developing countries to participate fully in internet-related technical and policy processes.

Others call for the creation of a specific group (I2G: ITU Internet Group), win [sic] the Telecommunication Standardization Sector to coordinate the technical aspects of Telecommunication Networks that support the internet and to deal with all other technical matters related to internet governance.

Hmmm. One wonders which nations can be counted in this ***number of countries*** that are ***calling on*** (specifically) the ITU? And who has made these ***proposals***? Finally, what are the names and identities of these ***others***? I find all of this ambiguity to be very intriguing, and look forward to learning who each of these mysterious parties may be. Certainly energy continues to be exhibited to wrest the root directories from the grip of ICANN in the Internet Governance Forum that was commissioned as a result of WSIS, and which just held its first meeting in Athens. But I wonder whether there is really a crowd clamoring for the ITU to lead the charge to reclaim the root directories.

In truth, many feel that ICANN has not have demonstrated a sterling record of stewardship, independent of whether the United States has an untoward level of control over the root directories. And in fact, from an historical perspective, the ITU would be a logical place for the root directories to be administered.

But that does not automatically equate to a conclusion that the ITU should be the heir apparent to take control, assuming that there is a need to transfer the directories to a third party at all. ICANN, after all, is already custom-made for the purpose of hosting the root directories, and the more straightforward approach could be to reform its governance structure. Or perhaps a new custom-made host would be a better choice, one that would lack ICANN's baggage, and which would hopefully avoid the ITU's reputation for bureaucracy.

What I do know is that the role of the Internet is far too important in the modern world to be a pawn in anyone's political game, whether it be the US Department of Commerce, ICANN, the United Nations or the ITU. The root directories are a creature and a requirement of technology, not politics, and need to be treated with the degree of care and neutrality that such essential technical services demand.

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