



Just Call Me A Xenophobe—US Control of the Internet

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All right, cousins. Call me a xenophobe if you must. You see, I'm one of those benighted types who think the Internet works tolerably well under American control. Over the last several years, however, there have been loud voices clamoring for "international" control of the network, and claiming that the system will split apart unless the U.S. listens to the UN and its assorted drumbeaters. As you will doubtless surmise, the issue is both political and technical.

Matters came to a head two years ago, when the "Working Group on Internet Governance" (a UN creature that includes a number of the world's least-enlightened states) announced that it was meeting in Tunis to "reform" Internet governance. And then the drumbeaters went to work.

Let's start with the EU. At the time, the Guardian's Richard Wray reported that EU worthies were warning that the network could "fall apart" unless the U.S. yielded control of the Internet to the United Nations. In his words, "The European commission is warning that if a deal cannot be reached at a meeting in Tunisia next month the Internet will split apart." As reported in the Guardian, the European IT Commissioner, Viviane Reding, began the bluster by remarking that if a multilateral approach could not be agreed upon, countries such as China, Russia, Brazil and some Arab states could start operating their own versions of the Internet "and the ubiquity that has made it such a success will disappear."

Of course, countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran cheered the EU plan. But not

every European statesman was pleased. As former Swedish Prime Minister Carl Bildt confided on his blog at the time, "It seems as if the European position has been hijacked by officials that have been driven by interests that should not be ours." Indeed.

But who actually "runs" the Internet? To the extent that anybody runs it, it's ICANN. The Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers is a California-based non-profit corporation that operates under contract to the U.S. Department of Commerce. Managed by an international board, ICANN operates the DNS servers that provide unique domain server numbers for individual computers working the Internet. And that is what is really at stake. The ability to control the root servers and master files confers the power to control whole segments of the Internet, including the ability to add or hide whole segments of the network. Just prior to the Tunis conference, ICANN announced that the U.S. would retain control of the root indefinitely. And only the U.S. can make changes to the root. And therein lies the rub.

After the Tunis conference, the WGIG issued a wonderfully prolix report entitled, "Reforming Internet Governance" in which various WGIG members provided their vision of a world in which the Internet would be "governed" to death. Since 2005, the U.S. has refused to allow any UN-approved body to "share" power over the DNS. This in turn has led to the unusual charge that the U.S. has "hijacked" the Internet. A bit of a *non sequitur*, that. How, after all, can one hijack what one created in the first place? Wasn't the Internet created and commercially developed

Attorney at Law
David P. Crocker
Solicitor of England and Wales



Business Address
Russell House
158 Pleasant Avenue
Portland, Maine 04103-3204 USA

Phone: 207.879.0708
Fax: 207.221.6417
Email: dpc@davidcrocker.com

Local and International
www.davidcrocker.com

First admitted to practice in 1989, David P. Crocker manages an international law practice in licensing, intellectual property, information technology and business law. He has experience in domestic and international licensing, technology development and general intellectual property law, including copyright, trademark and trade secret protection.



Crocker provides direct and timely assistance not only to technologists, but also to writers, artists, photographers and all creative people who wish to protect and license their work.

Crocker is currently qualified to practice in the United States and England and Wales. He advises United States, United Kingdom and other international clients in intellectual property, technology and business matters.

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Internet Governance (cont'd)

by the U.S.? More to the point, the U.S. has operated the Internet with scrupulous fairness to all.

This is a problem for some members of the WGIG. The question really comes down to ultimate authority. Theoretically speaking, the US could decide to delete a country from the master DNS and the usual suspects complain that this will doubtless happen, even though the US has never done such a thing. The real issue seems to be the Internet's commercial and cultural success. Apparent, the UN's view is that the Internet has become too valuable to entrust to the U.S.

But let's get back to ubiquity and universal acceptance. Why has the Internet flourished? Precisely because the U.S. has never abused its position. U.S. scruples and neutrality create a confidence and predictability that encourages commerce, innovation and massive information flows. More to the point, this spells commerce transacted on a vast scale by companies that have everything to gain from a predictable system and everything to lose if the system becomes unpredictable. By creating the Internet, the U.S. quite unwittingly created a medium of exchange that benefits the world and puts the U.S. in the position of being a central information banker to the world.

But certain members of the WGIG (like China, Saudi Arabia and Iran) continue to argue that the U.S. might change its policies in the interests of higher control. If I were a psychiatrist (which I am most assuredly not), I would say that we have a raging case of projection on our hands: the Cubans and Iranians might well behave that way were they in the shoes of the U.S. But this argument defies reason: the system *would* disintegrate were the U.S. to behave the way that the Cubans

and Iranians would doubtless behave if they got their hands on the DNS root. It is the very neutrality of the system that makes it work.

The notion that the Internet has become "too valuable" to entrust to the U.S. is exactly backward. The system has become too valuable – even to U.S. interests – to think of fiddling with its basic structure. This should be clear. But there is another matter that is barely discussed in the midst of the diplomat-speak: the Internet is a subversive element for political systems that specialize in repression. Witness ongoing Chinese attempts to control Web traffic generally and Google in particular. And we want to entrust the DNS root files to this lot, even if they stand behind the UN banner?

But the drumbeaters continue. Not content with merely creating the WGIG, the UN last year created the "Internet Governance Forum", the stated purpose of which "is to support the United Nations Secretary-General in carrying out the mandate from the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) with regard to convening a new forum for multi-stakeholder policy dialogue" on the Internet. You have to hand it to the UN – when thwarted, they simply generate more well-funded flatulence.

So, cousins, what's the conclusion here? The warnings that the system will split apart if the U.S. doesn't cede control are rubbish. The totalitarians can create their own system and their own style of governance. But by doing so, however, they will construct a system that will never have universal acceptance nor, for that matter, any acceptance. Let's just leave it alone, which has been U.S. policy all along.