

Why Internet Governance Should Be Everyone's Concern

Nitin Desai

Chairman of the WGIG and Special Adviser to the United Nations Secretary-General on WSIS

Internet governance is on the agenda of the World Summit on an Information Society (WSIS), and a multi-stakeholder Working Group set up at the request of the Summit has submitted a report on the subject. The content of this report is widely available and will not be described here. The purpose of this short note is simply to say why Internet governance is an issue that the world community needs to address.

Information technology is going to shape the societies and polities of the 21st century. There are other new technologies that will have as profound an impact on the production process. But information technology, in its broadest sense, will also have as deep an impact on societal and political relations.

We can see this already in the way in which our economy functions. The distance between buyer and seller, producer and consumer has been reduced. IT is more and more directly integrated in products and processes. It has led to massive changes in sectors like banking and other services. Internet-enabled services are booming in world trade.

In politics, the relationship between government and citizens is being transformed by the easier access to public services and official data bases. It can lead to substantial improvement in the transparency of official transactions and the accountability of public authorities.

Information technologies are also providing citizens with new ways of connecting with one another for political or social action. NGO networks have used this technology to great effect, for instance, in the movement against landmines or in the mobilisation of opinion on developing country debt problems.

It is this impact which has led people to talk about a new type of society. Some speak of a cyber-society, a term preferred by scientists and technologists who see the future as one where many control functions, exercised today by humans will be performed by computers. Some, who come mainly from the world of information science and communications, refer to it as an information society. Those whose focus is mainly on the use of this technology for widening the access to knowledge refer to it as a knowledge society, because they believe that it is really differences in access to information that will shape social structure. There are some who refer to it as a network society because they believe that its greatest impact will be in allowing people to connect more easily with one another for economic, political and social purposes.

All of these terms have an element of truth. But as of now we have not yet found a portmanteau word that will capture all of these aspects of IT impact. But whatever be the term of choice, all four types of impact depend on one particular information technology – the Internet. That is why Internet governance is a key dimension of global governance for the 21st century.

The Internet itself developed bit by bit, from experimental beginnings in the USA. It is a product of an extraordinary process of distributed and bottom-up development. Its underlying culture is libertarian, almost anarchic. Therefore to talk of Internet governance seems almost treasonable to some. But governed it is, and the challenge is to ensure that these processes of decentralised management take into account the concerns of all Internet users.

A growing number of these users are in developing countries. In these countries Internet expansion is being driven to a significant extent by public service applications and by telecom administrations. That is why the demand for a greater engagement of governments in Internet governance.

The Internet is a rapidly evolving medium. The uses to which it is put change as new technologies become available. A recent example of this is the fast growth in music distribution through the net, which has almost rendered records and prerecorded CDs semi-obsolete in some countries. We do not know how this medium will evolve, the way in which it will transform options for other media and other sectors. That is why flexibility and adaptability must be built into governance arrangements.

Until now Internet governance and management has been largely in the hands of information science and technology professionals. They have served us well. But the Internet is changing and becoming a part of everyday life for at least a billion people. These billion,

mostly satisfied users, must take a more direct interest in the governance of the Internet. Our hope is that the WSIS and related processes will help us towards this end.