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Navigating the multi-stakeholder morass: The past, present and future of Internet governance

[Chris Disspain](#) ^[1]


CEO, .au Domain Administration Ltd (auDA)

[Paul Szyndler](#) ^[2]

General Manager, International and Government Affairs, auDA

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Abstract

2013 marks the tenth anniversary of the United Nations World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). Although neither a forum focussed exclusively on Internet governance nor the first discussion of the topic, WSIS marked the start of a global, decade-long debate on how the Internet is, and should be, managed. A decade later, the Internet has grown exponentially, bringing about massive cultural, social and economic change. And yet, many of the political and policy issues around its governance largely remain the same and are regularly debated in a wide range of fora. This article draws upon historical experiences in the Internet governance debate to explain and assess current discussions and to cast a wary eye into the future.

Introduction

Over the last twelve months, a broad cross-section of the Internet's technical and policy community have collectively endured an exceptionally dense schedule of international activities and conferences.

A few meetings, such as the regular sessions of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) and Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF), were focussed upon fundamental technical and policy issues that need to be discussed and resolved to ensure the continued, interoperable, stable and secure operation of the Internet.

However, a great many others were an exercise in collective navel-gazing ? revisiting long-standing debates on who runs the Internet, who *should* run the Internet and whether or not current mechanisms for ensuring stakeholder engagement are adequate and appropriate. The most widely-publicised of these meetings was the World Conference on International Telecommunications (WCIT), hosted by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) in Dubai in December 2012. Although convened to review decades-old standards for telecommunications interconnection (the International Telecommunication Regulations - ITRs)^[6], WCIT degenerated into an irrecoverable schism between Member States, reflective of deep divisions that exist between stakeholders in the Internet governance debate.

The Internet community's obsession with its own structure and oversight may seem very introspective. But the debate over the governance of the Internet is not a new one. It has a decades-old history, with a deep root in American military and research networks, branches that led to rapid globalisation and expansion, and an intensely political dynamic in the current sphere where the Internet permeates all elements of our society, economy and political discourse.

The current Internet governance debate(s)

Internet governance is the development and application by Governments, the private sector and civil society, in their respective roles, of shared principles, norms, rules, decision-making procedures, and programmes that shape the evolution and use of the Internet. (Working Group on Internet Governance 2005 ^[7])

In the simplest terms, the density of the Internet governance calendar can be attributed to the popularity of the topic. Everyone wants to be involved in the debate, to have their voices heard, and to host relevant discussions on the subject.

Although they are spread across the broad spectrum between centralised control and free-market philosophies, governments share a common desire for a clear role in Internet-related policy discussions. The United States maintains a pre-eminent role in global discussions, given its involvement in the establishment of the Internet through initiatives such as ARPANet and vestigial oversight powers such as those relating to ICANN and its performance of the IANA function. Equally engaged are other early adopters such as Australia, the United Kingdom and Japan, as well as economies such as Russia and China that, for largely political reasons, maintain positions diametrically opposed to the U.S. and its Internet policy allies.

In addition, the Internet's capacity for stimulating economic progress has also attracted the increasing interest of developing countries, particularly in Latin America and Africa. This has, in turn, provided a broad and fertile support base for the UN and ITU in seeking a great role in the Internet governance debate.

Equally, a wide cross-section of the business community is strongly invested in discussions around the governance of the Internet. This includes both established companies and sectors that recognise the Internet's potential for facilitating transformation, efficiency and growth, and participants that have utilised the Internet in building entirely new business models and practices. Business engagement is not limited to 'new economy' players such as Google, Facebook, Amazon and eBay, but also includes banks and other financial institutions, established telecommunications companies and national and international Chambers of Commerce.

Given the significant potential of the Internet to facilitate cultural, social and political change, stakeholders from civil society and academia are also understandably drawn into the conversation. In the early transitional stages of the Internet's shift from a U.S. military and research network project to a vastly broader application, it was an informal network of university-based experts and volunteers that helped facilitate the process of internationalisation and growth. They also contributed vast amounts of technical expertise and are rightly referred to as both fore-fathers of the Internet and a relevant and important stakeholder in contemporary discussions.

Together, these actors comprise the 'multi-stakeholder' collective that is so often referred to in relation to the governance of the Internet. Internet governance is a topic that is important to all of these stakeholders. And yet, it is a topic with no logical and obvious home.

As mentioned previously, Internet governance was both a prominent theme at WCIT and one of the significant 'deal-breakers' upon which conference attendees could not reach agreement, resulting in a fractured meeting, an unexpected members' vote and a treaty document that was formally endorsed by 89 countries but unsigned by another 55.

To a lesser extent, Internet-related issues, such as mechanisms for the allocation of numbering resources, also stood out at the World Telecommunication Standardization Assembly (WTSA), in the fortnight preceding WCIT.

In February, UNESCO hosted a 'WSIS+10 Review Event', taking stock of progress over the last decade towards building 'knowledge societies'. Unsurprisingly, the Internet was again one of the main themes and numerous sessions looked at the sub-themes of governance and stakeholder engagement.

In May, the United Nations will convene the World Telecommunication / ICT Policy Forum (WTPF) in Geneva. Although not a treaty-level conference like WCIT and WTSA, the WTPF is significant because it will focus exclusively on Internet Governance. The WTPF's themes will include (Toure 2013 [8]), but will be not limited to:

- The multi-stakeholder model of the governance of the Internet;
- Global Principles for the governance and use of the Internet;
- Development and diffusion of ICTs and strategies for developing Internet connectivity globally;
- How to develop an enabling environment for encouraging growth, interoperability and development of the Internet;
- How the Internet can contribute to developing an enabling environment for encouraging growth;
- Strategies for increasing affordable global connectivity: the critical role of Internet Exchange Points (IXPs);
- On the basis of reciprocity, to explore ways and means for greater collaboration and coordination between ITU and relevant organizations - including, but not limited to, ICANN, the RIRs, the IETF, the Internet Society (ISOC) and the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) - involved in the development of IP-based networks and the future internet, through cooperation

agreements, as appropriate, in order to increase the role of ITU in Internet governance so as to ensure maximum benefits to the global community.

The WTPF will also develop 'opinions' that will contribute to the preparatory process for the ITU's Plenipotentiary meeting in Busan, Korea in 2014.

In addition, there are the ongoing and varied activities associated with:

- the Informal Experts Group (IEG) that is assisting the ITU Secretary-General with preparatory and reporting processes for WTPF;
- the 2013 WSIS Forum (held in conjunction with WTPF);
- the high-level UN Group on Information Society (UNGIS);
- the ITU Council Working Group on International Internet-Related Public Policy Issues (CWG-Internet); and
- the next Internet Governance Forum (IGF) in Bali, Indonesia in October.

The list above is purely illustrative. It by no means covers all of the inter-governmental events related to Internet governance and does not even touch upon the many local and regional discussions. It has been a busy twelve months, and we face more of the same multi-forum, multi-stakeholder, multi-national discussions over the next year. But to what end? Is there any point or end-game goal to this seemingly endless discourse over the management of the Internet?

An authors' disclaimer

To be clear, we strongly support the broad principles of good governance and recognise the importance of regularly reviewing management and oversight structures to ensure that they deliver effective and efficient outcomes. They must represent, and be responsive to, stakeholders' views. This is especially true in the case of managing the Internet, given its massive reach and its stakeholder community of approximately two billion end-users.

We also recognise that many of the current inter-governmental, national, business and civil society initiatives that touch upon Internet governance are not wholly preoccupied by the topic. Indeed, there are many varied and valuable dialogues on ICT for development, knowledge-sharing, Internet accessibility, and recognising and celebrating cultural and linguistic diversity through technology.

However, inevitably, a simmering undercurrent of tension relating to governance permeates many of these broader discussions. This is both unsurprising and worthy of further consideration. It gives rise to questions such as:

- What motivations underpin the diverse views of stakeholders involved in the Internet Governance debate?
- Why does the dialogue remain so static, with apparently little progress?
- Has there been any positive progress in the last decade?
- Can there be any resolution to the deadlock?

As any historian will attest, in order to understand the present and to look to the future, we must first understand the past.

The world before WSIS

In late 2003, many of the structures for the oversight and governance of the Internet were in their infancy. Collectively, we were still finding our way ? trying to adapt traditional governance and management mechanisms to a technological and social phenomenon that was expanding rapidly and evolving unpredictably.

ICANN, the global manager of the Internet's key naming and numbering resources, was not even five years old. The organisation was striving for legitimacy and recognition, following its assumption of critical oversight roles previously undertaken by the U.S. Government and pioneers such as Jon Postel (Internet Society 2012 ^[9]).

Some of the Regional Internet Registries (RIRs), which manage the allocation of numbering resources such as IPv4 and IPv6 addresses, had had a decade of operational experience. However, a formalised mechanism for unifying the RIRs and engaging them in ICANN (the Numbers Resource Organization ? NRO) had only just been formed.

Many country code Top Level Domains (ccTLDs) were undertaking the often-difficult transition from management structures built around the expertise, knowledge and energy of volunteers and academics, to more streamlined, professionalised models that could effectively manage rapidly-growing demand.

In Australia, we had only recently finalised the transition of our national ?.au? domain from the volunteer-based efforts at the University of Melbourne, led by Robert Elz, to the newly-formed .au Domain Administration Ltd (auDA). Back in 2003, while it had already successfully coordinated the development of an industry self-regulatory model and introduced stable policy frameworks and competition to the .au space, auDA was still only a little over four years old.

The common theme across these various domestic and international evolutionary timelines was an acknowledgement of the need for inclusion and engagement of all stakeholders. The Internet, at least in theory, was ?by everyone and for everyone? and successfully managing its growth, developing policies for the future and ensuring ongoing stability and interoperability, could only be achieved by effectively engaging the many users that depended upon it.

This philosophy of inclusion and engagement became widely known as ?the multi-stakeholder model? and the problem of how to deliver this utopian ideal became a mainstay of the Internet governance debate. Despite a great deal of trial, error and moderate success, by 2003 a number of key questions still remained unresolved:

- Could all stakeholders come together in an effective, efficient way?
- Was it possible to capture, separate and distil key policy inputs and stakeholder needs from the considerable ?noise? generated by the vociferously-expressed positions of governments, civil society, businesses and end-users?
- Was it possible to balance successfully the voices of users with the demands of governments, given that many of the latter preferred a more centralised command-and-control model?

Into this juvenile and uncertain landscape was thrust the World Summit on the Information Society, a global forum to address a vast range of issues relating to information and communications technologies and the Internet. Unsurprisingly, this government-led initiative was met with great hope and optimism from some stakeholders - and a deep sense fear and mistrust from others.

Sorting through the questions, misunderstandings and rumours

Before it had even begun, WSIS had already succeeded in doing two things; bringing sharp international focus to matters relating to the Internet and its governance, and creating two distinct, sharply-divided camps with fundamentally opposed philosophies on the topic.

It must be noted however, that the first common misconception about WSIS is that it was the first broad-based, multi-stakeholder discussion on Internet governance. However, the topic had already been deliberated amongst those who knew and cared about these issues for at least a decade. To a large extent, origins of the debate can be traced back to the technology boom of the late 1990s that had brought with it significant corporate participation and funding. It was also around this early stage that many stakeholders, particularly those from civil society, recognised the Internet's potentially significant transformative effect on society, economies and political processes.

Another fallacy is that WSIS was always all about Internet governance ? when this was far from the truth. The genesis of WSIS came from a proposal by the government of Tunisia at the ITU Plenipotentiary Conference in Minneapolis in 1998. The proposal was adopted in the form of a Resolution (ITU 1998 ^[10]) and formally put forward to the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) which endorsed the concept in late 2001. The UNGA's Resolution (United Nations 2001 ^[11]) was based upon recognition that Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) had the potential to promote the goals of the UN Millennium Declaration and that global consensus and commitment was required to ensure that the potential benefits offered by ICTs (including the Internet) could be accessed equally by all stakeholders.

Key themes were those of universal access, capacity building, the role of ICTs in development, cooperation and cultural development. Importantly, the Resolution also established a precedent for the engagement of stakeholders beyond the UN's traditional inter-governmental sphere. Inter-governmental organisations, non-governmental organisations, civil society and the private sector were all invited to participate.

However, those who maintained a strong scepticism about the purposes and intent behind WSIS posited that the event was essentially ?a grab for power? and an attempt at control by governments. Discontent also arose from the observation that the process for coordinating WSIS had been allocated to the ITU. Despite its 150-year history, the ITU was a body that was deeply mired in the minutiae of technological and communications standards. The ITU traditionally dealt in specifics and technical agreements, not open discussions and collaboration. It was also struggling to retain meaning and relevance in an increasingly deregulated, open-market telecommunications environment.

The prospect of an inter-governmental model for regulation of the Internet threw the ITU a metaphorical life-line; an opportunity to re-affirm its long-held place in the broader communications industry. Questions arose as to whether this was, after all, the most appropriate agency of the United Nations to address so amorphous a concept as regulation of the Internet ? or was it the agency most in need of the role?



Moreover, the ITU and UN had displayed typical bureaucratic inertia in transforming an idea to action ? the five years between 1998 and 2003. Could this administrative trait adapt to the rapidly-changing, technology- and user-centric nature of the Internet? Could governments act, multi-laterally, with the agility required to govern this new frontier?

WSIS ? Outcomes and achievements

WSIS and its many preparatory processes held the Internet community's attention for the better part of two years. The initial meeting in Geneva in 2003 successfully delivered an aspirational Declaration of Principles (ITU 2003 ^[12]) that focussed upon the development of a global information society, underpinned by principles of democracy, commonality and collaboration. Built upon this Declaration, phase 1 of WSIS also produced a Plan of Action that identified many admirable goals for progress on:

- The role of public governance authorities and all stakeholders in the promotion of ICTs for development
- Information and communication infrastructure
- Access to information and knowledge
- Capacity building
- Building confidence and security in the use of ICTs
- Creating an enabling environment
 - ICT Applications including E-government ^[13], E-business ^[14], E-learning ^[15], E-health ^[16], E-employment, E-environment, E-agriculture ^[17], E-science ^[18]
- Facilitating cultural diversity and identity, linguistic diversity and local content
- Recognising the role of media
- Considering the ethical dimensions of the Information Society; and
- Engendering improved international and regional cooperation

However, the fears of many regarding the matter of Internet governance and how it would be treated at WSIS were realised, when the conference was unable to reach agreement, both in preparatory processes and at the summit itself, on preferred governance structures for the sector.

In retrospect, this impasse was unsurprising, given the disparate views among countries, civil society and private sector participants. While all agreed that the management and governance of the Internet was an issue of significant importance, the first phase of WSIS concluded with no consensus on the best way forward.

As a result, making progress in this contentious area was allocated to a newly-formed Working Group on Internet Governance (WGIG). WGIG was tasked with the unenviable job of 'investigating and making proposals for action, as appropriate, on the governance of the Internet by 2005' (ITU 2003 ^[12]), and, more specifically:

- Developing a working definition of Internet governance
- Identifying the public policy issues that are relevant to Internet governance
- Developing a common understanding of the respective roles and responsibilities of governments, existing international organizations and other forums, as well as the private sector and civil society in both developing and developed countries.

As the preparatory process for the second phase of WSIS wound up, it became increasingly obvious that Internet governance was going to be *the* key issue of the summit. Therefore, great importance was placed upon the outcomes and recommendations the WGIG.

The key themes of the WGIG's final report (WGIG 2005 [7]), went right to the heart of the Internet governance debate. That is, the desire by some stakeholders for a more equitable, balanced and representative say in the way the Internet is governed. For many governments, the logical implementation of this would be some form of intergovernmental organisation, based upon traditional models, with one vote per Member State. For many developing countries who had traditionally suffered on the wrong side of the digital divide, the United Nations' model seemed an ideal saviour.

More specifically, the WGIG report articulated four proposed models for global public policy development and oversight of the Internet. A wide range of new concepts were introduced, including a Global Internet Council (GIC), an International Internet Council (IIC), a Global Internet Policy Council (GIPC), World Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (WICANN) and a Global Internet Governance Forum (GIGF).

One common concession to multi-stakeholderism made by the WGIG proposals was that business and civil society *could and should* play a role in the Internet's future. However, it would be in a subordinate role to governments.

For the most part, the WGIG's Report drew a concerned reaction from stakeholders, particularly those who supported the incumbent governance regime. With one exception, the models proposed by WGIG represented a significant shift away from the *status quo*.

Opponents suggested that greater governmental involvement could stifle innovation, slow policy development processes and add a layer of bureaucracy that is historically cumbersome and slow-moving. There was widely-shared cynicism about some governments' motivation for an intergovernmental model for Internet governance, suggesting that the true reasons were centralised control, censorship and control of national populations.

Others noted that the changes proposed by WGIG would represent a change from the traditional 'bottom up' processes that had guided the early years of Internet policy development. 'Top down' governmental direction would be inconsistent with this history, even if, to-date, gathering the views and needs of the Internet's user base had proven somewhat chaotic.

Given this divergence of strongly-held views, it is somewhat unsurprising that WSIS failed to deliver a clear outcome on a preferred model for the oversight of the Internet.

At the 2005 Tunis meeting, there was a significant and tense stand-off about how to resolve the Internet governance conundrum. In the end, a compromise was reached, including the establishment of the 'Internet Governance Forum' and agreement towards 'Enhanced Cooperation' on international public policy issues pertaining to the Internet.

In the end, no less than fifty-three paragraphs of the WSIS output document, the 'Tunis Agenda for the Information Society', related to Internet governance (ITU 2005 [19]). Many of the outcomes were significant and positive, including recognition of:

- countries' sovereign rights with regard to the management of their ccTLDs;
- principles of inclusion, responsiveness, democracy, transparency and multilateralism in Internet governance;
- the need for participation of governments, the private sector, civil society and international organisations;
- the utility and successes of current multi-stakeholder models; and
- the need to maximize the participation of developing countries in decisions regarding Internet governance.

However admirable they may be, these outcomes were a function of artful diplomacy. They represented a minimum common ground and a set of broad principles. For many, the absence of a clear and concise plan-of-action, represented a failed conference.

The lessons learnt

It would be easy to categorise the outcomes of WSIS, as they relate to the governance of the Internet, as either an abject failure, a crisis averted or an inconclusive compromise. Equally, one could take the position that, although a handful of environmental changes eventuated in the short-term, no momentum for longer-term change was established. Such a hypothesis would likely conclude that WSIS failed to advance the existing debate. However, such a position would oversimplify the situation and misrepresent the lasting legacy of the summit.

?Show your hand?

In the first instance, WSIS impelled all stakeholders to develop and reveal their positions and allegiances when it came to Internet governance. It sharpened the focus on key issues and demanded that stakeholders give consideration to what they wanted the future of the Internet to look like.

The positions of those fundamentally opposed to any government intervention in managing the Internet, or those in favour of absolute openness and freedom in communication were obvious and self-evident prior to WSIS. However, WSIS helped the Internet community develop a collective understanding of the various ?shades of grey? that existed, particularly with relation to the views of governments and where they stood along the spectrum between centralised control and open market policies.

Clarifying the role of the US

WSIS also helped clarify the nature of the role of the US Government in Internet regulation ? particularly with regard to the oversight of ICANN.

ICANN?s relationship with the USG had traditionally been the much-maligned subject of rumour, misunderstanding and mistrust. WSIS brought these arrangements into sharper focus. A better collective understanding was developed of the Memorandum of Understanding between the parties (NTIA 2003 ^[20]) and the specific, and in many ways, far more critical, zero-dollar contract for the performance of the IANA function.

For some, this could have been viewed as an ?inconvenient truth?. The current model for management of the Internet?s critical naming and numbering functions was subject to greater influence by one government. The USG had a pre-eminent role in ICANN?s operations.

However, this observation ? and the heightened criticism expressed at WSIS ? did result in some positive outcomes.

Evolution of ICANN

WSIS was part of the impetus for longer-term change and improvement within ICANN. It was a driver towards making ICANN better.

In the face of calls for greater democratisation and a more equal international mechanism for managing the Internet, supporters of the existing ICANN model were united. The choice was clarified between the current model, flawed as it may be, and the option of government-led regulation that afforded less opportunity for multi-stakeholder representation. For many, internal disagreements and conflicts about ICANN's workings were contextualised, crystallising the support of disparate voices against a perceived 'common threat'.

ICANN and the US Government went through the long and arduous task of reframing the uni-directional reporting contract model of their Memorandum of Understanding into an 'Affirmation of Commitments' that places clear and scheduled responsibilities on both parties, while also recognising the principles of multi-stakeholder, open, bottom up policy development.

Similarly, the engagement of end-users, and groups of users, had long proven problematic, though has been resolved since WSIS with the establishment of expansive and representative 'At Large' structures that provide an effective mechanism for engaging with the debate on Internet policy development.

Movers and shakers

At a very individual level, the WSIS process also introduced leaders conversant with the language of governments and international diplomacy to the Internet governance debate, providing a strong legacy that has endured for a decade after the Summit concluded.

For example, Ambassador Janis Karklin, the former Latvian Ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva, took the roles of Vice-President of the Preparatory Committee of the Geneva Phase of WSIS and President of the Preparatory Committee of the Tunis Phase. Karklin's engagement in the Internet policy landscape continued for many years beyond WSIS, both as Chair of ICANN's Governmental Advisory Committee between 2007 and 2010 and his current role as the Assistant Director General of Communication and Information at UNESCO.

Similarly, Nitin Desai brought his decade of experience as Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs ^[21] of the United Nations ^[22] to the role of Special Adviser to the Secretary General for WSIS and, beyond that, as Chair of the IGF's Multi-stakeholder Advisory Committee. In association with Markus Kummer, former Executive Co-ordinator of the IGF Secretariat, Desai guided the transition of the IGF from a forum established as a compromise outcome of WSIS, to a critical part of the annual Internet policy calendar.

Enriching the language of the debate

Related to the above point, WSIS also engaged a very broad range of individuals and interest groups that have helped enrich international debate through their ongoing participation in, and support of, the IGF.

Given their broad remit, both WSIS and the IGF engaged stakeholders who would not traditionally identify as part of 'the Internet community', but for whom the rapid promulgation of the Internet raises sector-specific concerns, opportunities, challenges and policy questions.

New grounds for commonality were found and WSIS 'and then the IGF' afforded these stakeholders with a forum within which to discuss all of these issues.

Freedom-of-information and child protection advocates, economic and sustainable development experts, business and intellectual property representatives, law enforcement agencies and parliamentarians and very many more experts have been drawn into the discussion.

All of these individuals and organisations contribute their own unique perspectives, ensuring that the debate on the future of the Internet – including, but not limited to, its governance – is significantly enriched.

Hope for the future

‘‘Internet Governance’’ is an oxymoron. Internet, by its very nature, cannot coexist with the concept of ‘‘governance’’, which relates to a system designed for dealing with the issues of the physical world. The term ‘‘Governance’’, immediately invokes concepts of those who govern and those who are governed, which have no relevance in cyber-space.’’ Kapil Sibal, Minister of Communications and Information Technology, Republic of India (Shetty 2013 ^[23])

When first presented with the opportunity to contribute this article, it was tempting to focus upon current developments in the Internet governance landscape. However, given the surfeit of recent analysis on the WCIT process and predictions for WTPF, WSIS+10 and beyond, it seemed appropriate to frame some of today’s debate within a historical perspective.

Looking back, one can hardly fathom the scope of the changes to the Internet over the last ten years and the exponentially greater levels of change this tool has brought about for our societies, economies and everyday lives.

Given so much has changed, it would be easy to develop a sense of frustration about the Internet governance discussion and question why so many of the arguments and positions remain the same. We endure a constant tension between traditional inter-governmental values and a brave new model that has, at its core, a sense of inclusiveness that is both its greatest strength and potentially fatal weakness. We make so little progress because the arguments are strongly-held and the positions are deeply entrenched.

It is a great and inevitable truth that sovereign governments will seek to control and regulate markets, economies and political processes. It is equally inevitable that new developments will rise and evolve to challenge the *status quo*. This is especially true in the case of the Internet – where these structural tensions are amplified given the medium’s massive transformative power and global reach.

However, just because there appears to be no obvious resolution to the debate, doesn’t mean that it isn’t a battle worth fighting. Much can be gained from an industry- and community-wide acceptance that the tension between centralised and devolved models for Internet governance is a simple fact of life.

Instead of the Internet community viewing every UN or ITU event as the next great challenge and threat to openness and inclusiveness that must be repelled, each forum should be seen as an opportunity to improve the model we have today.

Both WSIS and WCIT broke down because the structures that underpin them were fundamentally incapable of evolving to meet the challenges of multi-stakeholderism. They are inflexible vestiges of a 150-year old model for collaboration between governments that cannot effectively engage with business, academia, civil society and end users. These processes cannot gather, assess and respond to these stakeholders' needs in a timely fashion. That the mistakes of WSIS were repeated nearly ten years later, at WCIT, is proof positive of these structures' fundamental inertia and inability to evolve.

That said, it is folly to assert that governments do not have a valid and important role to play in the oversight of the Internet. Whenever governments individually, or collectively, focus upon the 'multi-stakeholder model', the Internet community should embrace that inquisition as an opportunity to review, reflect and improve.

The refrain of 'current structures exist that can best provide for the future governance and oversight of the Internet' is frequently rolled out as defensive posturing at various inter-governmental forums. Many stakeholders, including a significant number of governments, steadfastly maintain that the model we have today is the best available. However, the Internet community needs to convert this rhetoric into a call-to-action.

Since WSIS, and particularly over the last few years, ICANN has shown an improved capacity to reflect upon its collective failings, develop systems for reform and make a genuine attempt at fulfilling its critical role in the Internet Governance landscape. However, given the hysteria around the processes, roles and oversight of ICANN, it is important to remember that the organisation is only one cog in the broader Internet ecosystem. ICANN has a narrow technical mandate and does not, and will never, 'control' the Internet. The 'multi-stakeholder model' is not a description of ICANN's structures or the way it goes about its work, but rather a far more expansive concept that may not yet have an effective mechanism or forum to help realise its full potential.

Ironically enough, the closest we have to such a forum is the IGF – a mere compromise outcome that arose from a clumsy first effort at engagement between governments and the broader community.

It is a forum that cannot deliver formal resolutions or advice to governments. Nor does it hold any powers relating to the technical or policy control of the Internet. Moreover, after a number of successful annual gatherings, the IGF concept is struggling under an uncertain future, lack of funding and unstable leadership.

However, the IGF also has the potential to evolve into a true realisation of the multi-stakeholder model, where the partnership of civil society, government, business and others can deliver a shared vision for the future of the Internet and press for meaningful change in policy and governance structures. It is ideal 'neutral ground' given that its UN heritage is familiar and comfortable for governments, while also being open and not bound by treaty-based restrictions.

Rather than having their own internal processes misconstrued as the battlegrounds for Internet control, the IGF allows organisations such as ICANN, the RIRs, IETF and the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) to contribute as simple equals amongst a broader community.

The IGF is not constrained by an inflexible mandate, allowing participants to identify and explore their own issues of concern and interest. It is able to co-host discussions on topics as varied as child protection, cyber-security and the role of ICTs in economic development, which are often discussed in isolation in other forums.

Most importantly, the IGF has spawned a vast number of national and regional offshoots that provide communities the opportunity to engage at a local level on issues of global importance. Even in the face of ongoing uncertainty about the global IGF, many of these local projects are expanding and strengthening their ability to engage with stakeholders, collect their views and express them at the global level.

Local IGFs are now an integral part of the Internet governance dialogue and will likely continue in their own right and create their own enduring legacies, should interference, obstruction or indifference curtail the future of the global model.

However, it would be a great shame to witness such a balkanisation, the isolation of local communities, and the creation of a vacuum through the absence or irrelevance of a global IGF.

Such an outcome would also show that we have not learnt from the tough battles of the last decade. It would also inevitably attract the renewed attention of governments, and generate another cyclical heightening of tensions regarding regulation. We would once again revisit the same debate about control and would focus upon defending the model we have, rather than devoting resources and energy to improving it.

The IGF is the positive and hope-filled legacy of the much-maligned WSIS process. It represents the best opportunity to achieve what some may consider impossible ? the real and meaningful engagement of all Internet stakeholders. If the lessons of the last decade are to mean anything, it is incumbent upon all of us to help make it work.

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