

What's In A (Domain) Name?

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This week the UN-backed Internet Governance Forum (IGF), designed to discuss internet policy, convened for the fourth year since its inception in 2006. By bringing together 1800 representatives from the public, private, and third sector- government officials, representatives of international organizations, academics, internet experts, and more, the IGF attempts to collect a variety of views on how best to progress with internet governance. But this year is different and could see something of a revoultion in Internet governance. This report by Esha Chhabra

This year IGF delegates sparked debate before they even assembled for the conference. IGF chose to meet in Sharm-El-Sheik, Egypt, which led to accusations. Reporters Without Borders retorted, stating that “it is astonishing that a government that is openly hostile to Internet users is assigned the organization of an international meeting on the Internet’s future.” Previous locations for the IGF meeting have included Athens, Rio, and Hyderabad- more internet-friendly hosts.

Ironically, though, at the conference, Egypt was the first to announce that it had applied for an internationalized domain name (IDN), emphasizing its desire to expand information and communication technology (ICT) to more users within the country. At the conference, The International Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) welcomed applications from countries who wanted to adopt an IDN in their language. Egypt applied, requesting .masr – *masr* meaning Egypt in Arabic. Russia and Saudi Arabia also submitted applications

To date, 40% of web addresses end in .us, .uk, or .cn, an indication of the digital divide that still looms over the developing world, despite a technology boom in recent years.

Actually, the UN reports that while Internet use is on the rise, the poorest regions are still marginalized because of broadband capabilities, access to public computers, and lack of funding and resources. In Sub-Saharan Africa, only 3% are Internet users; in Central Asia, that’s 6%; and in South Asia, home to some of the largest ICT ventures, just 10% are accessing the web.

One of the biggest hurdles is language. English isn’t everyone’s language, nor are they all written in a Latin-based alphabet. Hence, the challenge isn’t just getting to a computer; it’s also reading the text on the screen. So now, the IGF is beginning to account for that, by translating more of the content and opening up domains to other languages as well.

But the IGF’s mandate expires in 2010. The US and Europe back a renewal. Yet some of the other participants are not as enthusiastic about its future, arguing that the US has too firm a grasp over the forum. A Pakistani member at this year’s IGF and a Japanese internet expert told AFP that the US’ influence over ICANN, a California-based non-profit corporation which regulates the Domain Name System (DNS), makes it more than just a participant at the conference.

China, on the other hand, lashed out at the IGF altogether. Just days after Obama’s visit to the country and his appeal for open Internet use, without censorship and filtration, the Chinese lambasted the IGF as a vehicle of the West and an unnecessary forum, a “duplication” of what is already being examined in other similar institutions.

The next IGF will take place in Lithuania in 2010. Beyond that, the UN Secretary-General will have to decide: is the IGF the ideal way to pursue internet governance? Or does it need to be democratized further, incorporating more voices from the developing world?

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