

## ICANN50: Just Olympics for Geeks or Steps towards Global Governance?



*In the last week of June London hosted the 50th meeting of ICANN, one of the key organisations involved in internet governance. LSE post graduate students **Anri Van Der Spuy** and **João Carlos Magalhães** attended as part of the NEXTGEN@ICANN programme. They found few signs of fragmentation and more evidence for moves towards global multi-stakeholder governance raising questions about accountability and representation.*

A plethora of mysterious acronyms that commonly refers to other mysterious acronyms. An arcane system of groups and subgroups in which a variety of stakeholders are represented. Simultaneous sessions lasting for hours at a time; conducted in multiple languages about increasingly indecipherable topics. Meetings of ICANN, the global organization that some consider a synonym for “internet governance”, can be boring for outsiders and obscure for newcomers. But why did the one that took place in London last week – which Ed Vaizey MP called ‘the Olympics of geeks’ in his opening speech – attract a record number of more than 3,000 participants?

### Allaying fragmentation fears

This was the 50th meeting of the Internet Corporation of Assigned Names and Numbers, created in 1998 to manage internet protocol (IPs) distributions and assure the functionality of the domain name system (DNS). And judging from both official speeches and corridor chatting, this conference was a historic one; marking a pivotal moment for the future of the internet.

The participation of China during the meeting has seemingly mollified fears of internet fragmentation from at least the East. The Chinese government sent its minister of cyberspace affairs administration, Lu Wei, who tellingly pointed to “the different situations in countries [...] which has caused some disputes and debate”, but also asserted that “we all hold one single aspiration, i.e. to improve the governance of the Internet, in line with ICANN’s vision of ‘One World, One Internet’”.

### Post- Snowden separation from US Government

The need to improve internet governance has become almost axiomatic following the **Edward Snowden revelations** a year ago. In April, another important meeting of the internet community, **NetMundial**, took place in Brazil to **supposedly** find a pragmatic response to what Snowden revealed about how the online world is actually governed. The surveillance scandal also highlighted the growing and potentially fatal gap between governance *of the* internet and governance *on the* internet; and prompted loud calls for better oversight of powerful actors, such as governments and tech behemoths. There was thus little surprise that a sense of suspicion towards existing mechanisms to govern the web was palpable at the London ICANN meeting, which was the first such meeting after NetMundial.

But ICANN’s role in the problems with internet governance is somewhat difficult to define. As a California-based non-profit entity that assumes responsibility for the “**technical governance of the internet**”, ICANN’s responsibilities include the Internet Assigned Numbers Authority (**IANA**)



**functions.** For various historical reasons, the US has always assumed a stewardship role regarding these functions through the National Telecommunications & Information Administration (NTIA). Snowden's revelations led to loud calls for ICANN to let go of the US' government's hand, and the NTIA announced in a **March statement** that it would relinquish its role subject to some requirements by September 2015.



ICANN 50 drew 3000 participants from around the globe, but is it the future of global internet governance?

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The call to foster global accountability and to allow broader oversight of ICANN's responsibilities, including the IANA functions, has seemingly forced ICANN, logically global, to physically globalize its operations too. It has started to open offices away from its US home – including Istanbul and Singapore. Its workforce has also seen substantial growth – and several of the new employees seem to focus on strengthening relationships between various stakeholders and expanding the number and diversity of the community (including ordinary internet users). But what exactly an ICANN that is not US-backed will be remains open question.

## Roadmap for a global future?

In May, ICANN proposed a **roadmap** towards transitioning and globalizing IANA functions. As ICANN CEO Fadi Chehadé explained during the opening ceremony of the London meeting, the proposal calls for the creation of a coordination group of 27 members, representing 13 sectors of the internet community that should design a blueprint for the future of the organization (the deadline for applications is 2 July). Given the fragmented nature of multi-stakeholder models of governance, it is unsurprising that this plan is still being discussed quite **fiercely**, and there were already indications at the London meeting that the September 2015 deadline might not be met.

But the focus on globalizing IANA functions may have become somewhat of a scapegoat for what are arguably larger issues with post-Snowden internet governance. In addition to more obvious debates at the meeting about new root domains, registries and registrars issues, and how to bolster the multi-stakeholder governance model, there were constant discussions at the meeting about how to hold ICANN accountable to and representative of the multiplicity of stakeholders involved.

Above all, there was also a kind of unspoken, controversial issue that is fundamental to the future of the internet: should ICANN evolve to become more than what it currently is, as (simply) an extremely powerful technical body? Should it assume a larger executive role regarding 'broad' global policies on the internet, which are so difficult to divorce from 'narrow' technical policies? Will it manage to address inherent tensions in the multi-stakeholder model to become more than a mere meeting place for internet geeks? These and other questions will no doubt continue to permeate the internet governance debate for the next year while ICANN and the coordination committee face what will no doubt be a very challenging test for the multi-stakeholder model of governance.

*This article gives the views of the authors, and does not represent the position of the LSE Media Policy Project blog, nor of the London School of Economics.*

