Marching Closer: The Internet Assigned Numbers Authority (IANA) Transition

As we draw closer to the time when the IANA stewardship functions transition away from US oversight to global stakeholders, LSE alumna and Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) NextGen participant Sana Ali talks to Konstantinos Komaitis, Senior Policy Adviser at the Internet Society (ISOC), about the implications of the transition for both ICANN and the internet community as a whole.

Sana Ali: What is the IANA stewardship function and how can the transition be explained in simple terms?

Konstantinos Komaitis: The IANA is an administrative function of the Internet that keeps track of IP addresses, domain names and protocol parameter identifiers that are used by Internet Standards. The transition of the IANA functions is not something new. It was envisioned early on, as part of the 1998 National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) White Paper which heralded the creation of ICANN itself. At the time, it was forecasted that by 2000 the United States Government would step away from its oversight role over ICANN.

However, in 2000 the US decided it would continue its oversight role. So the process has been in motion since then. In simple terms, the transition of the IANA functions means transferring the technical administration of these three specific functions [outlined above] to the global multistakeholder community; it further signifies the removal of the last piece of oversight control of a single government over a part of the Internet's key infrastructure. This is a very important move.

Why did the US Government decide now to relinquish its control over the IANA functions? There have been speculations that [Edward] Snowden's revelations might have had something to do with it, especially since ICANN signed the Montevideo Statement on the Future of Internet Cooperation in the leak's aftermath.

There is a lot of hype surrounding that. The truth is, we will never know exactly what triggered it. Yes, perhaps that played a role, but it is most essential to keep the following in mind: first, for many, many years, the US Government has done a wonderful job in ensuring oversight over the IANA functions; second, the US has repeatedly been on the record as being extremely supportive of the multistakeholder model. This model has been in constant development, and has been praised, criticised, tested and tweaked from all directions for several years.

So, the US Government has now said the model has matured and the multistakeholder community is ready to take on this role. A lot of people would like to attribute a lot of things to Snowden. I do not think everything is or should be about Snowden. Rather than attribute this transition to Snowden, I would attribute it to the realisation that we have a global and inclusive Internet community that is [sufficiently] mature and responsible to take on such a task.

What incentive will there be for ICANN's Board to satisfy the community's needs when no longer accountable to the National Telecommunications and Information Administration [NTIA; an Executive Branch agency of the United States Department of Commerce] after the transition?

When we are talking internet governance, one of the things we must understand is that central to the multistakeholder model are the elements of transparency and accountability. Any Board functioning within this space, that wants to remain relevant and able to contribute to the debate,

needs to remain accountable. We don't need to have the US Government, or any national government, overlooking ICANN's work. The danger of damaging the legitimacy of the multistakeholder model is too high for ICANN not to remain accountable or transparent. The members of this community want to encourage and strengthen the multistakeholder model, and the only way to do that is to maintain basic levels of accountability and transparency.

And, the presence of accountability frameworks has been consistent throughout the history of the Internet – one needs to look no further than the accountability mechanisms employed by the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF), or those of the Regional Internet Registries (RIRs). ICANN is a key organisation in the Internet and its Board is fully committed to being accountable and working towards what's best for the Internet and the global Internet community.

Speaking of less favourable actors, what do you think of some governments' demand for more control over internet governance, specifically in relation to domain names and numbers?

The role of governments has always been one of the most crucial questions within the internet governance debate. The multistakeholder model is new and is fundamentally different from traditional governance structures, so for many years there has been a misunderstanding that the governments have no role, or merely a decorative role within the model. In reality, they are as essential as any other actor. We cannot do this without the governments, so their cooperation is crucial.

National governments tend to understand governance in the context of the Westphalian system, based on sovereignty and geographical boundaries. The fact that some governments want a more active role is understandable, as it stems from their traditional conception of governance. To a certain extent, it also stems from a lack of clear understanding of just how many roles and responsibilities are involved in a successful governance structure relating to something so technical, yet also social, as the internet. Over the years, a lot of governments have begun to become advocates of the multistakeholder model. In moving forward, trying to integrate their expertise and willingness to work will be crucial.

How will the upcoming US elections affect the ability of stakeholders to agree to the transition?

NTIA has said they want the transition to be completed before the new government comes in. A new government will not necessarily see this transition as a priority. The current administration sees no need to extend this transition to a new government. The current climate is ideal for this to happen because the standing political climate in the US is familiar with the transition and has been working with all stakeholders closely for a long time.

The views reflected here belong to Konstantinos Komaitis in his own personal capacity and do not implicate or represent the Internet Society. This blog gives the views of the author and does not represent the position of the LSE Media Policy Project blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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