

System error

Governments squabble over new rules for the internet



The rules of the internet decide its speed, safety, accessibility, flexibility and unity. They therefore matter not just to computer enthusiasts, but to everyone with a stake in the modern world. On December 3rd officials from more than 150 countries, plus do-gooders, geeks and other interested parties, will meet in Dubai to argue about how to run the network—and fight over who should control it.

Since the internet's creation, a ragtag bunch of academics, engineers, firms and non-profit outfits have been in charge. That delights innovators but has been a nightmare for the tidy-minded, and especially for authoritarian governments. They would like the net to be run like the world's telephone system, with tight standards and clearly set charges. The Dubai meeting brings the chance to write new rules, with a review of an elderly treaty: the International Telecommunication Regulations.

America, the European Union and other Western countries are trying to defend the chaotic status quo. Against them are Russia, China and many African and Arab states which claim that the internet undermines national laws while enriching American firms. The meeting's host is the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), a sluggish UN affiliate founded in 1865 to regulate telegrams, but which now deals with satellite flight-paths and radio frequencies. Its influence has waned since telecoms liberalisation.

Some think it obsolete. Certainly its opaque and bureaucratic style dismays those steeped in the internet's open culture. Larry Downes, a commentator who blogs for Forbes, says the ITU's press releases read like "weird dispatches from Dickensian England". It has published only a few draft documents for Dubai and has yet to vote on whether the public can attend any of the discussions.

Though the ITU's president, Hamadoun Touré, dismisses the notion of a takeover of the internet as ridiculous, some governments, including Russia, would like the body to play a bigger role. In particular, they would like it to run the internet's address system, in place of ICANN, an unusual charity registered in California and supervised from a distance by America's commerce department. Critics think this gives the American authorities unjustified powers, for example to boot undesirable websites off the internet. Mr Touré says such matters are outside the Dubai meeting's scope, but he has little power to stop delegates raising them.

America wants to shield the net from the treaty, but its diplomats fear that a broad coalition is taking shape against them. They hope to fend off most of the 450 or so proposed amendments. Many seem innocuous, or even worthwhile: for example, calling for international co-operation against fraud, child abuse or spam. But Terry Kramer, the head of America's 122-strong delegation, says that some of these hide attempts to facilitate or legitimise censorship of political speech. America decries any wording, however mealy-mouthed, that could increase governments' control over content.

A fiercer row is brewing about the rules for online businesses. High charges for international phone calls once helped funnel cash from rich countries to state-owned networks in developing ones. Much of that traffic is now on the internet, hitting national operators' profits—and governments' foreign-exchange reserves. An alliance of poor countries and network operators wants businesses that depend on broadband networks, such as Google, Facebook and Microsoft, to pay towards their construction and upkeep.

Not joining the dots

One proposal is that the most popular websites, such as YouTube or Facebook, should be billed for the data they send, as if they were making phone calls. At the moment an American web firm pays no more to serve data to customers in Dhaka than in Detroit. But if the cost of serving users varied by location, web firms might start to shun far-flung customers, says Karen Mulberry of the Internet Society, which represents the network's engineers.

Meanwhile a group of Europe's big telecoms firms, the European Telecommunications Network Operators' Association (ETNO), is demanding that governments outlaw the introduction of "network neutrality" rules, which are already in force in countries such as the Netherlands and Chile. These rules require operators to grant equal priority to all internet traffic, and prevent them from charging higher prices for "fast lanes" and other premium services. Luigi Gambardella, ETNO's chairman, says operators cannot continue to invest in broadband infrastructure without a fairer share of the revenues it generates.

Advocates of network neutrality worry that this is an attempt to erect tollbooths on the internet. They say network-neutrality rules are needed to ensure that the internet provides a level playing field for innovative start-ups, and is not simply run in a way that maximises profits for incumbent network operators. Geoff Huston, a network scientist, thinks former telephone monopolies exaggerate their importance to the web. "They are dinosaurs fighting over the last water in the swamp," he says.

Fears of an anti-Western putsch in Dubai, handing control of the internet to authoritarian governments, are overblown. Though in theory the ITU works by majority vote, in practice agreements are almost always reached by consensus. Moreover, the ITU has no power to foist rules on governments that refuse to bargain. A bigger danger is therefore deadlock. That might encourage a large pack of nations to set up their own internet regime, making communication with the rest of the world more costly and more complicated.

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