

Privatize Internet Governance

By Viviane Reding

16 November 2005

The Wall Street Journal Europe

TUNIS -- The Internet is certainly one of mankind's greatest inventions in the 20th century. Developed by technology geniuses such as Vinton Cerf and strongly supported by the U.S. government, the Internet's decentralized network structure was transformed into a truly global communication tool after Tim Berners-Lee, a British engineer, invented the World Wide Web. Since then, the private sector has played a key role in developing and deploying Internet technologies and services. Today, the Internet has become a global resource for freedom of expression, trade and intercultural dialogue.

The governance of this global resource will be high on the agenda at this week's World Summit on the Information Society in Tunis. It augurs well that this Summit will bring together so many heads of states, parliamentarians, NGOs and other civil society representatives from around the world. The agenda will include issues such the management of the Internet's domain name system or decisions affecting root zone files, whose superficial technicity hides more fundamental political questions that go to the very heart of the kind of Internet we want? What, for example, can the global community do to guard against the growing encroachment of several governments around the world on the freedom of the Internet, a freedom which has been the cornerstone of its success?

The European Union of 25 nations and over 450 million potential Internet users will speak with one voice in Tunis and set out a position that is clear, coherent and consistent. To correct some misrepresentations and allay fears that have crept into the public domain in the U.S. of late, that position bears repeating: the EU advocates a free, stable, democratic Internet that is open to the world. We believe this view is shared by the vast majority of nations around the world, and certainly by our partners in the U.S. I have discussed the issue twice on visits to the U.S. this year alone, and have been left in no doubt by my U.S. counterparts that there is no substantive difference of views on this.

The EU recognises the great job the California-based non-profit organisation ICANN (Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers) is doing in its technical management of the world-wide domain name system. We have been staunch supporters since its privatisation in 1998. Applying the old adage "if it ain't broke don't fix it," we should not try to change this successful example of management in private hands. ICANN enjoys the trust of the global Internet Community.

Consequently we believe governments should not have a say in the day-to-day management of the Net. To involve them could result in unnecessarily burdensome structures and even endanger its stability. The EU therefore supports an approach to Internet governance that even further removes government control from ICANN. For many years, we have understood that this objective was also shared by the U.S. administration. The next step, therefore, should be to complete the privatization process

of the day-to-day management of the Net by phasing out the oversight functions of the U.S. Department of Commerce over ICANN.

Thirdly, we believe that on important policy issues concerning the functioning of the Internet -- spam, cyber-crime, and ensuring access by all citizens to the freedoms offered by the Web -- we need a new "co-operation model," a light and transparent mechanism for deliberations between governments. The U.S. has already expressed interest in closer co-operation with other governments to address public policy and sovereignty issues concerning the country code top-level domains. These discussions should include all nations sitting at the same table. Only in this way will we spread the understanding that freedom of expression on the Internet is the starting point not only for a democratic development of societies, but also for their prosperity.

To do so, we certainly don't need to establish any new structures nor call in the U.N. Let's build on the existing structures and ICANN in particular. If governments are really serious about safeguarding the free, stable and open Internet we have today, convening under the auspices of ICANN's Governmental Advisory Committee in order to put this much needed "cooperation model" into practice could be one of a number of concrete steps open to us.

Tunis can mark an important step forward on the long evolution of the Internet toward freedom from government control and increased internationalisation of its governance structures. We are almost there with two-thirds of the final package already agreed. A political agreement in Tunis is within our grasp. It would be an important and much-needed signal that democratic nations are genuinely committed to overcome the growing digital divide and build a truly open and inclusive global information society.

Ms. Reding is the EU Commissioner for Information Society and Media.