Subject: The U.N.'s Internet Sneak Attack

Posted by CyberkNight on Tue, 27 Nov 2012 14:53:58 GMT

View Forum Message <> Reply to Message

Who runs the Internet? For now, the answer remains no one, or at least no government, which explains the Web's success as a new technology. But as of next week, unless the U.S. gets serious, the answer could be the United Nations.

Many of the U.N.'s 193 member states oppose the open, uncontrolled nature of the Internet. Its interconnected global networks ignore national boundaries, making it hard for governments to censor or tax. And so, to send the freewheeling digital world back to the state control of the analog era, China, Russia, Iran and Arab countries are trying to hijack a U.N. agency that has nothing to do with the Internet.

For more than a year, these countries have lobbied an agency called the International Telecommunications Union to take over the rules and workings of the Internet. Created in 1865 as the International Telegraph Union, the ITU last drafted a treaty on communications in 1988, before the commercial Internet, when telecommunications meant voice telephone calls via national telephone monopolies.

Next week the ITU holds a negotiating conference in Dubai, and past months have brought many leaks of proposals for a new treaty. U.S. congressional resolutions and much of the commentary, including in this column, have focused on proposals by authoritarian governments to censor the Internet. Just as objectionable are proposals that ignore how the Internet works, threatening its smooth and open operations.

Having the Internet rewired by bureaucrats would be like handing a Stradivarius to a gorilla. The Internet is made up of 40,000 networks that interconnect among 425,000 global routes, cheaply and efficiently delivering messages and other digital content among more than two billion people around the world, with some 500,000 new users a day.

Many of the engineers and developers who built and operate these networks belong to virtual committees and task forces coordinated by an international nonprofit called the Internet Society. The society is home to the Internet Engineering Task Force (the main provider of global technical standards) and other volunteer groups such as the Internet Architecture Board and the Internet Research Task Force. Another key nongovernmental group is Icann, which assigns Internet addresses and domain names.

The self-regulating Internet means no one has to ask for permission to launch a website, and no government can tell network operators how to do their jobs. The arrangement has made the Internet a rare place of permissionless innovation. As former Federal Communications Commission Chairman William Kennard recently pointed out, 90% of cooperative "peering" agreements among networks are "made on a handshake," adjusting informally as needs change.

Proposals for the new ITU treaty run to more than 200 pages. One idea is to apply the ITU's long-distance telephone rules to the Internet by creating a "sender-party-pays" rule. International phone calls include a fee from the originating country to the local phone company at the receiving end. Under a sender-pays approach, U.S.-based websites would pay a local network for each

visitor from overseas, effectively taxing firms such as Google GOOG +0.28% and Facebook FB +1.04% . The idea is technically impractical because unlike phone networks, the Internet doesn't recognize national borders. But authoritarians are pushing the tax, hoping their citizens will be cut off from U.S. websites that decide foreign visitors are too expensive to serve.

Regimes such as Russia and Iran also want an ITU rule letting them monitor Internet traffic routed through or to their countries, allowing them to eavesdrop or block access.

Full article: http://online.wsj.com/article/SB1000142412788732435200457813 6902821852508.html