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**Obama May Give Internet Control to ‘Global Community’:
Authoritarians Eager to Pick Up What U.S. Gives Up, Freeing the Internet for
Censorship**

by

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On March 14, the Obama administration announced it was initiating a process to transfer oversight of the Internet from the United States to some yet-to-be-defined global entity. Assistant Secretary of Commerce Lawrence Strickling said, “The timing is right to start the transition process.”

You don’t need to be a credentialed foreign-policy expert, however, to harbor reservations concerning the plan to turn over management of key Internet functions to what the Commerce Department called the “global multi-stakeholder community.”

It is enough to inject a note of caution to point out that the Obama administration’s proclivity to rely on cooperation from the “international community” — rather than U.S. leadership — has not always produced hoped-for outcomes.

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To understand what is at stake, it is important to know the essence of the current Internet governance regime and a bit of recent history. Currently, pursuant to a 1998 agreement with the Commerce Department, an entity called the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) manages the assignment of Internet domain names and addresses for websites across the globe.

ICANN is a nonprofit, private-sector-led multi-stakeholder organization. ICANN is required to operate in a collaborative and transparent manner that fosters accountability to the various nongovernment stakeholders — commercial enterprises, civil society organizations representing Internet users, technical experts, and so forth — that are represented in ICANN’s governance structure.

While it is not true that Al Gore invented the Internet, it is true that the Net’s roots are grounded in the United States. It is also true that the U.S. is the only nation with a formal role in overseeing the Internet’s functioning, even though the Commerce Department’s oversight has been mostly hands-off since ICANN took over management of the domain-name system 15 years ago.

With the growth in Internet usage and the number of websites across the globe during the past 15 years, perhaps it is not surprising that other countries increasingly have come to question the U.S. government’s role as the sole sovereign overseeing Internet management. After all, for a century, international telephone communications have been regulated by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), an arm of the United Nations. Each of the ITU’s 193 countries has one vote in its deliberations.

Whatever the current arrangements for overseeing international voice communications, turning over management of the Internet to the ITU almost certainly would be harmful. The likely result would be increased telephone-style economic regulation that would discourage continued investment in Internet facilities and innovation in services.

It would increase the likelihood that censorship of Internet communications and speech curbs would be sanctioned as official policy. Sound farfetched?

In advance of a meeting in 2012 to consider changes to the ITU’s international communications regulations, Russia’s Vladimir Putin explicitly stated that he wanted to achieve “international control of the Internet using the monitoring and supervisory capability” of the United Nations.

What’s more, several countries did not hide their intent to adopt as official policy government censorship of Internet communications. A proposal floated by Russia, China, Saudi Arabia and Iran — countries not known for respecting free speech — declared that ITU member states should be allowed to restrict communications “used for the purpose of interfering in the internal affairs or undermining the sovereignty, national security, territorial integrity, and public safety of other states; or to divulge information of a sensitive nature.”

That language is an engraved invitation for governments to engage in censorship.

It is true that currently, under the existing governance structure, individual countries often attempt to censor Internet communications, and frequently, they succeed. Right now, Turkey is blocking Twitter communications and Syria routinely has done so over the past three years.

There is a difference, though, between countries acting in contravention of current ICANN and U.S. policies intended to preserve an open Internet and some new international government-controlled organization adopting edicts that give official sanction to such speech restrictions.

To be sure, the Obama administration did state that the current nongovernmental, multi-stakeholder model of Internet governance should be maintained. Indeed, its announcement said the United States will not accept a proposal for replacing U.S. control “with a government-led or an intergovernmental organization solution.”

The U.S. government’s resolve must remain firm in this regard, especially when Russia and other like-minded countries already have declared their intent to change the open nature of the Internet if they can gain control over its governance.

While the administration says it will not turn over the Internet’s management to an intergovernmental organization like the ITU, frankly, it is not easy to envision the emergence of a replacement entity that will not be controlled by governments around the world — many of which we shouldn’t wish to see possessing such authority.

I don’t want to foreclose the possibility that such a new entity may emerge. However, I do want the Obama administration to keep its proclivities in check for relying on the “international community” to take on tasks for which such an ephemeral community may not be well-suited.

Contrary to Mr. Strickling’s claim, considering the current troublesome state of world affairs, the timing may not be right for moving ahead with plans to relinquish U.S. oversight of the Internet. At a minimum, the watchwords must be “proceed with extreme caution.”

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