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Technology: Will your business have a say in how the Internet is run?

Several emerging nations push for increased government control of Internet

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FCC Commissioner Robert McDowell recently delivered a speech warning that “the effort to radically reverse the long-standing international consensus to keep governments from regulating core functions of the Internet’s ecosystem has been gaining momentum. The reach, scope and seriousness of this effort are nothing short of massive.”

Head of the National Telecommunications and Information Administration Larry Strickling has likewise sounded the alert about efforts “to shoehorn the Internet into a supranational regulatory body where it simply doesn’t belong....An Internet constrained by an international treaty will stifle the innovators and entrepreneurs who are responsible for its awesome growth.”

What are these top U.S. officials talking about? And why does it matter to the entire business community?

They are talking about a global conference this December to discuss the renegotiation of a treaty called the International Telecommunication Regulations (ITR), where certain governments may try to seize control of the Internet.

Since the Clinton Administration, the Internet has been managed by the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) and other private organizations that make Internet policy through a process that invites

all stakeholders—governments, businesses, non-governmental organizations and individuals—to participate. This “multi-stakeholder model” of governance offers businesses an active voice in the making of Internet policy.

Not everyone is convinced that the economic growth produced by a light regulatory touch or an open policy making process has benefited them. Citing national sovereignty, the need for development funding and diminishing revenues from telephony and other older technologies, several emerging nations have demanded government control of the Internet. Led by Brazil, India, Russia and China, they have proposed taking away ICANN’s authority over the Internet addressing system and giving it to a U.N. organization such as the International Telecommunication Union.

Complaints that the multi-stakeholder model does not serve everyone’s national interest are as old as the Internet itself. What is new is that this December’s global conference on the ITRs will provide a forum and, more significantly, a negotiating platform. Efforts to update an old treaty that regulates radio and telephone communications (the ITRs were adopted in 1988) could be exploited to give the U.N. authority over the technical system by which the Internet operates as a global network.

Businesses have good reason to resist this power play.

The Internet has been an astonishing engine of economic growth and technical innovation because in most places it has been regulated lightly based on policies in which businesses had a significant voice. Exchanging that approach for the top-down regulatory model demanded by emerging nations would stifle growth and innovation, if not choke it off altogether.

Worse yet, giving the U.N. control of Internet governance would deny businesses direct participation in deciding how the Internet is run. Decisions about what equipment to use, what software protocols are valid, what Internet names and numbers are available for use and many other core Internet policies would then be decided in a room filled with diplomats where the door is locked and a sign reads “Governments Only.”

Every business has a compelling interest in avoiding this result. Businesses, no less than governments, should have a say in how the Internet is run.

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