Slouching Towards Geneva:
Ten Unappreciated Axioms of Internet Governance

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Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, […]
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?
                                        -- William Butler Yeats

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The meaning of "Internet governance" has changed over time, and been so misused by people to promote their self-interests that the phrase is almost meaningless. In regards to the management of the domain name system, most individuals and institutions vying to play a role have only got involved relatively recently, and are unaware of the long history, a knowledge of which can help avert repeating mistakes. In this context, and as a melancholic observer of global Internet policy matters for over a decade, I offer ten basic points to enrich the understanding and discussion.

1. Internet governance is a means, not an end.
We can be in favor of Internet governance but agnostic as to what institution performs it, provided that our interests are achieved. The institutional design, however, determines the outcome we get. The difficultly comes when we must prioritize differing objectives that stakeholders consider paramount. The history of Internet governance is one of ever-increasing numbers of new parties acknowledging themselves as stakeholders and wishing to gain greater say in the then-established order. However, what is needed is not to continually revise the institutional framework, but to create a framework that can admit new stakeholders.

2. The goal, alongside stability, is to maintain openness and interconnectivity of the Net.
The chief attribute of the Internet is that it defies definition -- it is a living medium that undergoes constant change, and does so in ways that are inherently unpredictable. This, the Internet's most prized feature and source of innovation, is due to the open design of its protocol, standards, interconnection and architecture that leads to low cost access and autonomy of users at the edge. Decentralization makes regulation harder, but brings tremendous economic and social gains. The growth of the Internet -- people connected, networks deployed, content posted and businesses created -- would have been impossible were it not self-organized by individuals and firms.

3. The open network is akin to an open society: a matter of human freedom.
The Internet's decentralized approach leads to technical freedom to develop new uses for the medium, such as the Web or instant messaging, or new business models. Moreover, it also leads to freedom in the social, political and economic sphere: the Internet empowers individuals and groups at a scale previously impossible, be it for free speech or free trade, particularly in places that lack those traditions in the real world. The decentralization threatens established political and commercial interests. It is the antithesis of centralization, be it technical (like the telecom network), economic (state-planned economies), or political (dictatorial governments), even if these forces are also able to harness the network to hinder freedom and innovation.

4. The Internet is antithetical to the state-system; it defers to global, multi-stakeholderism.
The original design and ethos took little account of national laws and borders, and strove for a broader spirit of global connectivity. The Internet, in the celebrated engineering maxim, "rejected kings, presidents and voting" in favor of "rough consensus and running code." Jon Postel's policy for country-code domain managers who came from the private sector (RFC 1591), set out a two-pronged test of accountability: to the "(local) community" and "the global Internet community," thus deferring to an ideal of transnational human solidarity. This spirit of interconnectedness and limits on sovereignty -- as well as private-sector and governmental approach -- fits in line with broader trends in international affairs over global issues, be it climate control, human rights, etc.

5. The Internet governance conundrum is that what flourished as a private infrastructure has emerged as a public infrastructure, yet lacks public input that governments provide.
The problem is how to apply broader public-interest values into the network without traditional governmental regulation that risks jeopardizing the technical innovation and political freedom which the Internet enables. Most power over the DNS is illusory, yet it is only place where centralized control could be imposed on the entire system -- at the core rather than at the edge, where control is imperfect. Ultimately, the debate is over whether the Internet should be treated as a public or private infrastructure, and the degree of control by industry, government, or "civil society" over the Internet's evolution. Giving one interest predominant power over the DNS is like handing the Church the control of the printing press.

6. The perennial logjam comes from trying to solve intractable differences by creating an organization, rather than first creating it, and then addressing (not resolving) conflicts.
The battle over the institutional design becomes a proxy for a much narrower interest one wants. In 1996 with the IAHC, this was for new TLDs by Internet entrepreneurs; in 1998 with ICANN it was for privately-operated TLDs by NSI (now VeriSign); in 2005 with WSIS it is for more power by governments. As in previous cases, any arrangement that leaves other parties unsatisfied is bound not to endure long. Every party employs the term "multi-stakeholder" to mean that they will enjoy predominant power but leave a few, merely symbolic crumbs for others.

7. The idea of a self-selected committee designing an institution for Internet governance is a continually seductive but dangerous fiction.
It always occurs because one group perceives a power-vacuum in the arrangement of Internet governance -- that they, of course, are most appropriate to fill. Prior to the commercialization of the Internet, the governance was by the original techies (DARPA researchers) keeping the new engineers (NSF academics) out. In 1992, it was IETF/ISOC, to include industry. In 1996, it was IAHC, to include governments (via ITU and WIPO). After 1998 it was ICANN, to include industry and other governments. In December 2003 at WSIS, an ICC representative Talal Abu-Ghazaleh said he would hand-pick a group to once-and-for-all establish an Internet governance system. In 2005, the WGIG vies to settle the matter. What these acronyms stand for is unimportant -- each entity failed because it entrenched the most powerful interests at the moment, and was inflexible to new, self-identified stakeholders.

8. Oft-cited Internet governance principles are inadequate, stressing process over design.
Openness, accountability, transparency, diversity and representation are ideals and aspirations, not institutional structures for policy-making. What is needed is more concentration on designing an organization that is capable of changing for new circumstances. It should have the seeds of its own diminishment or dissolution within it. It must have a separation of powers, and checks and balances -- the one thing that every attempt at Internet governance, oddly, has lacked. The structure will ideally have three main features: 1. minority views must be taken into account; 2.

majority acts effect operational questions at the margins, not fundamental premises upon which the Internet and its governance model is based; 3. the only viable alternative remains cooperation, not secession. The process of Internet governance fails because so far the notion of collaborative policy-making is completely missing -- there are no ideological camps, no political parties or coalitions in which groups are forced to sublimate their ideal self-interest for a suitably-acceptable compromise, in order to attain the benefits of the workable system as a whole.

9. The governance of the DNS will not completely encompass future Internet addressing and navigation, which is a good thing, not a shortcoming.
The system of domain names, IP numbers, root servers and protocol identifiers is not static but a technology capable of evolving into better form. As such, the current system should not be treated as sacrosanct, but amenable to innovation. The paradox of Internet governance is that any institutional arrangement will by nature be a collusion of political power and financial interests that acts to freeze into place the current technical design, and make new and better approaches almost impossible to emerge -- much as the system of national telecom operators dominated communications for a century until the Internet emerged as the unlikely force that upended it. We can already see that future Internet navigation will not simply be addresses linked to computers, but to billions of devices, file-documents, real-time video and audio streams, objects though RFID tags, and even constantly-changing instantiations of information -- all which will make today's DNS and its governance seem anachronistic. Allowing for alternative addressing and navigation across the network, alongside a sanctioned "legacy" DNS, will be a balanced way to achieve diversity, experimentation and progress, while also ensuring stability and reliability.

10. There is no solution to the problems of Internet governance -- but the attempt to devise a solution upon which others are bound itself causes problems.
The issue of Internet governance is like governance in other spheres: a timeless conversation in which there are no answers acceptable for all. The best one can hope for is a system whereby differing interests can be held in balance so that interconnectivity is preserved. The attempt to find a "solution" misdirects efforts that could be used for devising practical answers to specific problems on a reasonable scale, which is the most effective form of governance in the real world. Reforming the institutional structure is necessary, but risks making things worse for everyone.

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The Internet governance debate truly began a decade ago, in 1995 when Jon Postel prepared a draft plan for over 100 new domains, and the US government organized a conference entitled "Internet Name and Number Management and Beyond: Issues in the Coordination, Privatization, and Internationalization of the Internet." This underscores the degree to which today's controversies have a longer lineage than many participants in the current iteration of the debate know or acknowledge. It also sheds light on the goodwill of the US government to find a successor organization -- international in scope -- to preserve the openness and interconnectivity of the network it created and gave to the world. Hopefully, this reminds us to approach the matter with humility; the chief errors of those before us occurred when one group presumed to definitively answer the issues in favor of their interests at the detriment of others.

This suggests two lessons, forever unheeded: First, no one solution is viable since stakeholders see problems differently and hold diverse values, thus multiple institutions are needed to address the myriad issues (an approach that is in the spirit of the decentralized network). Second, though each stakeholder naturally seeks to uphold their interests, the reality is we are interdependent. Any Internet governance arrangement that does not take this into account will fail.