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## **'Global' Internet Governance Invites Censorship**

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*If the U.S. surrenders Web oversight, firm steps must be taken to protect free speech and commerce.*

The Commerce Department announced last month that the U.S. government intends to transition its authority overseeing the Internet's Domain Name System, which is run through a nonprofit organization called Ican (the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers), under a contract that expires in late 2015. This announcement comes at a time when global Internet freedom has never been more important or under greater threat.

Governments around the world are considering measures to squelch free speech or free enterprise on the Internet, including efforts to suppress Twitter, YouTube and Facebook, and restrictions on cloud computing and other Internet data services. Multilateral organizations have already taken disturbing steps. At the 2013 International Telecommunication Union treaty conference in Dubai, a majority of countries joined Russia, Iran and China in supporting a measure calling on the ITU, a United Nations agency, to play an enlarged role in "international Internet governance."

The ITU has historically had authority over certain international telephone rates and global spectrum allocations. At its next conference in South Korea in October, the ITU's 193 member states will likely consider extending the agency's authority to the Internet.

The U.S. can influence this and other multilateral gatherings, working to convince countries on the fence that a free and open Internet promotes economic growth globally and within countries that embrace it. Toward this end, changes in the U.S. relationship with Ican should be designed to preserve the unrestricted flow of information and data over the Internet.

This means, first of all, that any entity that might replace the U.S. oversight role cannot be a government entity. Instead, it must be a multistakeholder body rooted in the private sector and civil society, preserving the decentralized, nongovernmental approach that has "governed" the Internet from its inception. Otherwise, no deal.

The Commerce Department made such conditions implicit when it announced its intention to eventually transfer its current oversight role with Ican. We believe these conditions should become explicit and nonnegotiable. First, the U.S. should not yield any authority to another government, group of governments or intergovernmental body, including the United Nations or a U.N. agency such as the ITU. Second, any transfer must be to an entity that is protected from governmental interference and includes both private sector and civil society organizations that depend upon the Internet remaining free of international actions that could impede innovation.

Third, any transfer must guarantee the reliability, stability and resilience of the Internet, complying with official U.S. policy since the Bush administration. Finally, any transfer of authority over Iccann must be subjected to "stress tests," hypothetical scenarios designed to expose potential vulnerabilities of any new oversight mechanism.

America's relationship with Iccann has been used as an argument to grant governing authority to a United Nations agency like the ITU or to otherwise Balkanize the Internet through increased restrictions by individual countries. Not coincidentally, the argument has spread since the Arab Spring demonstrated that widely available Internet connectivity threatens nondemocratic governments. More recently, and without irony, some governments have cited the Snowden matter to advance international governmental involvement, despite the fact that American oversight of Iccann is wholly unrelated to NSA matters.

Bowing to these arguments would be a mistake. The Internet is the infrastructure of the modern global economy, and the free flow of data is essential to any country seeking economic growth. Global Internet consumption and expenditure now exceeds that of the agriculture and energy sectors. The Internet spurred 21% of GDP growth during the past five years in the world's 13 leading developed nations, according to a 2011 study by the McKinsey Global Institute.

Moreover, the Internet is a boon to small businesses and job creation. The Web helps new businesses start and young businesses expand, enabling them to sell more products and services across all industries. The lower infrastructure costs of the mobile Internet has brought innovation to countries that had given up on building a well-functioning communications system. And while it's caused disruption in some sectors, McKinsey also found that for every job eliminated, the Internet created more than 2.5 new jobs.

The Internet is also driving innovation in health care and education world-wide, saving lives and creating economic opportunity for millions. Innovators in Africa have led the way on mobile health initiatives, such as texting services that send health reminders and tips to pregnant women and young mothers. Innovators in Asia are using the Internet and technology to expand literacy and basic skills. South Korea, for example, has pledged to replace all paper textbooks with digital learning by 2015.

A censored Internet will choke these opportunities. A flourishing and free Internet, on the other hand, will expand them. A January Boston Consulting Group study of 65 countries found that reducing limitations on online activity, through enhanced broadband connectivity and access, can increase a country's GDP by as much as 2.5%. A fragmented global network encumbered by international regulatory restrictions will only limit this potential for growth.

The good news is there's broad, bipartisan support for resisting measures to restrict Internet freedom. In 2012, both houses of Congress unanimously passed resolutions affirming that the policy of the U.S. is "to promote a global Internet free from governmental control." The Iccann oversight transition presents a major opportunity to build on that consensus—to preserve and further Internet freedom world-wide.

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