Will the 'Honest Brokers' of Internet Governance Have Any Real Power?

*Our own **Alison Powell** responds to the European Commission's announcement on Wednesday that it will pursue a greater role in internet governance and expresses doubts that the US will really cede power.*

Europe wants to be an 'honest broker' of internet governance. But can it be a powerful one? Wednesday's press release from the European Commission could be interpreted as a brazen claim for Europeans to fill the legitimacy gap left by the US after the mass surveillance revelations. But things may well be more complicated: it is in the interest of the US government to appear to cede power, but it seems entirely plausible that they would seek to retain as much control as possible, with as little visibility. What kind of opportunity does this provide for Europe?

The European Commission hopes it is an important one, writing in its press release:

> "Recent revelations of large-scale surveillance have called into question the stewardship of the US when it comes to Internet Governance. So given the US-centric model of Internet Governance currently in place, it is necessary to broker a smooth transition to a more global model while at the same time protecting the underlying values of open multi-stakeholder governance of the Internet."

Against this background, Commission Vice-President Neelie Kroes calls for the EU to play a "strong role in defining what the net of the future looks like." Yet in this first statement, nothing stands out as being particularly different than what Daniel Sepulveda, the State Department's Coordinator for International Communications and Information Policy espoused in a speech on January 23. Both Kroes and Sepulveda stress the legitimacy of the Internet Governance Forum as the multi-stakeholder meeting of record, rather than the Brazil meeting proposed for early 2014. Similarly, both Europe and the US (in this context) underline principles for internet governance – particularly inclusiveness but also transparency and accountability.

Yet neither of these statements made any strong claims about the central target of the now-famous Montevideo statement: the US government's control of the ICANN and IANA functions, which in turn control the allocation of domain name servers and internet addresses. The EC's communication says only that it proposes "concrete actions such as: Establishment of a clear timeline for the globalisation of ICANN and the IANA functions". As concrete actions go, this seems a bit less hard-hitting than one would hope for from a strong 'honest broker', although the Commission may be able to provide some much-needed transparency to internet governance processes through its Internet Policy Observatory program. This could help to break what Internet Governance scholar Milton Mueller calls the 'iron cage of multi-stakeholderism'.

The trouble with the proposals is that they all appear to be eminently sensible and necessary without being especially concrete. It is clear that this is a moment in which the global power may well shift to move the US out of its historically central role in governing the internet, but this does not necessarily suggest that the US government will really cede that much power. It may well attempt to yield responsibilities that no longer grant strategic power. Europe and the Commission may succeed in playing a greater role in defining and monitoring internet governance, but not necessarily in enacting it.

This post gives the views of the author, and does not represent the position of the LSE Media Policy Project blog, nor of the London School of Economics

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