Freedom should Govern the Internet

The Internet “needs some centralized control in order to function” (Cukier). There are four aspects of the Internet’s infrastructure that require oversight and coordination and they all deal with how people obtain Internet addresses. The four areas that require oversight are: 1) Operating the database of domain names and two-letter country-code suffixes, 2) Allocating Internet Protocol numbers, 3) Operating root servers, the machines that match domain names with their corresponding Internet Protocol numbers, and 4) Coordinating the formal technical standards that ensure the Internet’s “interoperability” (Cukier).

The organization that does these tasks is a private-sector nonprofit organization called the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN). ICANN was created in 1998 by U.S. government.

Many foreign governments dislike ICANN because the U.S. government “retains oversight authority” (Cukier) of the organization. Foreign governments fear that ICANN is “an instrument of American hegemony over cyberspace” (Cukier) that can be used as leverage in international disputes. “What would prevent Washington, they argued, from … choosing … to knock Iran off the Internet?” (Cukier).

The UN and many foreign governments have advocated for a multilateral organization that would replace ICANN and that would allow the international community would administer the infrastructure of the Internet. Other foreign governments want to create their own Internet infrastructure that would serve political
agendas and control the Internet available to its citizens. Kenneth Cukier, Nanda Kumar, and Abbe Mowshowitz predict that the creation of parallel Internets would make “Internet addressing ambiguous and unreliable” (Kumar and Mowshowitz). The big dispute is over what organization should oversee the operational tasks of coordinating Internet access.

Cukier believes that ICANN is a good organization because it has an open infrastructure, allows free expression and creativity, is nonbureaucratic, and is free from political interference. ICANN’s work has “ensured that the network operates smoothly so that these benefits can be realized” (Cukier). Cukier is wary that Internet users take these values for granted and that a different governing organization may not follow the same liberal philosophy.

Cukier also writes that the current system of Internet governance “will almost certainly be unsustainable over the long term” (Cukier). The U.S. “will have to come up with some way of sharing control with other countries” if it wants to avoid foreign governments creating parallel naming and addressing systems that would compete with ICANN-sanctioned domains (Cukier). Kumar and Mowshowitz agree and write that sharing Internet oversight “sooner would be better [than later]” (Kumar and Mowshowitz).

I support ICANN because of its liberal governing philosophy and think that any institution that governs the Internet needs to have its mission set on protecting freedom on speech and universal access. The Internet has thrived because people can collaborate ideas and creativity can flourish. A private nonprofit organization eliminates financially or politically motivated decisions that would obstruct Internet users’ freedoms. ICANN, a
private corporation, will be able to exist as long as it continues to provide Internet users with essential freedoms and does not interfere with people’s access to the network. The major obstacle to ICANN’s control is if the U.S. government begins to use the Internet as a political tool. The Internet should not be used as a tool for U.S. diplomacy.

The Cukier and Kumar-Mowshowitz articles were written in 2005 and 2006 respectively and as far as I know there has not been the development of a parallel Internet in the past three years. I believe that this shows the success of ICANN as an independent institution in being able to oversee the essential structural components of the Internet without political interference from the U.S. government. I think that U.S. government oversight of ICANN is a good influence that ensures that ICANN continues to uphold liberal principles. I am concerned that a UN controlled Internet authority such as the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) would not run as efficiently as ICANN because of all the diplomatic procedures of politics. I would not be opposed to the IGF replacing ICANN as long as the new governing body is only focused on making sure that the Internet runs smoothly and not in political matters such as restricting access.