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Op-Ed Contributors

Web of the Free

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THERE is a move afoot at the United Nations and in the European Union to get the United States to give up control of the Internet - a medium that America created and on which it now critically relies.

Disingenuously calling for a "model of cooperation" in Internet governance in advance of the World Summit on the Information Society to be held in Tunisia in November, the European commissioner for information society and media is opening the door to Internet regulation while saying that "we have no intention to regulate the Internet."

This maneuver amounts to a call for the United States to depend on the kindness of strangers in maintaining basic infrastructure that underpins our national security and economy. Moreover, it threatens to whittle away the freedom of the Internet with a series of seemingly minor and well-intentioned compromises that begin with something that sounds as reasonable as a "model of cooperation."

Any society needs certain basics to enable it to function. If the United States had not created a postal service and post roads, for example, national commerce could not have developed. Airports and air routes, railways and highways are just modern-day post roads. The Internet is one more step in this evolution. It provides new tools for communication (supplementing regular mail with e-mail), buying and selling goods (electronic retailing with goods delivered by public and private mail services), financial transactions, and much more.

The Internet has become an integral part of the global economy, in large part because the United States has also provided the genius of our technology to other societies that use it to benefit themselves, including in doing business and competing with the United States. So it was only a matter of time before foreign powers began asking who should control the electronic superhighway on which they now rely for their national well-being, something that America has built, paid for and maintained.

Their eyes have turned to a California-based nonprofit organization created by the Commerce Department in 1998, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, that administers and keeps track of all Web addresses worldwide. Icnann, as it is called, operates largely free from government interference - the Commerce Department has never overruled an Icnann decision, believing that government should not become involved in Internet governance. And local authorities in other countries are free to set policy for their country-specific extensions (.ca for Canada, .de for Germany, etc.). But only Icnann ultimately has the authority to allow a site onto the Net, or not, by virtue of its role of maintaining a master list of domain names. Imagine how much certain governments would covet such power.

American values caused the Internet to emerge and evolve as a medium of freedom. While there is a standard of transcendent decency that can and should regulate Internet communication in such matters as child pornography, there are standards of national self-interest that vary from country to country. China sees the Internet as part of its internal infrastructure and seeks to govern it as such, monitoring and censoring communications that include words like "liberty," "Tiananmen Square" or "Falun Gong," and going after dissidents who use the Internet.

Internationalizing control of a medium now regulated with a loose hand by a nation committed to maximizing freedom would inevitably create more of an opening for countries like China - a strong proponent of imposing some international supervision of Ican - to exert more pressure on internet service providers. More broadly, international regulation could enable like-minded governments to work in concert to deem certain thoughts impermissible online. It is all too possible that minority political or religious expressions would be widely repressed under a doctrine of the greater good imposed by a collective of governments claiming to know what's best, limiting what may be expressed online to whatever, say, the United Nations General Assembly, the European Union, or the Arab League, might deem reasonable.

Any society may, of course, choose to create its own balkanized domestic version of the Internet, an Intranet within its borders that it regulates as it pleases. It could then still do within its borders many of the things done by the Internet, like Brazil's online tax collection system, but would not enjoy the online privilege of worldwide interaction.

The Internet is an attractive commercial infrastructure for all societies, even oppressive ones. But the string attached to its creation by America is that it must be used within a context of freedom, both economic and political. That is a democratic value that we should not be shy about exporting. Accepting that commitment to online freedom should be the price that foreign governments must pay for the blessing of the Internet in their national economic lives.

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