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# The U.N. Isn't a Threat to the Net

By Kofi A. Annan

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The main objective of the World Summit on the Information Society to be held this month in Tunisia is to ensure that poor countries get the full benefits that new information and communication technologies -- including the Internet -- can bring to economic and social development. But as the meeting draws nearer, there is a growing chorus of misinformation about it.

One mistaken notion is that the United Nations wants to "take over," police or otherwise control the Internet.

Nothing could be farther from the truth. The United Nations wants only to ensure the Internet's global reach, and that effort is at the heart of this summit.

Strong feelings about protecting the Internet are to be expected. In its short life, the Internet has become an agent of revolutionary change in health, education, journalism and politics, among other areas. In the United Nations' own work for development, we have glimpsed only the beginning of the benefits it can provide: for victims of disaster, quicker, better-coordinated relief; for poor people in remote areas, lifesaving medical information; and, for people trapped under repressive governments, access to uncensored information as well as an outlet to air their grievances and appeal for help.

There are also legitimate concerns about the use of the Internet to incite terrorism or help terrorists, disseminate pornography, facilitate illegal activities or glorify Nazism and other hateful ideologies. But censoring cyberspace, compromising its technical underpinnings or submitting it to stringent governmental oversight would mean turning our backs on one of today's greatest instruments of progress. To defend the Internet is to defend freedom itself.

Governance of matters related to the Internet, such as spam and cybercrime, is being dealt with in a dispersed and fragmented manner, while the Internet's infrastructure has been managed in an informal but effective collaboration among private businesses, civil society and the academic and technical communities. But developing countries find it difficult to follow all these processes and feel left out of Internet governance structures.

The United States deserves our thanks for having developed the Internet and made it available to the world. For historical reasons, the United States has the ultimate authority over some of the Internet's core resources. It is an authority that many say should be shared with the international community. The United States, which has exercised its oversight responsibilities fairly and honorably, recognizes that other governments have legitimate public policy and sovereignty concerns, and that efforts to make the governance arrangements more international should continue.

The need for change is a reflection of the future, when Internet growth will be most dramatic in developing countries. What we are seeing is the beginning of a dialogue between two different cultures: the nongovernmental Internet community, with its traditions of informal, bottom-up decision making, and the

more formal, structured world of governments and intergovernmental organizations.

The Internet has become so important for almost every country's economy and administration that it would be naive to expect governments not to take an interest, especially since public service applications in areas such as education and health care will become even more widespread. They need to be able to get their Internet policies "right," and to coordinate with each other and with the Internet community. But governments alone cannot set the rules. They must learn to work with non-state stakeholders. They, after all, are the ones that have played critical roles in building and coordinating the Internet, and they will remain the driving force of further expansion and innovation.

At the summit two years ago in Geneva, discussions on Internet governance reached a stalemate. So the U.N. member states asked me to establish a group to examine the issue further. This Working Group on Internet Governance presented its findings in a report that reflects the views of its members, but not of the United Nations. It proposed creation of a "new space for dialogue" -- a forum that would bring all stakeholders together to share information and best practices and discuss difficult issues, but that would not have decision-making power.

The group also offered several options for oversight arrangements, with varying degrees of government involvement and relationship to the United Nations. None says that the United Nations should take over from the technical bodies now running the Internet; none proposes to create a new U.N. agency; and some suggest no U.N. role at all. All say that the day-to-day management of the Internet should be left to technical institutions, not least to shield it from the heat of day-to-day politics. These and other suggestions are being considered by U.N. member states.

Everyone acknowledges the need for more international participation in discussions of Internet governance. The disagreement is over how to achieve it. So let's set aside fears of U.N. "designs" on the Internet. Much as some would like to open up another front of attack on the United Nations, this dog of an argument won't bark. I urge all stakeholders to come to Tunis ready to bridge the digital divide and ready to build an open, inclusive information society that enriches and empowers all people.

*The writer is secretary general of the United Nations.*

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