UN Web conference stirs 'culture clash' over regulations' reach

The Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) -- An upcoming U.N. gathering about Internet oversight is raising alarms from a broad coalition of critics, including the U.S., tech giants such as Google and rights groups, concerned that changes could lead to greater efforts to censor Web content and stifle innovation in cyberspace.

Among the issues on the agenda at next month's meeting in Dubai are ideas to battle Internet spam and fraud. But also tucked into more than 1,300 proposals are potential hot-button items that opponents believe could be used by in places such as Iran and China to justify their crackdowns on bloggers and other Web restrictions.

Another likely battle when the meeting begins Dec. 3 is over European-backed suggestions to change the pay structure of the Web to force content providers - such as Google Inc., Facebook Inc. and others - to kick in an extra fee to reach users across borders.

It's unclear what proposals will emerge from the 11-day meeting of the U.N.'s 193-nation International Telecommunications Union, or ITU. The preliminary jockeying highlights the tensions of the Internet age between what to regulate and what to leave alone. The outcome could affect billions of Internet users.

Some are unhappy with the structure of the conference itself.

"Engineers, companies and people that build and use the Web have no vote," said Google in an online statement. "The billions of people around the globe that use the Internet, the experts that build and maintain it, should be included" in the decision-making process.

Others warn of dangers.

Simply opening the door to greater controls by the ITU raises concern among activists and others. They worry that countries with tightly controlled cyberspace such as China, Iran and Gulf Arab states will push for additions to the ITU's treaty - such as national security monitoring - that could be used to give legitimacy both to their current efforts to monitor and restrict the Web and to possible future clampdowns.

"We can expect an Internet totally different to today's open and global system," said Sharan Burrow, general secretary of the International Trade Union Confederation, representing 175 million workers worldwide.

"Repressive governments will have a U.N. treaty which allows them to control freedom of expression, to monitor everything any targeted individual is saying on the Net, and to stop social movements and human rights defenders demanding respect for basic rights," she cautioned.

The host United Arab Emirates, for example, sharply tightened Internet laws this month to give authorities wide powers to bring charges for offenses such as insulting the rulers or trying to organize street protests.

The ITU's secretary-general, Hamadoun Toure, said in a May speech in Canada that he expected "a light-touch regulatory approach to emerge."

The ITU says it has no interest in governing the Internet or restricting expression, but notes that it must update its communications treaty to incorporate the dramatic technological changes that have occurred since the last revisions in 1988. That was before the Internet in the public domain.

Among the topics to be discussed in Dubai: Internet security, combating fraud, preventing mobile phone "bill shock" with roaming charges and efforts to expand broadband infrastructures in developing countries.

"For every proposal, there is a counterproposal," said ITU spokeswoman Sarah Parkes.

She noted that U.N. treaties such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights take precedence over any regulations ITU may adopt that could relate to freedom of expression.

"We will not support any effort to broaden the scope of the ITRs (International Telecommunications Regulations) to facilitate any censorship of content or blocking the free flow of information and ideas," said Terry Kramer, a former technology industry executive who was given ambassador status to lead a powerhouse 123-member U.S. delegation to the World Conference on International Telecommunications.

The groups include representatives from Facebook, Microsoft Corp., Amazon.com Inc. and Google - which has been leading an aggressive online campaign to warn about the risks of increased Internet regulations from the meeting.

The international Internet Society, a group headquartered in Virginia and Switzerland that maintains the Internet core protocols, also claims any tighter U.N. controls could "interfere with the continued innovation and evolution of the telecommunications networks and the Internet."

The American technology company envoys in Dubai also are expected to push back strongly against any sweeping revision in Internet charges. The proposal, led by the European Telecommunications Network Operators' Association, would do away with the current system - called "net neutrality" - that now treats all Internet traffic equally, regardless of who is sending or receiving.

In its place, the European plan seeks to have content providers pay when their service is accessed across borders. The money raised, theoretically, could pay to expand broadband infrastructures in developing countries. Opponents, however, say companies such as Facebook could cut off access to countries where the extra charges are too burdensome.

Even the U.N.'s cultural agency, UNESCO, has raised concerns about proposals that are so broadly worded that they could be used to restrict freedom of expression under the guise of national security or fighting spam and Internet fraud.

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