Proposal for the World Internet Conference

by Ronda Hauben
ronda.netizen@gmail.com

In 2015, I was invited to attend the Second World Internet Conference (WIC) sponsored by the Chinese government and held in Wuzhen in Southeast China on December 16-18, 2015. This conference may in the long run represent an important contribution to the global efforts to encourage international cooperation among nations to determine the infrastructure and regulations needed to encourage the growth and spread of the Internet.

Putting the World Internet Conference in a broader context, ten years earlier I attended the United Nations sponsored 2005 World Summit for the Information Society (WSIS) in Tunis. That Summit was a significant event. Participants there from around the world wanted to be part of and contribute to the development of the Internet and its future well being. The participants represented the desire of people everywhere to be on the Internet. Also I chaired and was a presenter on a panel that was part of an academic side conference held two days before the beginning of WSIS. Being at the side conference and at the Summit led me to contacts related to China and South Korea which I continued in the years following the WSIS Summit meeting.*

That academic side conference connected to the Tunis Summit was titled the Past, Present, and Future of Research in the Information Society (PPF). This academic conference made possible a focus on a more general perspective about the Internet and its development than did other events at the Tunis Summit itself.

After the Tunis Summit, I became accredited as a journalist at the UN Headquarters in NYC, first for a South Korean publication and later for a German and then also a Chinese publication. Each year at the UN I saw that the issue of Internet development would be brought up in the Second Committee of the General Assembly. And each year it was transferred to Geneva for discussion. The Tunis WSIS mandated the UN General Assembly to do a Ten Year Review in 2015 of what had happened in the 10 years that followed the 2005 Summit. Several times this obligation was raised at meetings of the Second Committee. The G77 + China called for a summit to be held at the highest levels possible of governments represented at the UN in September 2015 along with the Sustainable Development Goal summit.

This proposal for another summit-level event, however was blocked and transferred to Geneva, where it was also blocked. There was significant criticism about how it was never adequately carried out. The G77 + China statement to the WSIS Review meeting on July 1, 2015 outlines this problem. The statement explains, "It is unfortunate that the mandate of the Tunis Agenda has been implemented selectively to suit the narrow interests of a few influential players in the multi stakeholder community…. The Tunis Agenda called for Governments to, on an equal footing with each other, carry out their roles and responsibilities on international public policy issues pertaining to the Internet. However, ten years later, tangible progress on this specific mandate … has been blocked. It is imperative that this important issue be resolved, so that all nations have an equal say in the public policy affecting the Internet."[1]

Since the 2005 Tunis Summit, not only at the UN Headquarters in NYC, but also at other venues, a number of obstacles have been placed in the path of those making an effort to fulfill the inclusive vision expressed in Tunis.

In this context China's plan to hold a yearly meeting could be a welcome development. But a question is raised about the World Internet Conference held in Wuzhen. What is its purpose? Does

it represent a continuation of efforts to help spread Internet access and cooperative discussion and participation? Is it toward setting a global policy that will take up to support the continuing spread and development of the Internet? This is not a commercial question. It is a public policy question.

Perhaps some observations about the 2015 World Internet Conference will help suggest answers to this question.

Some Observations about the Second World Internet Conference

For the past two years, 2014 and 2015, China has sponsored and organized a high level meeting about Internet development and policy that is to be held on a yearly basis.

I want to share some observations about the experience I had at the Second Wuzhen World Internet Conference.

1) A substantial number of people involved with Internet development from around the world attended. I met and spent some time with people I had met previously at different occasions over the past 28 years that I have been part of the Internet community.

2) The opening session of the conference with speeches by Xi Jinping and other high officials of the member nations of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) raised important issues and demonstrated that China and several other countries were treating the World Internet Conference as an important meeting.

3) One very interesting session at the World Internet Conference was the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) Cybersecurity session held on December 17. This event was by invitation only and limited the number of those who could attend. Also, it was off the record. The form and process it provided however, were greatly appreciated by those I heard from who attended. The form of the session was that there were no panelists. All who were part of the session could raise their hands and get called on for a short response to the questions raised by the moderator. This event provided for a range of views and issues which broadened the spectrum of the topic of the session. The Cybersecurity session allowed a broad set of ideas to be presented and a wide variety of voices to be heard. Contributions were encouraged from all participants at the session.

4) The student guides who were provided to help participants at the Conference were capable, serious, and took on to solve the problems experienced by those attending. Bilingual student guides were available to act as a needed interface at the hotels, the EXPO, and the conference for English speaking participants and those who spoke only Chinese.

5) The program of the World Internet Conference in 2015 was somewhat varied but there were sessions which had too many presentations to allow time for questions and comments from the audience. A greater effort to welcome presentations or panels from a broader spectrum of presenters with more panels, but each panel with fewer presenters and allowing more time for discussion, would be a better format.

6) There was discussion about ICANN, but the discussion did not adequately represent those who have a critique of ICANN's contradictory nature.

7) One major criticism from my perspective is that the focus seemed too geared toward corporate presenters. Some aspects of the conference were more like a trade show than a high level Internet conference that will support and contribute to the still needed development and spread of the Internet, especially to developing countries. There are those in developing and developed countries who need a significant role played by government and by netizens to help spread the Net. Experience throughout the development of the Internet has shown the corporate model for Internet development is in general too narrow and focused on short term profit. A recent example is the effort by Facebook

to determine what part of the Internet poor people should have as opposed to the whole Internet. (See the critique of this model as applied to India published in the U.K. *Guardian.*[2])

8) In the realm of security, there seemed more concern at the World Internet Conference with security for commerce and less focus on understanding what the particular nature of security related to the Internet would mean.

9) But given the significant endeavor that organizing and planning an annual high level conference related to the Internet and its development represents, the Second World Internet Conference organized by China accomplished something important.

In my experience at the Second World Internet Conference I found that research I have done about the more general nature of Internet development proved helpful in my discussions with government officials, academics, students and others with whom I spoke during the World Internet Conference.

In line with my experience, in a speech[3] on May 30, 2016, Chinese President Xi Jinping reviewed the historic importance of the technological revolution to bring advances to human society. He pointed to science as helping to uncover the laws of nature toward being able to meet the challenges of economic development. Along with recognizing the need to support basic research, he pointed to the need to strengthen the science and technology decision making advisory system.

One of the ways I found that can make a significant contribution to the objectives that President Xi outlined, is to study and learn from the process by which the Internet was created and from the government support structures that helped or hindered the Internet researchers' work. Fortunately there is a rich set of research materials toward such study. Some of this study is documented in a draft manuscript I have been working on titled "On the International Origins of the Internet: A Conceptual History." This manuscript explores the work of computer scientists doing Internet research and development. It also documents the research support system that was created, known as the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA). The manuscript documents how ARPA functioned to support Internet research. It also explores the problems that were created when this research agency was changed into a different agency which was not in a position to provide the same needed support for the independence of the Internet researchers.

Following I am offering a proposal for an addition to the format of the World Internet Conference to build on observations about the 2005 WSIS and the 2015 World Internet Conference and on the importance of scientific research.

A Proposed Addition for the World Internet Conference

I am proposing that at the next World Internet Conference there be a section reserved for academic panels related to the history and culture of Internet development.

The panel I chaired at the PPF in 2005 can be taken as an example of the kind of general nature academic panel I am proposing. The title of that panel was "The Origin and Early Development of the Internet and of the Netizen: Their Impact on Science and Society." The papers that were presented at that panel were:[4]

•The International and Scientific Origins of the Internet and the Emergence of the Netizen
•The vision of JCR Licklider and the Libraries of the Future
•German-Chinese Collaboration in the First Stage of Open Networking in China
•Brief History of the Internet in Korea and Asia
•Netizens and Protecting the Public Interest in the Development and Management of the Internet: An Economists Perspective

I have consulted with several colleagues who have offered to submit papers for panels for the 2016 World Internet Conference if this proposal is accepted.

Also, panels could be organized around issues related to Internet and development.

I welcome comments on this proposal and if requested I can elaborate on it.

Notes

1. See "Observations on the 2nd Preparatory Meeting of the UN WSIS 10 Year Review," (http://blogs.taz.de/netizenblog/2015/11/01/2nd-prep-mtg-wsis-10-year-review/)

2. Rahul Bhatia, "The Inside Story of Facebook's Biggest Setback," https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/may/12/facebookfree-basics-india-zuckerberg

3. http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0601/c1024-28400027.html (in Chinese)

4. The papers from the panel I chaired in Tunis are gathered in the *Amateur Computerist* Vol. 15 No 2 Spring 2007, http://www.ais.org/~jrh/acn/ACn15-2.pdf.

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* The *Amateur Computerist* Vol. 26 No 1 Fall 2015, http://www.ais.org/~jrh/acn/ACn26-1.pdf gathers some of these experiences and serves as a broader introduction.