

Eli Noam: The internet's third wave

Eli Noam NOVEMBER 28 2005

Last week, the UN held in Tunis its global summit on the information society. The summit brought together almost 30 heads of state and government, and about twenty thousand officials, activists, experts, managers, plainclothes Tunisian police, and plain geeks.

Most of the media attention was focused on the battle over American control of the internet through its hold over the private non-profit entity ICANN that runs some organisational aspects of the internet. That role had been challenged by the EU, as well as by countries such as Iran, Cuba, and China. Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe, for example, decried the "undemocratic" internet. In the end, the US (with the help of Australia, Canada, Japan, and India) got to keep its role for the present, but a global forum will be established whose undeclared function is to help whittle down US control. The likely end-result is a two-tier mechanism, with an intergovernmental rule-setting board and a non-profit implementation body like the existing ICANN, with a broadened base.

There was a quaint aura to this heated debate by diplomats parsing words relating to national sovereignty and intergovernmental models, when in reality the issue isn't one of which government should be in control. It isn't even whether the private sector or government should be in control. The emerging issue is whether the commercial or the non-profit parts of the private sector will be in charge: the second or the third wave of the internet.

The first wave was the early generation of ‘techies’ who cooperatively established the technology and culture of the internet. They were largely apolitical. The second wave were the innovators and dotcom entrepreneurs who created industries from scratch. They were largely anti-political and libertarian. The third wave, strongly represented in Tunis through NGOs, is that of the internet social activists, under the loose umbrella of “civil society”, who are highly political and often seek a state role in the internet. What is manifest is the shift of energy from the second wave that sought to push the envelope to the activist third wave that seeks to redress problems and grievances.

The activism of civil society NGOs in Tunis is part of a much larger third wave mobilization in the information sector. It is manifest in a variety of disparate fronts. Just in the US, they include:

- the struggle over media concentration that overwhelmed last year the American government and media industry.
- the “open source” movement that battles and baffles Microsoft.
- the fair use and “copyleft” community that challenges restrictive copyright expansion to the benefit of companies such as Disney.
- the privacy protection advocacy against the use of personal information by marketers.
- the fight against governmental controls over encryption
- the advocacy for non-commercial community radio and low-power TV stations
- the peer-to-peer file sharing, which has moved beyond piracy to an ideology and undermined the music industry’s business model.
- the “unlicensed spectrum” initiatives that seek to end the exclusivity of access to airwaves of broadcasters and wireless providers.
- the move to municipal and free wi-fi connectivity challenging the phone companies.

All of these developments have their particular reasons but also a common thread. They are manifestations of a wider conflict over the role of the private sector in the information society. As the internet permeates society, society in turn permeates the internet, with its internal and international conflicts.

The emergence of third wave activists should not be surprising. They reflect the belief that many aspects of social and political life have deteriorated, creating political apathy, violence, consumerism, gender and racial stereotyping, neglect of the world's poor and poor nutritional habits. A second element is that information media play a central role in either creating or exacerbating these problems, or in preventing their alleviation. Therefore, information sector reform equals social reform.

This syllogism is shared by the anti-authoritarian left with the political right and traditionalists who are deeply suspicious of information medias' role in modernism and hedonism, and with most governments wishing to control information media. China's Vice Premier minced no words when he declared in Tunis that "For the internet, we need effective measures to fight against...anything that harms state security." Together, this is a formidable grouping. Its NGO members are well-connected electronically and instantaneously into a world-wide activist network of a kind that never existed before. They exhibited at the summit effective collaborative skills. They can run electronic circles not only around governments that are in their way - from Tunisia to the US - but also around traditional media firms.

Information companies should not be surprised. For years they have touted their sector as the key to the planet's economic and cultural future and solution to most of its problems. No wonder that control over this sector is being contested by more than their business competitors. In the industrial age, the control over the "means of production" led to revolutionary movements and the overthrow of governments and social systems. In Britain, the "commanding heights" of the economy - the coal and steel sector - were nationalised in the 1940s, with dubious results. Today, a similar battle is emerging over control over the "means of information".

How should the second wave of the internet deal with this challenge?

First, by relentlessly pushing internet technology forward and recapturing the public imagination. Nobody challenged the narrowband internet when it created new marvels at a dizzying pace.

Second, by engaging rather than walking away from the debate, and by promoting positive values and principles. Gordon Moore, Vint Cerf, Robert Kahn, or Tim Berners-Lee have more credibility in the worldwide internet community in favour of cyber-liberties than the White House.

Third, by embracing civil society. Civil society, in concept, is a counterweight to authoritarian government and stodgy business giants. Its social entrepreneurialism, often American-styled, is much more palatable to second wavers than traditional inter-governmental agencies and standard-setting associations.

Most second wavers are familiar with the various flash points, but they have not connected the dots and recognised that they are facing an incipient social movement on the model of environmentalism, a comparison made by my co-columnist James Boyle. Conversely, many third wavers are caught in their own myopia. They ask both for more, and for less, of a governmental role in the internet. Thus, second and third wavers, even with their different perspectives, need to recognise the commonalities: a self-reliant perspective, tech-savvy, a healthy suspicion of big government, and a common adversarial relation to traditional big media.

Only an alliance of the internet's commercial and non-profit sectors can hold off a fourth wave which will benefit neither, that of regulatory controls over the commanding heights of the information economy.

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