ICANN and an experiment in bottom-up democracy

Over the years I have occasionally had the opportunity to attend ICANN meetings to get a feeling for situation and progress. My first time was in Bucharest in Romania in 2002 and the last time was Dublin 2015. ICANN stands for Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers is a nonprofit organization registered in California USA responsible for the technical operation of the Internet. ICANN is based on the so-called stakeholder model with industry, government and users being the stakeholders and run in a bottom-up fashion. This is the opposite of the top-down model we are used to.

I have been walking around ICANN Dublin for few days now listening to presentations and discussions. Subsequently, I have put together some of my thoughts and feelings on ICANN, see below.

The big question is where are we and where are we heading? Will ICANN with all its maze of constituencies and working groups be able to achieve its goal and in the end what is that goal really? To organize and maintain the Internet to everybody´s satisfaction? That is going to be a tough cookie.

ICANN is trying to do the impossible thing: to run a global organization in a bottom-up fashion. This is an experiment in democracy crossing geographical, political, cultural, linguistic, judicial and economic boundaries, the biggest experiment ever undertaken. Maybe the Internet itself has made it possible?

The multi-stakeholder model of users, industry and government is the fundament ICANN is based on and each with its sphere of interests. In such a global organization there are bound to be conflicts to be resolved. ICANN has chosen to do this among other things by introducing a maze of constituencies, working groups, etc. Everybody is invited to participate at his level of choice and interests. If you have something to say come and join us and speak your piece! And people communicate by email and conference calls and occasional face to face meetings like the one in Dublin. Paper documents are gone, people sit side by side with their laptops open connected to the Internet reviewing document for discussion. And discussions appear on the screen in real time. However, this model costs time and patience as decisions are made on a consensus basis. The new
meeting schedule of having ICANN meetings around the world certainly will help ICANN to maintain and strengthen its image as a global player.

After attending several sessions at present ICANN in Dublin I had the feeling/impression that ICANN is getting its act together. The events are better organized and the discussions are more to the point although often lengthy and boring. But that is the price you pay for the bottom up democracy. Interestingly it is the Internet itself that makes this kind of organization and democracy at all possible.

Let us hope ICANN and the stakeholder model continues to work out well for the Internet community.

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