Our task isn't to claim a seat at the table because we know how the technology operates, but because we know the fundamental network principles.

As we don our armor for the second Great War of Internet Governance, we need to know the cost of the combat and the real weapons that we bring to the fight. The field of battle began filling the moment the US Department of Commerce announced, on 14 March, that it would no longer be the political guarantor of the Internet Domain Name System (DNS).

This war merely continues the first Great War of Internet Governance, fought more than 15 years ago, which converted Arpanet technology, or more accurately, NSFnet technology, into the modern Internet. Marked by contentious negotiations, and acts of cyberterrorism that seized control of the DNS, it ended in an armistice rather than clear victory. No one was happy with the solution, but all were willing to step away from the confrontation and let events take their course.

The key combatants in that first war could be divided into roughly four camps: those who sought fortune, those who sought knowledge, those who wanted to rebuild society in a new image, and those who wished to strengthen society as it was. Each held different assumptions and opinions about how the new network should be governed.

The four found common ground in the principles articulated in a document that came to be known as “The Green Paper.” This paper, written by an advisor to President Bill Clinton, described these principles in slightly awkward but precise language: “Stability, Competition, Representation, and Private Bottom-up Coordination.” As a political slogan, it will never be ranked with revolutionary phrases such as “Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité,” or “A Chicken in Every Pot and a Car in Every Garage.” Nonetheless, all the participants knew what it meant.

All the combatants had grappled with these principles as they had built the network. They knew what a stable network was. Each appreciated the value of competition among domain name servers. Each also knew how the early workers were represented in the decision-making process. All knew that the ugliest of the four principles, private bottom-up coordination, somehow captured the way that the network had been built, how people had proposed ideas, created standards, and disseminated common methods. It was something they felt in their soul even if they couldn’t express it in words.

At a recent congressional hearing, representatives of all the major factions sat behind a microphone to announce to the political world that they’re deeply concerned about maintaining the operational stability of this wonderful piece of infrastructure. They expressed their support for the technical workers who designed and maintained the systems and programs that keep the Internet operating. Beyond the idea of stability, they diverged in their opinions on how competition worked on a network, how technical ideas bubbled from the bottom of the Internet to the top, and who was to be represented in the new governance, one that has to include multiple stakeholders.

If the technical community thinks that it will be able to dominate this environment, it’s likely to be mistaken. When commercial stakeholders, military stakeholders, or even civil society advocates seek peace in this conflict, they look for a peace in which the technological decisions are well under their control. We will be able to claim a seat at the table only by demonstrating that we understand and best articulate the principles on which the network has developed.

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