Rod Beckstrom's First 100 Days at ICANN

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Rod Beckstrom took over as ICANN President/CEO on July 1, 2009, so October 9th marked his 100th day in office—and a good opportunity to examine the progress made by ICANN during his short tenure. Of course, the ICANN community (Board, staff and stakeholders) deserve credit for their hard work prior to Rod's appointment, which made ICANN's recent achievements possible. But to borrow an analogy from American football: when you have the ball in the Red Zone, you need to score touchdowns, not field goals. So far, under Rod's leadership, ICANN has moved down the field on a number of issues. In particular, ICANN scored a "touchdown heard round the world" by bringing the MoU/JPA to a successful conclusion.

Drinking from a Fire Hydrant

While Rod is no stranger to the technical sector, he was by no means an ICANN insider and getting up to speed on the myriad of issues confronting ICANN is no easy task. But since taking office, he has demonstrated an impressive willingness to listen to an almost unlimited number of sources, both within and outside the ICANN community, and to synthesize a sophisticated understanding of ICANN's mission and how that mission is perceived globally. In conducting this outreach, Rod has engaged contracted parties (registrars and registries), the business community, national and international organizations, the non-commercial community, and individual stakeholders via Twitter.

Affirmation of Commitments

Over much of the last 12-18 months, ICANN and the United States Government (USG) appeared to be engaged in a high-stakes game of chicken, seeing who would blink first regarding the expiration of the MoU/JPA. The Affirmation of Commitments (AOC), which succeeded the MoU/JPA, produced no clear winner or loser, but a win-win-win situation for ICANN, the USG and the broader Internet community by building into the ICANN governance framework increased accountability to the global private-public stakeholder community. It would be unfair to the many other participants in the AOC negotiations to give Rod sole credit. But he certainly does deserve credit for using this defining moment in ICANN's continued evolution as an opportunity to both reinvigorate participation by long-time ICANN stakeholders such as myself and to engage new stakeholders in the ICANN process.

Internationalized ccTLDs

The ICANN Board appears poised to approve an internationalized country code top-level domain name (IDN ccTLDs) fast-track process at its annual meeting in Seoul later this month. This represents a critical step forward in giving the entire global Internet stakeholder community equal access to the Internet's domain name system through their native languages and scripts.

Consistent with Rod's can-do attitude, ICANN staff has proposed an ambitious implementation process that will potentially enable the inclusion of these IDN ccTLDs into the Root by the end of the year.

Such a timetable would not be possible without the efforts of ICANN staff, particularly Tina Dam, who shepherded the IDN ccTLD initiative over the past several years. While the underlying technical issues appear to have been effectively resolved, the legal/governance framework into which ICANN and these ccTLD administrators and/or national governments will enter still requires discussion. Rod will play a critical role in developing that framework in consultation with ICANN's legal counsel to ensure the support and backing of the ICANN Board. All too often in the past, ICANN's ability to enter into formal relationships with third parties has been complicated by placing complicated legalese above practical operational and governance principles in ICANN's best interest.

Domain Name System Security Extensions (DNSSEC)

Sneaking in just under the 100-day time line, ICANN and VeriSign jointly announced at the RIPE meeting on October 6 in Lisbon, Portugal, a proposed timeline for the implementation of DNSSEC:

- December 1, 2010: the Root zone would be signed, although the initial signed zone will remain accessible only to ICANN and VeriSign.

- January - June 2010: ICANN and VeriSign would begin incremental roll-out of the signed root.

- By July 1, 2010: a signed root will be fully deployed (assuming no unforeseen obstacles).

Bringing in New Blood

According to ICANN's latest job postings, ICANN is currently soliciting candidates for two new Vice President positions to supplement the existing four. These hires will present Rod with the opportunity to begin putting his imprint on ICANN's operational character—much as Paul Twomey did over six years ago when John Jeffrey and Kurt Pritz were Paul's first two new senior management hires. With any luck, the ICANN community will be able to meet his new hires at ICANN's Seoul meeting at the end of the month. If not, the community will have to wait until ICANN's next meeting in March 2010 to meet this new key management.

New gTLDs

This issue will eventually define Rod's legacy. Rod is currently in a no-win situation: Any statement he makes on new gTLDs will be perceived by the TLD-promoter community as evidence of insufficient commitment to swiftly launching the new gTLD program, while simultaneously being perceived by the trademark and business communities as rushing the launch of new gTLDs. The significant issues that remain outstanding have polarized the debate to the extent that, no matter how they are ultimately resolved, there will be clear "winners" and "losers."

Rod must ensure that the "losers" in the process feel that their positions were fully and properly heard, and that ICANN's ultimate decision is carefully grounded in fact and reached through an

open and transparent process—as opposed to the current perception (fair or not) that ICANN simply pulls policy and implementation detail from their hats.

Complicating this task is the reality that participants in the gTLD debate, including ICANN staff and Board, have already formed strong opinions that are unlikely to change. Fortunately, Rod's lack of any ICANN "baggage" allows him to assess where the debate stands starting from a clean slate. If ICANN's past work on this issue (and especially its more controversial aspects) has been conducted in an open, transparent and fact-based manner, Beckstrom should be able to reproduce that decision-making process on his own and reach the same result—just as a starfish (to borrow Rod's favorite analogy from his 2006 book) can regenerate a new leg when one is severed simply by referring back to its genetic code. If the results of the process cannot be reproduced, that may indicate that the process ICANN has followed in implementing new gTLDs has been more "spider-like" (highly centralized and top-down) than "starfish-like" (decentralized and bottom-up).

Conclusion

Rod's early success with the AOC has set a high bar for measuring his future performance. But I believe he is more than up to the challenge, and that we will soon see Team ICANN run up the score with successful touchdowns on issues such as IDN ccTLDs and DNSSEC.

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