

APrIGF Summary Report

Track 2a: ICANN and New gTLD

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Mary Wong, Chair

It did emerge from our session that it's very clear that the new gTLD program at ICANN is not just about IDNs. IDNs form a very important part of the program, but it is much more than IDNs and so for participants here in the Asia Pacific region, in thinking about new gTLDs, the point was made that it's very important that we do not just focus our thinking, our plans, our strategies, our funding assistance and whatnot, on just IDNs. Having said that, the IDNs continue to present a problem, probably it was mentioned in one of the sessions yesterday, that a variance is a huge problem and there is a working group right now that is talking about variants and given that some of that work on IDNs is on-going, within ICANN.

Even within the generic name supporting organisation, which the main policy development body in terms of generic top level domains for ICANN, there are some uncertainties. And certainly if you look back at the early recommendations by that body, in 2007 about new gTLDs, it's very skimpy on the IDN issue, because the technical work had not yet even got under way. So IDNs remain an issue, certainly points about visual similarity which is what all the apply for gTLDs strings or otherwise, will be measured by in part by an algorithm, in part through an expert panel that will look to see will the applied for string is confusingly similar to either another applied for string, an existing TLD or an IDN ccTLD.

That's probably going into more detail than people want, but it seemed that it was a good opportunity to speak off the other two presenters to my right. With that, we then really went into some very challenging business and overarching issues for individuals, for consumers, for businesses, if relation to the new gTLD program. Our session focused really on opportunities, challenges and lessons that we in the Asia Pacific region can learn from that program. Like many of the other sessions, we had a very diverse and broad panel. We had five speakers, excluding me, obviously, who were from North America, Europe and the Asia Pacific region.

We covered the gamut from academics and civil society to individual entrepreneurs and businesses that are going to be applying for new gTLD and businesses who are going to be providing services to applicants in the new gTLDs. One point that was made is that in terms of a rule making , specifically of ICANN, in the broader internet governance context, several of our speakers felt that it is very important for that body to have a very light touch in rule making. It's always tempting, especially in a new environment and as we have heard, there is a lot of uncertainties with the new gTLDs, to try to over-legislate, to overcompensate, to try and foresee every possible problem and find a solution. Several of our speakers felt that that is not only a time consuming way to go, but that is the wrong way to go.

The other lesson that we thought we would draw from the ICANN experiment is to ask the question whether it has worked as an experiment in multi-stakeholderism. I don't know that we got full

consensus from the panel, but the feeling generally was that it has worked up to a point and that certainly it has evolved and matured as an organisation. Everyone who participates in it as part of a stakeholder group is learning how to play in the sand box with other stakeholder groups. Yet, the question remains as to whether some groups are more equal than others. Certainly there was a question as to what role governments have in a multi-stakeholder process. A question that's very familiar to everybody in this IG space and specifically in the ICANN space, with the new gTLD program especially, it has become very clear that governments do have a role to play, but that governments are also an interest group within the ICANN organisation and that they too have to learn to play with the other stakeholder groups and vice versa.

And that the experiment is on-going. Those were two of the lessons that we drew out of the ICANN experience over the last 10 years that we thought would be relevant to internet governance issues.

On the specific new gTLD program, all the panellists felt that it's quite likely and I think some of it was very hopeful, but there was certainly a resounding yes when I asked the question, do you think the ICANN board will approve the new gTLD program at a special meeting in three days' time on Monday?

That was an interesting question to ask, and perhaps an expected response, which then bringing me back to opportunities and challenges question. There are questions that have to do not just with the implementation. Everyone involved in the ICANN space will recognise that there are some implementation details that remain, but there are also larger questions, such as what is going to happen to internet search engines? Today even we are looking for a brand or a company or an organisation usually say let's just Google it. If you have a .brand or a .generic that's not limited to the existing 21 top level domains, does that mean that the world of search engines is going to be diminished? What kind of business models are going to emerge in the new gTLD space in terms not just of marketing, but in terms of service provision to consumers across the world.

Finally, what are the measures of success? These are questions that ICANN has not yet asked itself, but if that program is to launch, then it's very important that the community as a multi-stakeholder organisation gets down to thinking about how do we measure the success of the new gTLD program, so that if and when there is a second round, we can take those lessons learned into that round as well.