**Community Surprised by ICANN Announcement of Five Strategy Panels to Facilitate Cross-Community Dialogue**

Members of the ICANN community assembled in Durban, South Africa were greatly surprised by announcement on the meeting’s first day that no less than five new strategy panels were being formed to “serve as an integral part of a framework for cross-community dialogue on strategic matters”.

According to the official announcement[[1]](#footnote-1):

“The ICANN Strategy Panels will convene subject matter experts, thought leaders and industry practitioners to support development of ICANN's strategic and operational plans, in coordination with many other global players, and will be comprised of up to seven members including the chair for an anticipated one-year timeframe…The ICANN Strategy Panels will focus specifically on identifier technology innovation; ICANN's role in the Internet organizations' ecosystem; ICANN multistakeholder innovation; the public responsibility framework; and the role of ICANN in the future of Internet governance.”

Chairs for four of the five panels have already been announced and include former ICANN Board Chairman Vint Cerf, who now serves as Chief Internet Evangelist for Google.

While withholding judgment until additional information becomes available, initial responses from most of the business stakeholders we have spoken with in Durban have been to question where did this come from, why is it needed, and should ICANN even be thinking about how to reinvent five separate wheels at a time when the new gTLD program launch poses continuing complex challenges? These questions were amplified by the near-simultaneous announcement that initiation of GNSO review will likely be postponed for at least another six months[[2]](#footnote-2). The current GNSO structure, comprised of discrete silos for contracted and non-contracted parties, has been substantially scrambled by the launch of the new gTLD program -- with many existing stakeholder groups unable to reach consensus views on key issues due to a growing diversity of internal interests.

Concerns were also voiced that, given the lack of any community calls for such an initiative, the announcement signaled a further subjugation of the bottom up model by top down decision making. This added to feelings that the volunteer multistakeholder community is at an increasing disadvantage in dealing with a torrent of ICANN developments -- while the organization’s staff ranks are slated to expand by fifty percent over the coming year.

Although the announcement stresses that the panels “will operate in a manner consistent with ICANN's commitment to transparency and accountability; and will channel all views, guidance and advice produced into the standard community and Board processes that guide ICANN's activities”, our experience is that it is the nature of such entities to recommend change rather than maintaining the status quo.

With each of the five panels limited to no more than seven members, including the Chair, the member selection process may well be the most critical step in the entire process. The panels are slated to start their work in September. With the surprise announcement now a fait accompli, the multistakeholder community can anticipate delivery of five new strategic blueprints in Fall 2014. But it is impossible at this time to predict what those blueprints will propose to construct.

1. <http://www.icann.org/en/news/announcements/announcement-15jul13-en.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://www.icann.org/en/news/announcements/announcement-2-15jul13-en.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)