

# Multilingualism online: old challenges and new perspectives

## Description

The purpose of the session is to bring together a group of diverse people to share their experience and discuss the policy issues that are relevant to the topic.

After welcoming everyone, the moderator introduces the topic, sets participation ground rules and gives the floor to the speakers.

The speakers point out the state of the art, the challenges, the suggestions for improvement for the field that they are experts in (about 5 minutes each).

The speakers cover the following areas:

- Technical aspects related to multilingualism online
- Internationalized Domain Names - the perspective of a ccTLD operator
- The role of the Government
- Local languages in the Internet - the experience in Latin America
- User experience in underserved regions

The moderator will continue and ask some questions to the panel to address specific policy issues, links with general IGF objectives, etc. Questions are also taken from the audience and from remote with the help of the remote moderator. The organizing team believes that, in particular with possible travel restrictions this fall, it will be extremely important to ensure excellent coverage of the online participation.

The audience will be asked to do some “hands-on” exercises, like for instance to try to use some internationalized email addresses, so that they can experience some of the challenges people have when using different writing systems in the Internet.

The audience will also be polled via an online tool in order to get some feedback to questions asked. This part will also be organized in a way to ensure proper user experience to remote participants.

The rapporteur will close the session listing the main points that will be retained for the report and possible follow-up actions.

## Issues, challenges and/or opportunities

The organising team has identified these major issues, challenges and/or opportunities that will be addressed:

- Increased use in the Internet of local scripts, local language, local culture, is an opportunity to improve participation of the local communities and to

reach out to underserved regions, but does it also present challenges, like a potential risk of fragmentation? How can we measure the benefits of multilingualism and the support of different writing systems in the Internet? How can we capitalise on the benefit while addressing the risks?

- Multilingualism has a cost associated. We must make sure that we know all the issues that the operators face for the implementation of multilingual solutions - this will also be input for policy decisions so that, for instance, incentives can be used to achieve results.

In part because few of the issues surrounding the topic of the session are completely separate from the topic or each other, additional issues might come up in the discussion. There is no plan to address all of those in the limited time of the session, but it is important to highlight them so that the experts are ready to answer questions - or at least that we have reference to appropriate material ready.

Possible questions are:

- what is the difference between multi-language capability and multi-script capability (an obvious complication is that in the last century some languages have remained the same but changed their writing system)?
- is there a way to distinguish between identical forms, similar ones, acceptable orthographic variation and misspelling - and how does this affect implementation?
- what does IDN, EAI, UA mean in the context of multilingualism and what is their implementation status?

## **Policy Questions**

Some of the major policy questions that are related to the implementation of a fully multilingual internet are:

- What strategies could be developed to promote (better) Internet access for people who only know their native language or only know their writing system? Do we have a higher incidence of the problem for women and girls, older people, people living with disabilities, refugees and other disadvantaged groups - and if so do we need to adjust policies accordingly?
- What is the role of the different stakeholder groups, like the technical community (including device and platform providers), the users, the governments, the business, for achieving multilingualism online? Do they have equal voice in the policy development process?
- Can we recommend policy and other industry led measures to drive adoption and usage? Can we create incentives for additional deployment and use, both for applications and use in individual countries and for keeping things interoperable enough to allow and encourage communication across boundaries (not just of countries but of language, culture, etc.)?

- Worldwide interoperability of systems using different languages and writing systems requires agreed-upon standards and software and other systems that conform to them. How do we create the right incentives for the development and deployment of such systems?
- Are local (national) policies sufficient or do we need global coordination? If we need global coordination, who takes the lead?

## **Expected Outcomes**

The organising team believes that because of the very specific theme raised within the wider area of ICT implementation and its impact on the communities, and because of the wide range of diverse expertise involved in the discussion, the proceedings of the debate itself will be a meaningful outcome. In particular, this session will improve the understanding among the different stakeholder groups of each other points of view.

The team will produce a report that will be circulated among the key stakeholders. The expected outcomes from the dissemination of this material are:

- to provide an input in local and regional IGF meetings in 2021, as several members of the organising team are involved in local and regional Internet Governance activities;
- to propose policy recommendations to the relevant bodies;
- to increase awareness about the needs of the communities who do not speak English and who use different writing systems;
- to increase awareness within the local communities, in particular in underserved regions, about the possibilities of progressing towards a multilingual Internet, and incentivise their action as demanders of multilingual support.

In addition, there are many efforts going on that address parts of the issues that will be covered in this session, often from a particular national or business perspective by focusing on only some of the issues. However, we believe that only taking a comprehensive view we can come to a global solution: this could be an example to all groups working on these issues on how to approach them from a holistic point of view.

## **Relevance to Internet Governance**

The issues related to multilingualism and the use of different writing systems in the Internet are only mildly related to technical issues - by now mostly solved - but mostly to implementation policies and policies affecting deployment and use. The complexity of the matter, the cost of deployment, the need for international coordination, call for robust policies and support and a robust governance that is not going to be simple to design and implement. The objective of achieving equal opportunity of access and best

use of the contents by worldwide users cannot be left to market forces and needs a governance process.

In short, we need to make policy decisions and define governance processes in order to balance the competing interests and priorities.

One example among many about the opportunity of influencing market forces is the initiative of the Government of the Indian State of Rajasthan to provide email addresses in the local script for every citizen of the State. This case is referenced in “Optional Documentation”. In order to ensure Universal Acceptance and full multilingualism on the Internet we need to make policy decisions and define governance processes.

## **Relevance to Thematic Track**

There is a huge variety of languages and writing systems - as a matter of fact the vast majority of the world population does not speak English as a first language and has a language that uses a writing system that is different from the Latin alphabet. For example, India, has 23 officially recognised languages not to mention the existence of nearly 1400 other dialects. An Internet that is not multilingual and not accepting different writing systems is a serious obstacle for digital inclusion because it does not provide equal opportunities to users who are not familiar with the globally or locally dominant language and writing system. This happens even in the developed countries where parts of the population, for instance elderly people, who have more difficulties in accessing an Internet that is not sufficiently localised, end up in being marginalised. This exclusion is also reflected in the limitation in the production and fruition of local content in the Internet, hindering also social inclusion, in a world that is becoming more and more connected.

Nearly 40% of the world's population (3.2 billion) are unconnected - over a billion of them, for example, in South Asia alone. To bring connectivity to them is just the first step, because they will remain lagging back unless they are going to be able to communicate online in the way that they are used to communicate offline.

## **Workshop Session Format**

Round Table - U-shape

Duration: 90 Min

## **Diversity**

- Gender
- Geographic Origin
- Stakeholder Group

We deal with diversity in the topic itself and in the choice of speakers. The topic itself addresses a divide that comes from the different ability of people to master the languages and the writing systems that are predominant in today's internet.

We have tried to have the most diverse set of speakers keeping the number manageable for a session. From the geographic origin, we have Latin America, Africa, Western world, Eastern Europe and Asia. From the stakeholder groups we have the technical community, civil society, Governments and business. Although we do not have direct representation of international organizations the proposer of the workshop has 13 years of experience as international civil servant. We have also a gender balanced panel, and a mixed set of experiences: while most of the speakers are very experienced we have in the organising team also people who have brought fresh views. Last but not least, contacts are going on - albeit not finalised yet - to involve the young local community to participate to the finalisation of the session.

## **Organizers**

In alphabetical order:

- Abdalmonem Galila (speaker)
- Amitabh Singhal (onsite moderator)
- John Klensin (speaker)
- Maria Kolesnikova (speaker)
- Natalia Filina (online moderator)
- Patrik Fältström
- Roberto Gaetano (rapporteur)
- Satish Babu
- Sylvia Herlein Leite (speaker)

## **Session Interaction and Participation**

We plan to interact with the audience - in person and remote - in two ways.

- We will propose some simple exercises, like for instance to try to provide an internationalised email address as input in different web sites. Most of the people in the audience have never tried that, and will therefore become aware of the different obstacles that a person using a different writing system will encounter even for simple operations.
- When questions or specific points arise from the discussion we will poll the audience - in person and remote - via a software tool. This will give an anonymous aggregate feedback on how the audience feels about a specific issue.