**Accountability & transparency of ICANN**

* In ensuring that its international, bottom-up, and multistakeholder operating model remains effective, ICANN has built accountability mechanisms into every level of its organization and mandate. These mechanisms include the organizational reviews of supporting organizations and advisory committees and the reviews of the Affirmation of Commitments (AoC).
* In light of the transition of the United States Government (specifically, NTIA)’s stewardship of the IANA functions to the global Internet community, a working group of ICANN community members developed a set of enhancements to ICANN’s accountability mechanisms that must be in place within the time frame of the transition. The proposal has been approved by the ICANN community and NTIA, and the implementation is underway. The second work stream of enhancing ICANN accountability, which addresses broader topics beyond the transition, has started.
* End users are an integral part of ICANN’s multistakeholder community and through the At-Large Community, they play an important role in holding ICANN accountable. End users’ contributions are essential, especially due to their experience in understanding and explaining public interest and their ability to be innovative and propose solutions. Critical in this evolution of Internet Governance, end users’ participation in ICANN will ensure the legitimacy in ICANN processes and strengthen an inclusive, transparent, global and collaborative model of governance that is fit for our present and future.

**Contracted party agreements**

* A registry operator of a top-level domain (TLD) must enter a contract (i.e. Registry Agreement - RA) with ICANN in order to operate and maintain a generic TLD (gTLD). Registrars that offer domain name registration services with a direct access to TLD registries are also required to obtain accreditation from ICANN (i.e. Registrar Accreditation Agreement - RAA). ICANN’s Contractual Compliance department ensures registries and registrars are in compliance with those agreements. RA and RAA are also subject to changes by consensus policy developed through the GNSO's bottom-up, consensus-based Policy Development Process (PDP). The areas that can be modified through consensus policy are often referred to as the 'Picket Fence'.
* Contracted party agreements are significant to individual registrants, as they empower registrants to submit complains to ICANN if they believe the contracted parties are in violation of provisions in those agreements and they receive unfair treatment. In addition, policy changes to RA and RAA may directly affect registrants’ rights, obligations, and overall experiences using the domain name registration services.
* Average end users who do not have registered websites are indirectly affected by those agreements, as they contribute to the security and stability of the domain name system and have public interest implications.
* Individual registrants and average Internet end users are empowered to shape contracted party agreements through the GNSO processes and advocate for their interests, counterbalancing commercial interests.

**Engagement & outreach**

* Diversity and inclusion is critical to the success of ICANN’s multistakeholder model. Business, government, technical community, civil society, and end users from around the world should have equitable representation in ICANN and be involved in policy activities that shape the future of the Internet. Committed to this principle, ICANN Staff departments (esp. Global Stakeholder Engagement – GSE, Development and Public Responsibility Department – DPRD, and Policy Development Support) closely work with the Community to develop and implement engagement and outreach strategies in all regions. Notable efforts include the Regional Hub strategies, Fellowship Program, NextGen@ICANN Program, and Community Regional Outreach Pilot Program (CROPP).
* Engagement and outreach has been a focus of the At-Large Community, which acts on the interest of the 3.0 billion Internet end users worldwide. It is critical for the At-Large Community to maintain a sustainable flow of volunteers from diverse areas, making sure they are versed in ICANN issues and can effectively advocate for end user interests, counterbalancing other competing interests. Apart from collaborating with ICANN Staff on existing programs and organizing outreach events (e.g. RALO General Assemblies, At-Large Summits), At-Large Community often spearheads initiatives that promote diversity and inclusion, targeting underserved communities (e.g. Applicant Support Program for new gTLDs applications, captioning pilot, etc.).

**IANA functions & stewardship transition**

* The IANA functions comprise of domain names, IP addresses, and a standard set of protocol parameters. They work together to enable your computer to reliable find and connect to other devices, things, or information sources on the Internet no matter where you are physically located in the world.
* ICANN has been performing the domain names related IANA functions under a contract with the US government (specifically, NTIA), along with IETF for IP addresses and IAB for protocol parameters. In March 2014, the US government announced its intent to end the contract with ICANN and transition its stewardship role to the global Internet community. A working group of ICANN community members developed a proposal, which has been approved by the ICANN community and NTIA, and the post transition implementation is underway. The transition is at its final stretch, pending the final Congressional approval.
* Although the IANA functions are operational functions, they do require global governance and stewardship, in which end users have an important role to play. Specifically, the At-Large Advisory Committee has a liaison involved in the operational oversight previously performed by NTIA as it relates to the monitoring of ICANN’s performance of the IANA naming functions. Ultimately, the transition matters to every one of us, as its success will allow for the continued expansion, diversity, and innovation of one open, unified, and interoperable global Internet.

**ICANN operations / finances**

* Committed to the multistakeholder model of governance and principles of global inclusivity, transparency, and accountability, ICANN Staff departments proactively communicate to the Community its strategic and operating plans and implement transparent financial reporting system.
* Stakeholder consultation is critical, and their inputs feed into every aspect of ICANN’s operations and finances. Strategic Plan, Five-Year Operating Plan, Annual Operating Plan and Budget are made available for public comment where end users can provide their feedback for consideration.
* Furthermore, ICANN has a special budget request process in which the Community requests additional resources from ICANN Board to better function. Through the At-Large Community, end users have the option to provide rationales of their requests for additional funding and put the resources toward meaningful work once approved.
* Since ICANN is the one and only organization that manages the Domain Name System, a critical Internet resource, end users should care about the operational excellence and financial wellbeing of ICANN and take advantage of the opportunities to monitor and comment on those issues.

**ICANN policy processes**

* To keep pace with the dynamic technologies and rapid innovation on the Internet, ICANN facilitates the process of policy development that will enable technical changes to how the unique identifiers are run. Policy development is a fundamental part of ICANN’s mission. Unlike the traditional, top-down government models, ICANN’s policy development uses a “bottom-up, consensus-driven, multistakeholder model”. This model mimics the very nature of the Internet – borderless and open to all.
* There are three types of ICANN policies: 1) policies related to the global internet's system of unique identifiers (DNS) developed by ICANN’s Supporting Organizations (SOs), 2) operational policies developed by ICANN Staff departments, and 3) general practices. While not developing policies directly, Advisory Committees (ACs) usually influence policy making by providing advice in their own distinct manners.
* As an AC, the ALAC publicizes, analyzes, and provides advice on proposed ICANN policies and decisions that reflect the views and needs of individual Internet users at regional and global levels. Not just limited to the DNS policies, the ALAC comments on the work deliverables from ICANN Community, Board, and Staff in a wide range of topics. The range of individual Internet users, whose interests that the ALAC acts on, is quite broad. They include registrants (people who hold domain names), consumers, and the billions of average web users and visitors. While ICANN is a technical organization with a focused mandate, average users that don’t have vested business interests, political interests, or even technical backgrounds can also have a voice to influence the evolution of the critical logistical infrastructure layer of the Internet. Such position is rare to find in other international organizations in the world.

**Internationalized Domain Names (IDNs)**

* IDNs use representations of languages (e.g. characters with accent or diacritical marks, characters from non-Latin scripts) in the domain names, beyond the ASCII characters (i.e. the 26 basic Latin alphabet “a-z”, number 0-9, and hyphen “-“).
* ICANN brings together stakeholders from various linguistic communities to develop policy for implementing IDNs. It created the IDN Implementation Guidelines for register operators to follow when the implementation of IDNs began in 2000 at the second level of URLs under .com and .net. In 2009, the ICANN Board approved the IDN ccTLD Fast Track Process that enables countries and territories to offer national domain names with non-Latin characters. In light of the massive rollout of new gTLDs, among which more than 100 are IDN gTLDs, ICANN facilitates the work of Generation Panels to set the “Label Generation Rules (LGR)” for determining the validity of new top-level domain labels in a diverse array of language scripts and writing systems.
* IDNs give users around the world the same rights to access the web in their native tongue, making it easier for users to discover and remember websites, and promoting local content via service providers likely in their own countries. In particular, it is expected that IDNs will increase the Internet penetration in emerging economies of Asia Pacific, Africa, and Latin America where English is not the primary language. However, due to the lack of universal acceptance, using IDNs still can be challenging across browsers, emails and mobile apps. ICANN’s work on the universal acceptance of IDNs will ultimately improve user experience, increasing the IDN uptake and realizing a truly multi-linguistic Internet.

**Internet Governance**

* As defined in the Tunis Agenda in the World Summit on the Information Society of 2005, Internet governance is the “development and application by Governments, the private sector and civil society, in their respective roles, of shared principles, norms, rules, decision-making procedures, and programmes that shape the evolution and use of the Internet”. With an emphasis on the notion of “multistakeholder model”, this definition recognizes the fact that the Internet ecosystem is responsible for the health and growth of the Internet, and no single entity runs the Internet alone.
* The Internet ecosystem is governed through a layered model that segregates and characterizes different functions of the Internet and its applications. One popular way to define the layers, from top to bottom, is: 1) economic and societal layer, 2) logical infrastructure layer, and 3) physical infrastructure layer. Within this ecosystem, ICANN coordinates the administration of the Internet’s logistical infrastructure layer that delivers ‘One Internet’ for the world through three sets of unique identifiers: domain names, Internet Protocol (IP) addresses, and protocol parameters.
* In the multistakeholder model of the Internet Governance, underrepresentation of any component would adversely affect the Internet's smooth operation. The users' freedom to innovate is at the core of the success of the Internet. Their participation in Internet governance ensures that this ecosystem is not stifled by specific interests. This participation will also empower users to advocate for equal rights and to counterbalance possible attempts from private sector and governments that reduce freedom of choice and market competition against the general public interest. Direct user involvement will also contribute important skills and expertise to the Internet policy making process, such as that in ICANN, as well as establish a quick reaction loop to verify their effects. Their involvement will significantly increase the geopolitical diversity of the governance bodies. If the users are not speaking out in Internet governance, it could mean that changes to the way the internet is governed will not serve the interests of end users in the long term. Any policy that does not take into account the needs and values of the user community will be unenforceable and ineffective.
* Within ICANN, the At-Large Community acts on the interest of end users and it is the platform for users to participate in ICANN policy activities.

**New Generic Top-Level Domains (gTLDs)**

* A TLD is the rightmost label starting from the last dot in a web address (e.g. .com, .net, .biz). The domain namespace originally had eight TLDs. In 2000, seven new TLDs were introduced, and in 2004, eight more were made available. In 2012, ICANN launched the New gTLD Program which resulted in the massive expansion of the domain namespace. As of today, more than 1,000 new gTLDs have been delegated to the root zone.
* Currently, an important policy development process is going on in the GNSO to review the experience and lessons learned from the New gTLD Program. Timing for the next round is yet to be determined.
* New gTLDs offer much greater flexibility for individual registrants to create memorable, innovative names for their websites. New gTLDs opened up opportunities for new registries and registrars to enter the domain name industry, and in turn registrants have more choices when purchasing services.
* New gTLDs also have the potential to cause widespread confusion, as users may have to learn the new addresses of websites that they have already been using. In addition, users may be exposed to fraud, counterfeiting, and identity theft when criminals take advantage of this confusion to create hostile sites with new gTLDs.

**Public Interest**

* As the Internet has become a critical part of the global public sphere, and the influence of commercial interests and state powers has been increasing, stakeholders need to work together and form a comprehensive vision on the Internet that addresses the protection of civil liberties, such as free speech and privacy.
* The discussions on the topic of the “public interest within ICANN’s remit” and potential definitions of this term have been ongoing for years. While the Section 2 of ICANN’s Bylaws clearly names the Public Interest as a Core Value and its Affirmation of Commitments (AoC) employs the term several times, the notion of “public interest” is often contested by stakeholder groups and constituencies. ICANN’s Strategy Panel on Public Responsibility Framework explored this topic and attempted to define the global public interest in relation to the Internet. However, its report received mixed reviews.
* Within the ICANN context, there is a pressing need to devise mechanisms to effectively address and defend the public interest against commercial pressure, fulfilling the promise of the multistakeholder model.
* As a sub-topic of public interest, the Public Interest Commitments (PICs) attached to the new gTLD applications have direct end user impact. Some new gTLD strings, such as .doctor, .lawyer, and .bank, are linked to regulated or professional sectors which have clear entry requirements. These strings are likely to invoke a level of implied trust from consumer and carry higher levels of risks associated with consumer harm. By attaching PICs to those new gTLD applications, registries will be committed to ensuring that those strings are not abused, and ICANN is empowered to launch compliance investigations against registries that fail to live up to PICs.

**Reviews at ICANN**

* Reviews are one of several important ICANN accountability mechanisms. Organizational Reviews and Affirmation of Commitments (AoC) Reviews provide the means for independent assessment of ICANN’s performance toward its commitments.
* Performed by independent examiners, periodic Organizational Reviews are conducted for each of the Supporting Organizations (SOs), Advisory Committees (ACs) except for the Governmental Advisory Committee (GAC), the Nominating Committee, Board of Directors, and the Technical Liaison Group (TLG). These reviews are meant to determine whether the organization has a continuing purpose in the ICANN structure, and if so, whether any change in structure or operations is desirable to improve its effectiveness.
* The Affirmation of Commitments (AoC) is the 2009 Agreement between ICANN and the United States Department of Commerce. The Affirmation of Commitments calls for periodic assessment by community review teams of ICANN's progress toward the following objectives: 1) Ensuring accountability, transparency and the interests of global Internet users; 2) enforcing its existing policy relating to WHOIS, subject to applicable laws; 3) preserving security, stability and resiliency of the Domain Name System (DNS); and 4) promoting competition, consumer trust, and consumer choice.
* End users are an integral part of ICANN’s multistakeholder community and through the At-Large Community, they play an important role in holding ICANN accountable. Their participation in the reviews are essential, especially due to their experience in understanding and explaining public interest and their ability to be innovative and propose solutions. Specifically, the review of the ALAC and the wider At-Large Community has direct impact on end users. The At-Large Community is mandated to act on the interests of end users in ICANN policy making and other activities. To understand whether the Community has fulfilled the mission well and the overall organization effectiveness

**WHOIS**

* WHOIS is a protocol used to query publicly accessible databases that store the identifying information of the registrant of a given domain name, as well as the technical, billing, and administrative contact information associated with the domain name.
* ICANN develops and implements consensus policies that frame how the WHOIS service is operated. Currently, an important policy development process is going on in the GNSO to discuss the need for a comprehensive WHOIS policy reform.
* WHOIS data is key for fixing system problems, maintaining Internet stability, and enhancing the accountability of registrants. But its “one-size-fits-all” disclosure identifying information may also expose registrants, especially individuals, to potential spam, phishing, and identity theft. Due to its implication in privacy, data protection, policing, security, and malicious use and abuse, WHOIS matters to end users, especially domain name registrants.