**Report: Open Forum 36: Challenges & Opportunities for a Multilingual Internet**

**IGF2024 Riyadh, Saudi Arabia**

**Key Takeaways:**

- Multilingualism on the Internet is fundamental to digital inclusion and enables meaningful connectivity. Efforts to build a multilingual Internet contribute to closing the digital divide by catering to the needs of the next billion Internet users, many of whom do not speak or read English as their first language.

- A multilingual Internet is a win for all key stakeholders. For governments, increased multilingualism on the Internet can contribute to digital inclusion strategic objectives. For companies, supporting Internationalized Domain Names (IDNs) and Internationalized Email Addresses (IEAs) is a market advantage. For the technical community, IDNs, IEAs, and Universal Acceptance represent solutions that emerged from the multistakeholder system to address an important problem and are ready to be implemented. And for end users, IDNs, IEAs, and Universal Acceptance can provide a seamless, end-to-end online experience in their native language.

- Despite important technical and policy progress, there is a long road ahead to achieve a truly multilingual Internet. There are valuable insights to be gained from the experiences of governments working to improve the multilingual Internet landscape. In addition, collaboration and coordination on these issues will be important, as well as working with entities such as ICANN and the ITU.

**Call to Action:**

- Governments have an important role to play in advancing multilingualism on the Internet, including through raising awareness and capacity building, engaging with academia and industry, and leading by example through leveraging existing toolkits and policy mechanisms like government procurement requirements.

**Featured Speakers (in order of statements):**

- **Jaisha Wray**, Associate Administrator, Office of International Affairs, NTIA, U.S. Department of Commerce

- **Mr. Pradeep Kumar Verma**, Scientist D, Ministry of Electronics and IT, Government of India

- **Manal Ismail,** Chief Expert, Internet Policies, National Telecom Regulatory Authority of Egypt

- **Nigel Hickson,** Senior Adviser on Internet governance and DNS, Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT), Government of the United Kingdom

- **Owen Fletcher** (moderator), Office of International Affairs, NTIA, U.S. Department of Commerce

**Summary:**

On December 17, 2024, the governments of Egypt, India, the United Kingdom, and the United States co-organized an Open Forum session titled "Challenges & Opportunities for a Multilingual Internet." The session included opening remarks from Jaisha Wray (NTIA, U.S. Department of Commerce) followed by

case study presentations from the governments of India, Egypt, and the United Kingdom, which highlighted both successes and challenges governments face in spurring multilingualism on the Internet across differing geographic and linguistic landscapes. A robust audience Q&A and discussion portion followed. The event emphasized the role for governments in advancing multilingualism on the Internet and highlighted that multilingualism is a foundational requirement to achieve digital inclusion and meaningful connectivity. The event was well attended, with approximately 75 attendees (including both in-person and online participants) and at least eleven governments represented.

## Case Studies:

**India:** Building on India's leadership in the launch of Universal Acceptance (UA) Day in 2023, a regional UA Day in 2024 marked the launch of the BhashaNet portal, an initiative to promote a multilingual Internet and enhance Universal Acceptance in India. The portal aims to equip developers and service providers with the necessary tools and processes to build a digital space without language barriers. In order to support the 22 Indian languages, 11 scripts, and 15 IDN ccTLDs available, the BhashaNet portal provides standard operating procedures across different technologies, code samples, and other resources. The portal also hosts a UA Readiness Dashboard to track progress and a support ticketing system. This effort is linked to a project titled "Mera Gaon Meri Dharohar," or "My Village My Heritage," which aims to provide meaningful Internet access in approximately 600,000 villages across 29 states and 7 territories.

**Egypt:** Language is an access barrier and building a truly multilingual Internet is a necessity. Both globally and in Egypt's experience, there were positive early signals of success, including an initial surge in Egypt's IDN ccTLD registrations in 2010, but in recent years, there has been a contraction in IDN registrations even when they are well supported.[1] In order to counter lagging demand for IDNs and continue to support UA readiness, the government of Egypt is working to promote awareness and deployment by reaching out to software companies, setting up pilots for proofs of concept, working with academia, conducting technical trainings and hackathons on UA, organizing engagement activities with relevant stakeholders, and tracking progress. Governments can play a key role in spurring demand by highlighting benefits of these efforts, from digital inclusion and transformation to preserving culture, ensuring government services reach all citizens, increasing market competition and innovation, and providing increased customer choice. Additionally, governments can also highlight that deployment is straightforward and that UA readiness makes systems more future-proof.

**United Kingdom:** It is very important that people can use their own scripts on the Internet. In addition to technical work to ensure IDNs are well-supported not least in provision of public services, work is also needed to ensure that citizens and residents know that they can use different languages and scripts in their online communication, including with their government. The United Kingdom has taken an incremental approach to address the lack of awareness and confidence among Internet users. In observing the uptake of IDNs containing diacritics within Wales, it is evident that even when an IDN would better serve an end user, they may lack the knowledge and confidence to acquire and use one.

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[1] EurID, "2023 IDN World Report highlights slow growth and awareness challenges for IDNs," June 29, 2023, https://eurid.eu/en/news/2023-idn-world-report/.

Governments can do much more, not by regulating or passing laws, but by working with the private sector, local authorities, and educational institutions to build greater awareness and confidence.

### Discussion:

Participants highlighted the importance of enabling Internet users to engage in their own language and script and noted additional ways governments can contribute to a multilingual Internet. For example, governments could incorporate Universal Acceptance compliance into software procurement policies, thereby driving digital transformation that aligns with global inclusivity goals. It was also noted that governments can lead by example by ensuring that government websites are available in local languages. Several participants noted the issue of semantics, highlighting that while the terms "Universal Acceptance" and Internationalized Domain Names do not always translate well, digital inclusion is a globally understood concept. Governments can work to ensure language is treated as a core component of digital inclusion and raise awareness of the relationship between IDNs, UA, and digital inclusion.

It is clear that achieving a multilingual Internet will require continued multistakeholder cooperation. Much of the discussion focused on the critical range of roles different stakeholders play. Large technology companies have the resources to innovate and the scale to reach the majority of end users, and governments must play a role in building the market and highlighting the advantages of UA. In the DNS ecosystem, registries have made progress toward enabling IDNs to work, but more work is needed, including by registrars and Internet service providers. Civil society has been active in the development of valuable resources and is developing toolkits to support and amplify the efforts of governments and other stakeholders. Universities have a role in training the next generation on these concepts and in developing curriculum that integrates IDNs and UA. The prominence of this topic across international fora was also highlighted repeatedly. In addition to comments by ICANN that highlighted ongoing work to enable IDNs and expand UA readiness, the International Telecommunication Union noted its work on this topic. In addition, the relevance of this topic under the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) framework was noted as well as ongoing related work under UNESCO.

It was highlighted that while IDNs are a critical step, Universal Acceptance is necessary to make IDNs work seamlessly across the Internet, and there is much work to do on that level. This point was reiterated by several participants, including that a key issue is insufficient UA-readiness among email providers, browsers, and other online services; according to one participant, testing indicates that only 11 percent of the top 1,000 global websites can accept IEAs and only 20 percent of email providers support them.

Several participants raised other important accessibility and security implications of IDNs. There was a valuable exchange regarding the unique challenges of languages and scripts that read right-to-left, like Arabic and Farsi. A domain name containing these scripts will require a mix of left and right directional reading, which represents additional challenges both technically and in terms of accessibility for non-English speakers. The challenge remains of addressing the large segment of the population that cannot write in any local language. The importance of including people with disabilities in these discussions was also raised, and the unique importance and characteristics of sign language were noted. As one panelist stated, enabling a multilingual Internet has moved beyond a technical issue to a social policy issue, and there is much more work ahead.

References:

- [Video Recording](#)
- [Session Page](#)