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## Promoting the Internet around the world

By David Hoffman and Jerry Berman

**T**HERE ARE certain fundamental truths about the Internet. It is powerful. Its reach is enormous. And its potential to change the lives of all citizens around the world is immeasurable.

But there are also certain Internet myths.

One of the most dangerous is that left unattended, the Internet, like the technological equivalent of weeds, will develop freely and unfettered anywhere it plants its roots.

The truth is that for the Internet to reach its full potential, particularly in remote parts of the world, certain conditions must exist to maximize access and effectiveness.

It is not until a country's legal and regulatory environment is suitable to encourage the growth of information technology, that those who most stand to benefit from the technology will be able to do so.

Closing the digital divide requires more than technology transfer. It demands good policy. And it can't be a one-size-fits-all policy.

We need to address the obstacles within each country that either prevent it from being Internet-ready, or limit it from reaching the full potential of the medium.

Country by country, region by region, the Internet is developing at different speeds and with widely varying degrees of openness.

In China, for example, Internet laws ranging from e-commerce taxation to press restrictions on news sites are announced weekly by central, provincial and local governments. Although Internet use in China continues to grow exponentially, the regulatory environment in "Sinocyberspace" is so confusing and repressive that China is unable to reap the full commercial benefits of the Net.

Many government-owned monopoly telephone carriers maintain pricing structures in which the costs of Internet access are so high that only the government-run Internet service providers can survive. The playing field needs to be leveled and competitive pressures applied to keep prices low.

The government of India has outlawed Internet telephony — the application that could potentially multiply, by many times over, the number of Internet users in the largest democracy in the world.

Further regulation of the Internet misses the point — that without actively encouraging participation in the new global information infrastructure, India is losing a huge opportunity to harness cheap new technology, which could help alleviate poverty.

In Indonesia, a country of 220 million, public Internet centers have flourished and interest in the Internet is high, but the country lacks the regulatory stature to implement a

telecommunications law that took effect last year.

So do we need an international Internet governing body?

Absolutely not. But there are things that can be done to shape global Internet policy on a local basis:

First, policymakers need to overcome their lack of information. Often they do not have the sophisticated understanding of the Internet's architecture to make informed decisions. Nor do they appreciate the critical role of competition, especially in the telecommunications market, as well as governmental accountability.

By bringing government leaders together with industry experts and nongovernmental groups, one can close the enormous knowledge gap — even in the developed world, when it comes to understanding and shaping global Internet policy.

Second, governments around the world must recognize that the Net is the gateway to the global economy. But many are confronted with a Hobson's choice, between controlling information and joining the world marketplace.

The Internet poses threats to authority, and in some cases, governments impose a range of legal and regulatory actions intended to shape the Internet. Government policymakers will have to learn that less regulation inevitably translates into greater e-commerce.

Finally, local stakeholders must be engaged in the process of Internet policy formation to address the persistent problem of the digital divide, which separates the haves and the have-nots.

Creating an open Internet system that connects countries of the world is one of the surest ways to level the playing field between the developed and developing world.

While most countries of the world are now connected to the Internet, barriers still exist to getting the technology into the hands of citizens in an affordable and effective way.

The Internet — architecturally open and decentralized, abundant, inexpensive and user-controlled — is a medium suited for the promotion of open, democratic societies and is increasingly central to economic growth and human development worldwide.

But it is not enough to have Internet technology if you don't have the policies to support it.

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