Internet Society intervention during WSIS Prepcom 2 in Geneva on 24 February 2005

by Lynn St. Amour, President and CEO of the Internet Society

The Internet Society (or ISOC as we are also known) is a global not-for-profit open membership organization founded by Dr. Vinton Cerf and Dr. Robert Kahn – the “fathers of the Internet”. ISOC welcomes the preliminary report of the WGIG submitted to the Preparatory Committee of WSIS. Clearly a lot of hard work has been done by the Working Group on Internet Governance (WGIG). While we are pleased to see that progress has been made in some areas, we are concerned that an inordinate amount of effort has been focused on what are largely administrative areas already addressed quite effectively by ICANN and other Internet Organizations, at the expense of the many policy and capacity building areas where governments and International organizations quite clearly have the major role and primary responsibility.

Given the above, we support WGIG’s decision to take a 'broad approach' to Internet Governance and to recognize the fact that Internet Governance encompasses a much wider range of topics than IP address and domain name administration.

Furthermore, we support WGIG's move to distinguish between technical and policy issues. In the technical area there are existing effective, inclusive, transparent, multi-stakeholder processes and mechanisms for the administration and operation of the Internet infrastructure. These processes and mechanisms gained legitimacy through their proven effectiveness, and the recognition by and the support of the communities they serve, including many governments. They grew organically, in a bottom-up, collaborative process over the last thirty years and hence are purpose-built for the Internet. The Internet community shares as a goal, and has always had a goal of maximizing participation by all stakeholders in all processes. This is not something the Internet community has ever resisted, nor have we built barriers. That is not to say that barriers do not exist, they do, but they are largely ones of access or affordability, areas where governments play a central role.

The Internet Society cautions against overlaying yesterday's telecommunications models on tomorrow's medium, but rather recommends that we all unite and support the evolution of these purpose-built Internet organizations and processes.

ISOC and the Internet community have for the last several decades had a significant focus on education, on all matters related to developing a sustainable Internet capability in developing countries. This included significant outreach and capacity building efforts. But, we need to do more. We're small organizations, particularly when compared to virtually any nation's government. We have limited resources, mainly from private sources, and given the need to do much more, we applaud the Summit's efforts to date and further call upon WSIS to make capacity building a clear and unequivocal priority.

The flexible, decentralized architecture of the Internet has allowed it to be a platform for innovation and incredible economic growth. The Internet enables ISPs, technology companies, online businesses, governments, and individuals to adapt it to meet localized needs thereby accelerating economic growth which is a key enabler of human, social and infrastructure development and growth. Open standards have enabled thousands of unexpected new applications to be developed, and the distributed nature of the Internet, as well as the lack of, and by definition slower, centralized control is another reason why the Internet has experienced such explosive growth over the last several decades. Decentralized, lightweight governance has proven itself to be a feature not a bug. While many processes and organizations have grown organically in support of the development of the Internet, the community has not seen the need to develop many new
frameworks or processes for handling issues concerning the usage of the Internet. This is because many of these issues are best dealt with through existing national legislation and improved international legislation and coordination. The Internet is in some ways, simply another medium. Like other areas such as the printing press, telephony, the postal service etc, it may be subject to inappropriate use. And as is the case for these other areas, such usage issues are most appropriately tackled through national laws and regulations such as those that apply in general to crime, fraud, privacy, and intellectual property. There was for example, no call for a "mobile telephony crime organization" or a new oversight "coordination body" to fight fax spam. Most, if not all, of the needed organizations already exist and we support governments, policy makers and the United Nations in their continuing efforts to improve cooperation in this area. There is still much to be done here.

Although there is no consensus on a definition of Internet Governance, we are pleased to note that the WGIG report observes that "the terms 'governance' and 'govern' mean more than government activities". However, there does seem to be consensus about the importance of coordination. The multiple facets of the Internet require different types of coordination, each calling for specific competencies and sensitivities to balance the needs of the Internet user community globally and locally. It is worth noting that many of the existing processes have proved to be flexible and responsive to the needs expressed by ever more local Internet communities. The evolution of these processes has been made possible by the cooperation of those organizations that are responsible for them. For example the recent creation of regional Internet Registries (RIRs) in Latin America and Africa was supported fully by the existing RIRs and has enabled the Internet communities in both regions to develop and implement policies based on needs specific to those regions.

Before attempting the creation of new and untested processes, we encourage WGIG and WSIS to define how existing processes could be improved, how participation can be increased, particularly for developing countries, and how the Internet community can help implement improvements. Bearing in mind the fact that the Internet has grown into a decentralized and distributed structure, any future processes will need to continue to work with that structure. Here the concepts of coordination and international cooperation have clearly proved to be the most appropriate, as well as successful, as they have facilitated the Internet's rapid, stable development and unprecedented deployment.

In closing, we encourage WGIG and WSIS to think carefully about governing the uses of the Internet rather than the Internet itself.

The Internet Society is ready to help in any way it can, by drawing on a vast network of Internet expertise, to continue supporting the Internet coordination processes that have stood the Internet so well, so that the benefits it brings really can reach all the world.