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Last week, the UN held in Tunis its global summit on the information society. The summit brought together almost 30 heads of state and government, and about twenty thousand officials, activists, experts, managers, plainclothes Tunisian police, and plain geeks.

Most of the media attention was focused on the battle over American control of the internet through its hold over the private non-profit entity ICANN that runs some organisational aspects of the internet. That role had been challenged by the EU, as well as by countries such as Iran, Cuba, and China. Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe, for example, decried the "undemocratic" internet. In the end, the US (with the help of Australia, Canada, Japan, and India) got to keep its role for the present, but a global forum will be established whose undeclared function is to help whittle down US control. The likely end-result is a two-tier mechanism, with an intergovernmental rule-setting board and a non-profit implementation body like the existing ICANN, with a broadened base.

There was a quaint aura to this heated debate by diplomats parsing words relating to national sovereignty and intergovernmental models, when in reality the issue isn't one of which government should be in control. It isn't even whether the private sector or government should be in control. The emerging issue is whether the commercial or the non-profit parts of the private sector will be in charge: the second or the third wave of the internet.

The first wave was the early generation of 'techies' who cooperatively established the technology and culture of the internet. They were largely

Information companies should not be surprised. For years they have touted their sector as the key to the planet's economic and cultural future and solution to most of its problems. No wonder that control over this sector is being contested by more than their business competitors. In the industrial age, the control over the "means of production" led to revolutionary movements and the overthrow of governments and social systems. In Britain, the "commanding heights" of the economy - the coal and steel sector - were nationalised in the 1940s, with dubious results. Today, a similar battle is emerging over control over the "means of information".

How should the second wave of the internet deal with this challenge?

First, by relentlessly pushing internet technology forward and recapturing the public imagination. Nobody challenged the narrowband internet when it created new marvels at a dizzying pace.

Second, by engaging rather than walking away from the debate, and by promoting positive values and principles. Gordon Moore, Vint Cerf, Robert Kahn, or Tim Berners-Lee have more credibility in the worldwide internet community in favour of cyber-liberties than the White House.

Third, by embracing civil society. Civil society, in concept, is a counterweight to authoritarian government and stodgy business giants. Its social entrepreneurialism, often American-styled, is much more palatable to second wavers than traditional inter- governmental agencies and standard-setting associations.

Most second wavers are familiar with the various flash points, but they have not connected the dots and recognised that they are facing an incipient social movement on the model of environmentalism, a comparison made by my co-columnist James Boyle. Conversely, many third wavers are caught in their own myopia. They ask both for more, and for less, of a governmental role in the internet. Thus, second and third wavers, even with their different perspectives, need to recognise the commonalities: a self-reliant perspective, tech-savvy, a healthy suspicion of big government, and a common adversarial relation to traditional big media.

Only an alliance of the internet's commercial and non-profit sectors can hold off a fourth wave which will benefit neither, that of regulatory controls over the commanding heights of the information economy.

The writer is professor of finance and economics at Columbia University and director of its Columbia Institute for Tele- Information

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