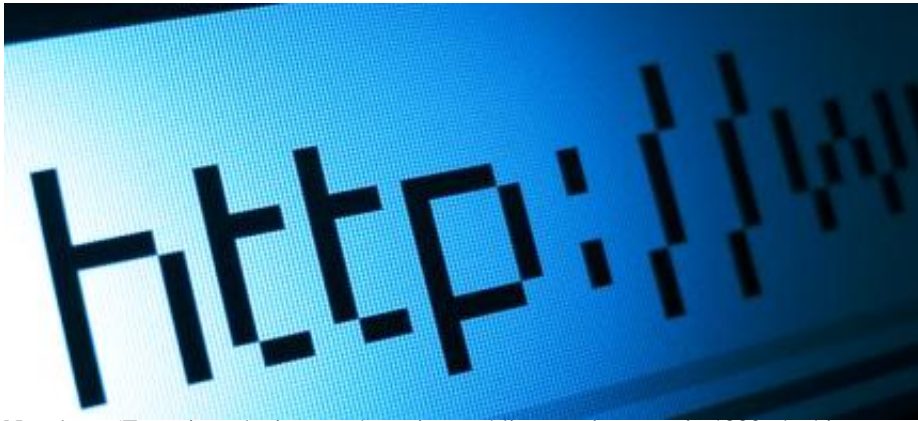● print this **page**

Naughton: 'Ever since the internet burst into public consciousness in 1993, the big question has been whether the most disruptive communications technology since print would be captured by the established power structures.' (photo: unknown)

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Will the Internet End Up Controlled by Big Business and Politicians?

By John Naughton, Guardian UK
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Its birth heralded a new age of intellectual freedom. Now the internet is under seige.

I t's all about control. Of course, nobody uses that particular term. The talk is always about "governance" or "regulation", but really it's about control. Ever since the internet burst into public consciousness in 1993, the big question has been whether the most disruptive communications technology since print would be captured by the established power structures - nation states and giant corporations - that dominate our world and shape its development. And since then, virtually every newsworthy event in the evolution of the network has really just been another skirmish in the ongoing war to control the internet.

This year closed with two such skirmishes. In Dubai, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), a venerable UN body employing nice-but-politically-dim engineers and run by international bureaucrats of average incompetence, staged the grandly named World Conference on International Telecommunications (WCIT-12).

The ostensible purpose of the meeting was to do what the ITU routinely does: update the regulations that harmonise international telecommunications - stuff such as dialling codes, mobile roaming charges and the like.

But because the ITU is a UN body on which every member country has a vote, some regimes construed the conference as an opportunity for enabling governments to begin getting a grip on controlling the net.

Their motives for doing so varied: some countries saw revised IT regulations as a way of enabling them to levy charges on the giant western companies that currently dominate the net; others saw them as a chance to control content flowing electronically across their frontiers; and a few saw them as a way of loosening the grip that western countries (particularly the US) currently has on the organisations that are critical to the technical management of the internet.

In the event, these various ambitions remained unfulfilled, though some fatuous wording found its way into the final communique of the conference, which concluded in thinly veiled disarray.

The [underlying reality](#) was that most western countries simply refused to buy into the agendas of the authoritarian and/or developing countries who sought to use the conference as a means to the ends that they desired. WCIT-12 was nevertheless a significant event in the evolution of the internet because it demonstrated that the war to control the network not only goes on, but is increasing in intensity.

Meanwhile, in another part of the forest, another illuminating skirmish took place. Instagram, a photo-sharing service that Facebook recently acquired for an unconscionable sum, abruptly changed its terms and conditions. Under the new T&C, the hapless users of the service were required to agree that Instagram could use any or all of their photographs for advertising and other purposes, at its sole discretion.

This caused such a storm that [the company rowed back](#) - a bit. Most people saw this as just another illustration of the old internet adage: if the service is free then you are the product. Others saw it as evidence that Facebook is determined to "monetise" its billion-plus users in any way it can. But however one interprets it, the inescapable fact is that it demonstrates the extent to which giant internet corporations will try to control their users.

And Facebook is a giant corporation in a way that we haven't seen before. It has over a billion customers, er, users. That's just under half of all the world's internet population.

Two years ago, when I was working on my book about understanding the net, I was astonished to discover that many of the people to whom I talked thought that the web was the internet.

During a coffee break at a Royal Society conference, I mentioned this to [Tim Berners-Lee](#), the inventor of the web. "That's nothing," he said. "There are probably 200 million people now who think that Facebook is the internet." Multiply that number by four or five and you have the current position.

In the early, heady days of the net - that is to say between 1983 and 1993 - we "netizens" believed that the network really was something unprecedented: a communications system that lay beyond the reach of the established power-structures of our societies.

We nodded approvingly when John Perry Barlow, the lyricist of the Grateful Dead, launched his [Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace](#) with its stinging contempt for the established order. "Governments of the

Industrial World", it opened, loftily, "you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather."

Predictably, it turned out that the aforementioned governments didn't see it that way. As WCIT-12 showed, they may be having trouble getting a grip on the net, but they won't give up on the project.

What Barlow didn't reckon with, however, was that another gang of control freaks would also get in on the act - the Facebooks, Googles, Amazons and Apples of this world. And, in a way, they're making more progress than governments at the moment.

The writer who has most vividly sketched the corporate threat to the internet is the American legal scholar Timothy Wu. In his magnificent book, The Master Switch, he relates the history of the great communications industries of the 20th century - the telephone, radio, movies and TV.

Each of these started out as gloriously anarchic, creative, open and vibrant technologies. Their early days were ferments of anarchic creativity, but eventually each industry was "captured" by a charismatic entrepreneur who offered consumers a more dependable, consistent proposition.

In the 20th century, those entrepreneurs were men such as Theodore Vail, Adolph Zukor and David Sarnoff. In our day they are people like Steve Jobs, the Google boys, Jeff Bezos and Mark Zuckerberg. Will they enjoy the same success as their earlier counterparts and wind up controlling the net?

That is the $64 trillion question for us all.