Workshop Implementing Internet standards and protocols for a safer Internet

This workshop is a part of an intersessional pilot project approved by the MAG. The idea is to ascertain whether the IGF is capable of speeding up certain debates on internet governance. The topic of this project was to analyze the (lack of) deployment of security-related internet standards such as DNSSEC, OWASP and RPKI and establish whether this process can be accelerated.

As a result this report knows two levels: the pilot form used and the content. The first will be mainly reported back on at the first MAG meeting of 2020. The second leads to a full report in January 2020, that will also be presented on the IGF's website.

What is important to mention up front that we have ascertained there is consensus on the following topics. Firstly, the internet needs to become safer and that internet standards, if only deployed, can contribute to a safer internet. Secondly, that, at least in most cases, a business case is lacking to deploy said standards. Thirdly, legislation, though perhaps successful, is not the answer and should be the last resort. Several participants more knowledgeable in the IETF standardization process provided a fourth point of consensus: communication about the agreed upon standards needs to be bettered. The way forward is another matter, but that one needs to be found is agreed upon.

The Project
The project allowed for a research phase, including a survey, that led us to formulate five concept recommendations that were discussed in five respective breakout sessions during the workshop at the IGF. One goal was to involve parliamentarians. Working closely with the German host made sure that the project leader was able to reach out to parliamentarians extensively. Between 15 and 20 from around the globe joined the session and spread out between most of the breakout sessions.

The combination of preparation and breaking out led to a very diverse set of ideas, views and suggestions for recommendations on all topics. The workshop proved what can happen within only circa 45 minutes, let alone if more time would have been available. To corroborate the findings so far, several interviews were conducted at the IGF with representatives from different stakeholder groups. A few will follow soon after the IGF.

The workshop
We organized a workshop including five break-out sessions to concretize and assess the concept recommendations but also to learn if we missed any crucial issues. It turned out we had. From the information gathered a sixth was added. One of the groups included those present online so they could actively participate.

1. 'Create a (positive) business case for the deployment of internet standards.' In implementing security standards, the costs are known but the advantages are not immediately obvious. Sometimes there are even disadvantages, especially in being a first mover. Standards need to be built, where possible, with having a positive business case in mind. In general alternatives need to be explored as well.
2. 'To deploy internet standards successfully it has to be incorporated in law, that is regulated actively.' Regulation is being named as a possibility in ensuring the implementation of internet standards. However, it appears to be the least favorite option of nearly everybody. If ever, it needs to be a last resort. Many pointed to the fact that the technical advancements move so rapidly that there is a risk that law will slow down the process of making the internet more secure. One option pointed to is an independent regulator.
3. 'To deploy standards successfully they need to be built into products (by design/default)'. Governments should function as a role model and a supercharger in the implementation of internet standards. Governments need to practice what they preach. When a government (or large enterprise) implements, it can take away some of the first-mover disadvantages for private sector players. Also, the government should include security standards as a prerequisite to public procurements to make sure industry has a clear advantage when they implement the standards. This could lead to trickle-down effects.
4. 'Make standards and their effect on internet security better known.' At the moment many players at least claim not to be aware of certain standards, so how can we make sure there is no plausible deniability of the knowledge any more? Consumer organizations might have a role to play in comparing different services/products on the implementation of security standards. Consumers can in this way pressure companies to ensure implementation. The argument of procurement by large organizations is the same as under 3.

5. 'Make ICT and internet products more secure through education.' At the moment many of the course material computer scientists or website builders in vocational training are taught, does insufficiently take into account internet security or security standards, or is already outdated. Organizations of private sector players could start up initiatives to enrich the curricula of these internet-related studies with information directly from the field. Also, these studies could focus more on the basic principles on which the internet and computers function rather than on specific coding languages.
6. 'Get policy makers involved in the standardization process.' Almost all stakeholders agreed that the policy making community and the technical community need to communicate better. Early interaction may prevent policy makers and parliamentarians from overreacting after serious incidents. To achieve this, the internet standards debate needs to be comprehensible also for people with a non-technical background.

In general, we can establish a few mismatches between stakeholders. Those who make the standards don't always take into consideration the operational challenges that come with implementing them. Also, there is by far not enough communication between policy makers and the standard making community. Both of them need to know from each other how to prevent harm in each other's functioning.

The participants in the workshop responded positively to the set-up of the pilot project. They recognized this as a way to effectively get different stakeholder groups to interact and extract the information to come up with concrete recommendations and actions for the IGF and beyond. Parliamentarians from all over the world were able to share their views on the issue and learned from other stakeholders about the challenges surrounding this topic.

The report
All the information gathered will lead to a report to be released late January 2020 and is shared through the IGF channels and elsewhere.

Wout de Natris
Marten Porte