

Control shift?

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Down to Earth

Abstract

USA might have ceded the control of the Internet, but only partially.

After dominating operations of the Internet for decades Washington has said it will relinquish some control. On September 30, the US department of commerce decided to cede some of its powers to the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), the body which manages the net's phone book, the Internet's Domain Naming System (DNS).

The system deals with online addresses: human understandable names (like google.com) are made to work with computer understandable names (81.198.166.2, for example). Managing this is critical because while Madras can be a city in both Tamil Nadu and Oregon, everyone wishing to go to madras.com must be pointed to the same place. For the Internet to work, everyone in the world must use the same telephone directory.

The Internet is not a single network of computers, but an interconnected set of networks. What does it mean, then, to control the Internet? For those wishing to access YouTube in late February 2008, it seemed as though it was controlled by Pakistan Telecom the agency had accidentally blocked access to YouTube to the entire world for almost a day. For Guangzhou residents, it seems the censor-happy Chinese government controls the Internet. And for a brief while in January 1998, it seemed the net was controlled by one Jon Postel.

Postel was one of the architects of the Internet involved from the times of the net's predecessor Arpanet project, which the US department of defence funded as an attack-resilient computer network. He was heading the Internet Assigned Numbers Authority (IANA), an informal body in de facto charge of technical aspects of the Internet, including the domain network system. But IANA had no legal sanction. It was contracted by the department to perform its services. The US government retained control of the root servers that directed Internet traffic to the right locations.

On January 28, 1998, Postel got eight of the 12 root servers transferred to IANA control. This was when the defence department was ceding its powers to the commerce department. Postal soon received a telephone call from a furious Ira Magaziner, Bill Clintons senior science adviser, who instructed him to undo

the transfer. Within a week, the commerce department issued a declaration of its control over the dns root servers it was now in a position to direct Internet traffic all over the world.

Soon after, the US government set up ICANN as a private non-profit corporation to manage the core components of the Internet. A contract from the department of commerce gave the organization in California the authority to conduct its operations. IANA and other bodies (such as the regional Internet registries) now function under ICANN.

Right from the outset, ICANN has been criticized as unaccountable, opaque and controlled by vested interests, especially big corporations which manipulated the domain name dispute resolution system to favour trademarks. Its lack of democratic functioning, commercial focus and poor-tolerance of dissent have made ICANN everyones target, from those who believe in a libertarian Internet as a place of freedom and self-regulation, to those (the European Union, for instance) who believe the critical components of the Internet should not be in the sole control of the US government.

The department of commerce has from time to time renewed its agreement with ICANN, and the latest such renewal comes in the form of the affirmation of commitments (AoC). Through the AoC, the US government has sought to minimize its role. Instead of being the overseer of ICANNs working, it now holds only one permanent seat in the multi-stakeholder review panel that ICANN will itself have to constitute. But two days after the AoC, ICANN snubbed a coalition of civil society voices calling for representation; the root zone file remains in US control. It is too early to judge the AoC; it will have to be judged by how it is actualized.

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