

US secures continued control of Internet naming system

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A last-minute agreement reached November 15 on the eve of the UN-sponsored World Summit on the Information Society left control of the Internet's naming system in the hands of the United States, despite opposition from more than 100 countries.

While the European Union claimed that the decision to form a new international body goes some way toward answering demands for a global role in governing the Internet, this was flatly denied by representatives of the US. Ambassador David Gross, leading the US delegation, said, "There's nothing new in this document that wasn't already out there before. We have no concerns that it could morph into something unsavory."

The decision has been presented in the US media as a victory for "common sense" and against "government control of the Internet," but in fact maintains the government control which already exists—the unilateral control of the US government.

The Bush administration announced in June of this year that earlier promises to relinquish control of the Internet's Domain Name and Addressing System (DNS) would not be fulfilled. The system is presently managed by a California-based non-profit organization, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN). Though ICANN has global representation, it is ultimately answerable to the US Department of Commerce, which maintains a veto over modifications to the root server database, which contains the addressing information through which web sites or email addresses are located.

The June announcement provoked demands from various countries for control of their own top-level country domains. Countries such as Brazil, China, Iran, Russia and others argued that since the Internet is a global tool, no one country should control it. In pre-conference negotiations, they demanded that decisions such as the registration of new domain names should fall under an international body such as the United Nations.

In September the European Union called for a new international governing body for the Internet. The proposal called for the creation of a new model for allocating IP number blocks, potentially challenging ICANN's authority. The EU also called for a new forum to address Internet policy issues.

This provoked a furious response within the United States, where the Bush administration refused categorically to relinquish control. Republican Congressman Fred Upton, the chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Telecommunications and the Internet, sent a letter to the Commerce and State Departments, urging a defense of the status quo. "The United States should maintain its historic role in authorizing changes and modifications to the authoritative root zone file," Upton wrote.

A Republican resolution stated that the current system is working and should not be tampered with. "It is incumbent upon the United States and other responsible governments to send clear signals to the marketplace that the current structure of oversight and management of the Internet's domain name and addressing service works, and will continue to deliver tangible benefits to Internet users worldwide in the future," the resolution states.

Republican Senator Norm Coleman, who is in charge of the investigation into the "Oil for Food" scandal, accused the UN of anti-Americanism. "You may be angry with us about the war in Iraq, but we are not going to let you take over the Internet. You can't do that. We can't allow concern that folks may have about other things that the US does and doesn't do to really have the great potential for strangling this expansive vehicle for new growth and new opportunities."

There is however a profound connection between the actions of US imperialism in Iraq and the refusal of the Bush administration to relinquish control of the Internet. The US control of the root servers not only gives it the ability to prevent the adding of new domains or the modification of existing records, it is also possible to deny effective access to entire countries.

Following the US invasion of Afghanistan, for example, the top-level domain for that country was assigned to the US-backed interim authority after a letter allegedly signed by the domain's previous administrator was produced. The ".af" domain name is now referenced to servers based in New York, which are owned by the United Nations Development Program.

During the war against Iraq in 2003, the domain records for the English-language site of the Arabic news service Aljazeera were diverted to a pro-war web site, supposedly after hackers broke into the servers that hold the DNS records, controlled by Verisign, under an agreement with the US government. In April of 2004, Libya effectively "disappeared" from the Internet for three days when the ".ly" domain name was disabled, reportedly following a dispute between two people who each claimed to have control of the top-level domain.

A host of articles have appeared in the American media depicting the US as the defender of Internet freedoms and the EU and UN as seeking to impose "government control" over the Internet. An editorial in the *Chicago Tribune* of November 14 states, "It's hardly reassuring that such champions of freedom as China, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Cuba are backing this move. China already has demonstrated how its Internet governance model would work. The price of doing business in China these days means that Microsoft, Google, Yahoo and others are required to block Chinese citizen's

access to web pages that mention such taboo subjects as democracy and freedom.

“The European Union also has endorsed a shift in Internet governance. The EU, though, is more interested in commerce control—taxing Internet transactions—than content control. But its backing has added legitimacy to this movement at a critical time.”

The editorial then asserts that although ICANN is answerable to the US government, “ICANN has been managed in a hands-off-manner by the US Commerce Department.”

An article in the *Washington Post* of November 12 states, “While ICANN functions on a charter from the Commerce Department, the US government has followed a strict hands-off policy; ICANN’s actions are transparent and decisions are made only after extensive consultation with Internet companies, governments, techies and freedom-of-expression organizations.”

The *Post* also asserts, “It is no secret why Iran, China and Cuba are lobbying so desperately to replace ICANN: The Internet has proven a potent weapon against state repression. In an age of media concentration, it has contributed mightily to democratization of the means of communication. It nullifies totalitarian schemes to monopolize the airwaves; in the age of the Internet, the total control portrayed by George Orwell in ‘1984’ is simply impossible in all but the most hermetically sealed countries.”

The *New York Times* has also come out in favor of the present system and on October 23 ran an Op-Ed piece by Mark A Shiffrin, a lawyer and former Connecticut state consumer protection commissioner, and Avi Sliberschatz, a professor of computer science at Yale. The authors declare that there is a move afoot to get the US to give up control of the Internet, “a medium that America created and on which it now critically relies.”

“This maneuver amounts to a call for the United States to depend on the kindness of strangers in maintaining basic infrastructure that underpins our national security and economy. Moreover, it threatens to whittle away the freedom of the Internet with seemingly minor and well-intentioned compromises that begin with something that sounds as reasonable as a ‘model of cooperation,’” the authors continue, adding for good measure:

“Internationalizing control of a medium now regulated with a loose hand by a nation committed to maximizing freedom would inevitably create more of an opening for countries like China—a strong proponent of imposing some international supervision of ICANN—to exert more pressures on Internet service providers. More broadly, international regulation could enable like-minded governments to work in concert to deem certain thoughts impermissible online.”

Concerns over increased governmental interference have led even some privacy and democracy campaigners to line themselves up with the US. The Center for Democracy and Technology (CDT), for example, issued a briefing which states the following:

“From a public interest perspective, any direct governmental involvement in the Internet’s technical management is less than optimal. The Internet’s success as a platform for speech and political organization can be largely credited to the fact that the technological underpinning of the global network has not been politicized. Although US public interest advocates understand the concerns of world leaders who feel the United States plays too large a role in Internet oversight, we strongly disagree with the notion that the way to ‘solve’ that problem is to exponentially increase the number of governments involved in the process. For all the criticism of the United States, it must be noted that the National Telecommunications and Information

Administration (NTIA), which oversees ICANN, has never vetoed a decision made by the body, which includes representatives from every region of the world.”

After stating that a “more ominous” danger is that countries such as Iran and China “would use that control as a lever to impose anti-democratic policies on the Internet,” the CDT calls for the maintenance of the existing setup.

Control of the Internet by any capitalist government or groups of governments contains within it the potential for further attacks on democratic rights and suppression. But the heralding of US imperialism as the defender of Internet freedom flies in the face of reality.

As recently as August this year, the US government expanded the Communications Assistance for Law Enforcement Act (CALEA) to cover broadband Internet access services, including voice-over-IP (VoIP) Internet telephony services. The legislation potentially facilitates automatic surveillance of universities, libraries and other areas offering public wireless access.

In October 2004, at the height of opposition to the US war in Iraq, the FBI ordered the shutting down of 20 antiwar web sites across a range of countries including Brazil, Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Uruguay.

For those who reject the notion of the US as the defender of democratic rights, another argument advanced in favor of maintaining US control is that this is necessary for technical reasons. To allow multilateral control would see the fracturing of the Internet along national lines, the argument goes.

Such arguments are belied by the existence of bodies such as the World Wide Web Consortium, which oversees the development of standards for the World Wide Web. This organization includes technical, business and other interested parties from across the globe and manages to prevent the technical fracturing of web standards with no government veto on its work.

The reasons for the insistence by the US that it must control the root servers, and for that matter the arguments by other governments against it, are political, not technical. Precisely because the Internet is so central to the lives of the entire world population, playing a crucial role in the development of the global economy, it is also seen as a strategic political, economic and military weapon by the imperialist powers.

For a country which views the energy reserves of Iraq as its own for the taking, it is hardly surprising that the US reacts ferociously to any attempt to wrest control of the Internet. Just as it would be politically criminal to lend support to the European capitalists or the United Nations in their differences with the US over the war in Iraq, however, it would be equally dangerous to assign to them the defense of the Internet as a medium for free and democratic mass communication.



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