

Bush administration annexes internet

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An extraordinary statement by the US government has sent shockwaves around the internet world and thrown the future of the network into doubt.

In a worrying U-turn, the US Department of Commerce (DoC) has made it clear it intends to retain control of the internet's root servers indefinitely. It was due to relinquish that control in September 2006, when its contract with overseeing body ICANN ended.

The decision - something that people have long feared may happen - will not only make large parts of the world furious but also puts ICANN in a very difficult position. The organisation has slowly been expanding out of its California base in an effort to become an international body with overall responsibility for the internet.

The US government is professing its full backing for ICANN (which it created) at the same time that it awards itself control of the net's foundations, which will have the inevitable effect of pulling the organisation back into the US.

This is particularly relevant at the moment as a UN review of internet governance will report later this year and indications are that the team is considering handing over elements of internet control to a UN body, possibly the International Telecommunication Union (ITU).

In fact, it is the UN report that has most likely focussed the US government's attention and prompted the statement, made yesterday at a communications conference in Washington DC.

The decision is transparently a result of the culture permeating through Washington as a result of the Bush Administration's world philosophy. In an extraordinary presentation,

assistant secretary at the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA), Michael D. Gallagher, outlined new "US principles" regarding the internet.

"The United States Government intends to preserve the security and stability of the Internet's Domain Name and Addressing System (DNS). Given the Internet's importance to the world's economy, it is essential that the underlying DNS of the Internet remain stable and secure. As such, the United States is committed to taking no action that would have the potential to adversely impact the effective and efficient operation of the DNS and will therefore maintain its historic role in authorising changes or modifications to the authoritative root zone file," is the first of a four-point statement which can be found [here](http://www.ntia.doc.gov/ntiahome/domainname/USDNSprinciples_06302005.htm) (http://www.ntia.doc.gov/ntiahome/domainname/USDNSprinciples_06302005.htm).

The second point is that world governments can run their own country-code domains (like .uk for the UK or .de for Germany). The third says ICANN should be the organisation running the internet. And the fourth that "there is no one venue to appropriately address [internet governance] in its entirety" - which is basically a warning shot across the UN's bows.

But what is most disturbing about Gallagher's [presentation](http://www.ntia.doc.gov/ntiahome/speeches/2005/WCA_06302005_files/frame.htm) (http://www.ntia.doc.gov/ntiahome/speeches/2005/WCA_06302005_files/frame.htm), is how it endlessly refers to the president. The first slide has a picture of George Bush. The second begins "Thanks to the president's policies, America's economy is strong". The next slide is "The president's broadband vision". The next slide leads with a quote from Bush and two pictures of him. And on and on it goes. There is barely a single slide that doesn't quote from the president.

Clearly the internet has entered the Bush administration's vision and the resulting DoC statement - which boldly tells the rest of the world that the US will continue to run the Internet and everyone will just have to lump it - is very in keeping with how the US government is currently run.

The big question now is whether the rest of the world will be cowed. ICANN has yet to release a statement on the DoC's surprise declaration but it knows which side its bread is buttered on and so will probably make a careful and broadly supportive statement.

The vision of a US-controlled internet infrastructure will be anathema to large parts of the world however and it is a demonstration of the US administration's failure to think globally that it doesn't recognise that there is surprisingly little preventing other parts of the world from creating a second Internet outside of US control.

An already fractious situation has just got more difficult.

CENTR response

CENTR - an organisation representing a large number of country-code domains - has responded to the US government's declaration. In a cautious welcome, it agreed that the root files needed to be run in a neutral manner and welcomed its support for ICANN, but pushed that ICANN should focus only on its "core function and limited remit".

Disingenuously, CENTR also says that the stated approach to be taken by the US government "de-politicises the role of the Root Servers and empowers the relevant local Internet Registries". And this, says CENTR will "minimise the need for any procedural intervention by other unrelated parties." CENTR doesn't care who runs the root, so long as they do so neutrally and in a purely technical fashion. As representative for country-code domains, CENTR will be delighted by the US government's statement that it considers different countries as having complete rights over their own country domain.

That statement was a necessity to prevent the rest of the world's governments turning against the US, but it serves CENTR's ends. ®

Related links

[The new US "principles" over the Internet](http://www.ntia.doc.gov/ntiahome/domainname/USDNSprinciples_06302005.htm)

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