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ICANN be independent

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America is poised to loosen its control over cyberspace

FORTY years ago this month American academics sent the first message over the ARPANET, a military network that was the precursor of today's internet. A legacy of those efforts is that the American government continues to control the internet's underlying technology—notably the system of allocating addresses. This is about to change, albeit slightly.

For the past decade America has delegated some of its authority over the internet to a non-profit organisation called the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN)—an arrangement other countries have complained about, both because they have little say in it and because ICANN's management has occasionally proved erratic. ICANN's latest mandate is due to expire on September 30th. The day before, a new accord is planned to come into effect, whereby America will pass some of its authority over ICANN to the "internet community" of businesses, individual users and other governments.

Previous agreements had maintained close American oversight over ICANN and imposed detailed reforms, but the latest document, called an "affirmation of commitments", is only four pages long. It gives ICANN the autonomy to manage its own affairs. Whereas prior agreements had to be renewed every few years, the new one has no fixed term.

The agreement sets up oversight panels that include representatives of foreign governments to conduct regular reviews of ICANN's work in four areas: competition among generic domains (such as .com and .net), the handling of data on registrants, the security of the network and transparency, accountability and the public interest—the only panel on which America will retain a permanent seat. But there are no penalties if ICANN fails to heed its new overseers short of a termination of the accord.

The changes at ICANN come at a time when the number of addresses is set to expand dramatically. Next year ICANN plans to allow the creation of many more domains. There are currently 21 generic ones in addition to the 280 country suffixes (such as .uk for Britain). ICANN also intends to authorise domain names in other scripts, which will allow entire web addresses to be written in languages such as Chinese and Arabic.

All this is controversial. Firms that have already spent a fortune to protect their brands online fear that the expansion will create a huge legal quagmire. Some American politicians are backing calls from trademark holders to call it off. Yet the firms that register new addresses support new domains. There are nearly 200m internet addresses in use (see chart), which are thought to generate more than \$2.5 billion a year in renewal fees. New domains will add to that.

The new set-up at ICANN will not placate countries such as China, Russia and Iran that want America to relinquish control entirely. However ICANN runs itself, it cannot alter the basic piping of the internet without America's approval under another agreement that lasts until 2011. Even then, that is unlikely to change.



