

U.S. against U.N. Internet control

October 1 2005

The United States rejected a European Union proposal Thursday that called for Internet control to go to the United Nations Working Group on Internet Governance.

Though various countries had suggested this already, the EU had previously supported the current system, where control rests with the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, which works with the U.S. Commerce Department.

"The U.S. is probably a little puzzled and chagrined" by the EU's reversal, said David Mussington, an analyst at RAND Corporation.

"At the end of the day, it's just the U.S.'s option," said Sean Carton, director of interactive research and development for Carton Donofrio Partners.

"I don't think the U.S. would ever accede to (the E.U. pressure)," he added.

Mussington said he thinks America's stance is firm.

"The U.S. has taken a position that U.N. administration (of the Internet) is not necessary," he said.

Mussington said he agreed with the stance.

"I don't trust the U.N. to be efficient," he said.

Carton agreed.

"I'm pretty much on the left for most things, but I think the U.N. is unable to effectively manage something like this," he said. "It's too slow and bureaucratic."

The issue is to be discussed at November's World Summit on Information Society, taking place in Tunis, Tunisia.

At a pre-summit meeting this week, though, the EU announced its support for proposals to wrest control on the Internet from the U.S. government.

Mussington said he thought the EU's idea was a bad one.

"It's likely to spawn a huge bureaucracy," he said. "It's a recipe for disaster."

"The U.N. could be rigid and unresponsive to the rapidity of technical change," he added, noting that as a policy-making body, the U.N. would not be able to be as flexible as ICANN has been.

Mussington also noted that some critics are concerned that U.N. control could lead to Internet taxation, ostensibly to fund expanded Internet connectivity in developing nations.

"U.N. taxation is a red flag for many," he said.

The WGIG has suggested four options, which vary from creating a new U.N. body to take over for ICANN to simply leaving ICANN in charge and strengthening its international ties.

Mussington said adding more international voices to an advisory board at

ICANN would be a good idea.

"The way the U.S. government administers ICANN could use a second look," he said.

Chief among the proponents of moving control to the U.N. are many developing countries, as well as China, which recently took heat from the rest of the world for tightening restrictions on information available online to citizens.

Mussington said that if no agreement is reached at the WSIS, the worst-case scenario could have China or another nation create alternate root servers and domains, separate from ICANN control.

"It would fragment the Internet," Mussington said. "I've heard it referred to as the 'nuclear option.'"

Musser said it's not likely to happen, but "it's certainly on the table."

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