States and corporations grab for reins of the Internet

October 10 2014, by Glenn Chapman

As the US steps back from overseeing the group entrusted to essentially run the Internet, states and corporations are grabbing for the reins.

The Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) has gone from being behind the scenes tending to the task of managing website addresses to being center stage in a play for power on the Internet.

"Governments want to exert control over the sweeping trans-national power of the Internet that is effecting their policies, politics, social fabric and/or their economic conditions," ICANN chief executive Fadi Chehade told AFP just days before the group gathers in Los Angeles beginning Sunday to tackle an array of hot issues.

"The other groups are large corporations concerned about security issues," he continued while discussing forces striving for influence over the organization.

"Therefore, they are stepping in with force to figure out how to reduce potential harm to customers and to their businesses."

Governance of the Internet will be a high-profile topic at the ICANN 51 meeting that will continue through October 16 in Los Angeles.

The World Economic Forum recently unveiled a project aimed at connecting governments, businesses, academia, technicians and civil

society worldwide to brainstorm the best ways to govern the Internet.

WEF launched its NETmundial Initiative in a bid to build on the outcome of a large conference in Brazil in April that called for a transparent, multi-stakeholder approach to running the Web.

"Anyone who wants to come in and build a coalition of stakeholders and address issues, more power to them," Chehade said of the crowd-sourcing move.

"The way we put it in ICANN is getting the free will of the people to bottom-up coalesce, work together and come up with solutions."

Participants at the conference in Brazil balked at a push by some countries, including China and Russia, for governments to move into a leading role in overseeing the Internet, amid fears of the impact this could have on the unity of the Web and on online dissent and freedom of expression.

Chehade told AFP that the WEF will be involved in a more action-oriented initiative to be announced shortly.

"We don't need more dialogue, we need more solutions," Chehade said.

Solutions 'not forthcoming'

The ICANN 51 agenda that includes tackling whether identities of those running websites should be public or whether privacy should be safeguarded and operators true names revealed only with proper court orders.

ICANN runs a Whois.icann.org service where contact information can be found regarding registered operators of specific websites but not

necessarily people behind business names.

"It was designed by engineers as a technical tool to contact servers," Chehade said of Whois.

"Now, it is becoming a directory of a billion websites; it was not designed for that."

ICANN has mapped a path to evolve Whois into a true global website directory, complete with privacy safeguards for website operators, according to the chief executive.

Chehade felt that ICANN has a good grip on the technical challenges it faces but "we have some holes" in non-technical issues such as privacy, cyber security, intellectual property rights, taxation and more.

"All these non-technical issues that occur in the space of the use of the Internet, rather than the system that runs the Internet, require global frameworks of cooperation to address," Chehade said.

"In general, these solutions are not yet forthcoming."

Pushed too far

ICANN is also being pushed beyond its scope, being asked to tackle cyber security and bad behavior by website operators.

Essentially, issues beyond protecting and managing the "root" of the domain name system are outside ICANN's claimed territory.

"It is happening, and we are resisting it," Chehade said.

He compared the situation to a customer being treated horribly by a car

service opting to take their complaint to the department of motor vehicles that issued the driver a license.

What makes it frustrating turning away people with legitimate complaints about websites is there tends to be no where to send them for help, he noted.

"As we move forward, ICANN and others may have roles in an eco-system of cooperation that may involve multiple parties to address bad behavior," Chehade said.

Critics of ICANN have included France, which branded the US-based body unfit for Internet governance.

The eurozone's second-largest economy has been at war with the body, which assigns domain names like '.com' and runs crucial internet infrastructure, over the '.wine' and '.vin' suffixes being rolled out as part of an unprecedented expansion of domains.

© 2014 AFP