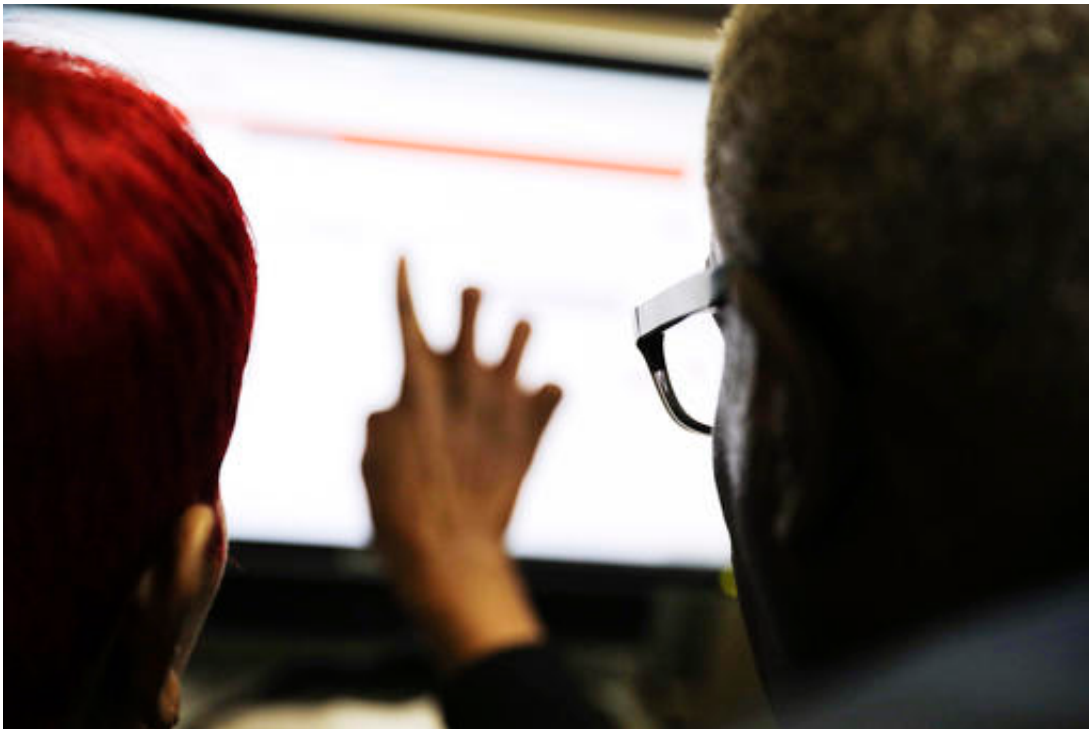# Explainer: US ceding control of core Internet systems

September 29 2016, by Anick Jesdanun

In this Thursday, March 3, 2016, file photo, people work on a job search on a computer at an office in Atlanta. On Saturday, Oct. 1, 2016, the U.S. government plans to cede control of some of the internet's core systems, namely, the directories that help web browsers and apps know where to find the latest weather, maps and Facebook musings. (AP Photo/David Goldman, File)

On Saturday, the U.S. government plans to cede control of some of the internet's core systems—namely, the directories that help web browsers

and apps know where to find the latest weather, maps and Facebook musings.

The U.S. has been in charge of these systems for more than three decades; plans to transfer control of these functions to a nonprofit oversight organization have been in the works since the late 1990s. Some Republicans in Congress raised late objections over the transfer, which they termed a "giveaway" to the rest of the world. But they failed to block the move in a spending bill to keep the government operating.

Here's a look at the systems in question and what's at stake for internet users.

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WAIT, THE U.S. GOVERNMENT CONTROLS THE INTERNET?

No single government, business, organization or individual controls all the computers and pipelines making up the internet.

But the internet does depend on an addressing system called the domain name system. This includes directories that help computers on the network how to send data such as email and web requests where it needs to go.

Control over these directories bestows some influence over the internet, although it's limited to deciding what gets included in those directories. For instance, can a Google critic register google-sucks.org, or does Google get first dibs? What about creating a domain name suffix just for porn sites? It has nothing to do with what websites publish; this is just about making sure your browser can find those sites.

Since 1998, an organization called the Internet Corporation for Assigned

Names and Numbers has overseen the directories, mostly by setting rules and creating mechanisms for settling disputes. But ICANN also has an overseer: the U.S. Commerce Department's National Telecommunications and Information Administration. It's a historical arrangement stemming from U.S. funding for the internet's early development. The domain name system we're familiar with dates back to 1984, long before "Pokemon Go" or even Amazon.com came along.

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HOW HAS THE OVERSIGHT BEEN WORKING?

ICANN's makeup has grown more international over the years, with more board directors and offices outside ICANN's headquarters in Los Angeles. But there still have been complaints, including how long it took ICANN to permit domain names in languages other than English. Many countries believe that as long as the U.S. retains oversight—even if it leaves day-to-day management to ICANN—the internet cannot be truly international.

Some governments have sought to transfer control to a U.N agency, the International Telecommunication Union, but critics objected to letting authoritarian regimes like Iran and China get equal votes on matters affecting speech. Instead, the U.S. government insisted that businesses, academics and other parties have seats at the table, too. ICANN already had such a multi-party approach. The U.S. agreed in June to relinquish control to ICANN after the organization created additional mechanisms to resolve disputes.

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WILL ANYTHING CHANGE FOR USERS?

Not really. The directories themselves aren't changing, and people don't interact directly with [domain names](#) as often in the era of Google searches, phone apps and Facebook contacts. In fact, few people would even know about the transition were it not for the noise from Capitol Hill.

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WHAT'S THAT ALL ABOUT?

Republican critics claim that the transition would give countries like Russian and China the ability to control online speech—something supporters of the transition plan deny given the multi-party approach. Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas is among those who tried to block the transition as part of a short-term spending bill to keep the government running past Friday. Donald Trump also came out in support of Cruz, his one-time rival for the GOP presidential nomination. Ironically, those wanting the U.S. to maintain its oversight role includes a group called Americans for Limited Government.

Their efforts failed, though, as budget negotiators left out the transition ban. That means the transition will almost certainly take place on Saturday as planned.

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