

Control of Internet in spotlight at Singapore talks

21 March 2014, by Martin Abbugao

Stakeholders meet in Singapore Monday to discuss the future of the Internet after the US said it will hand over stewardship of its technical operations to a global group including businesses and governments.

The US Commerce Department's National Telecommunication and Information Administration announced the move on March 14, saying it marked the "final phase of the privatisation" of the Internet's domain name system.

Control of the web has taken on geopolitical overtones with countries including China and Russia wanting management to be turned over to a body of national governments, a push Washington has said would impinge on the Internet's openness.

The European Commission has also called for governance to become more global, but supports the US approach of having diverse stakeholders—not purely national governments—do the job.

The Singapore meeting, the first for the Internet community since the US announcement, is being convened by the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), which the US has tasked with guiding the creation of a transition plan.

ICANN, a US-based non-profit group, manages the master database for top level Internet domains like .com and .net and the corresponding numerical addresses under contract by the US government.

That contract expires in September 2015, by which time the technical back-end operations of the Internet are expected to be under its new administrators.

"The initial steps in that (transition) process will occur at our Singapore meeting, which will draw

well over a thousand members of our community," said ICANN chief executive Fadi Chehade.

Those attending are a broad mix including representatives from the technical community such as Internet and IT organisations, businesses, governments, civil society groups and academia.

"The international multi-stakeholder community will be concentrating on building a proper foundation for the transition process," Chehade told AFP.

Snowden effect

Washington has come under increasing pressure to relinquish control following disclosures by former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden that US intelligence agencies scanned volumes of Internet traffic worldwide.

Observers say the US move to hand over the Internet's stewardship to a diversified group is aimed at blocking calls to give the role to the UN's International Telecommunications Union, made up of national governments.

Currently, the US has the final say in changes to globally used data on top-level Internet domain names, such as .com, .net and .org.

The demand for change in the Internet's governance "should be viewed skeptically, particularly when they come from governments that do not respect the freedom of expression," The New York Times said in an editorial this month.

"Handing control of the system to the (ITU), as China and Russia proposed in 2012, could create an opening for countries to try to squelch speech by, for example, demanding that dissident websites not be allowed to register domain names," it said.

Brazil talks

Paul Wilson, director general of the Asia Pacific Network Information Centre, the region's Internet registry, said the transition would be a key topic at the Singapore meeting even though firm decisions are some way off.

"The first of the global community consultation sessions on the Internet Assigned Numbers Authority transition will take place in Singapore and it will be watched very closely," Wilson told AFP.

But "while everyone will be bursting with ideas about this transition, we're not going to see decisions in Singapore on the outcome."

"What we will hopefully see are decisions on the process—on how the community consultation process will work, how inputs will be gathered, how the community will engage in the process and how decisions will be made."

Further discussions are expected to be carried over to the bigger "global multi-stakeholder meeting on the future of Internet governance" to be held in Brazil from April 23-24.

European Commission Vice President Neelie Kroes said the Brazil meeting "will be a good occasion to look at the details of the transition and to ensure that the outcome is what we all want: a trusted, open Internet which continues to be an engine of innovation while protecting fundamental freedoms and human rights".

"The next two years will be critical in redrawing the map of Internet governance: all those with an interest in preserving a trusted, free and open Internet must act now," she said in a blog post.

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