

The Web: Industry dismisses U.N. control

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Legal experts say that despite much caterwauling, the United Nations is unlikely to emerge as the next power broker of the Internet, and U.S. companies, which created cyberspace, are likely to retain their dominant role there.

"The Internet is a private network of private networks," Bill Semich, president and CEO of .NU Domain Ltd (nunames.nu), a domain registry service, told UPI's The Web.

Earlier this month the United Nations and the International Telecommunications Union, a multinational body, began arguing that the United States unfairly "monopolized" cyberspace, especially for domain name service, the registration of Internet site names. These organizations -- joined by the European Union -- called for the United Nations to seize control over Internet registration.

Experts doubt this will work, because the U.S. government, as alleged, does not control the Net. Private businesses, working cooperatively, do.

"The United Nations and the ITU are fighting to control something that is, in fact, (composed) of private business, and those private businesses voluntarily choose to use the U.S. Department of Commerce root servers," Semich said. "There is no technical requirement or national or international law that they do so -- they just do it so it will work universally."

The U.S. government did play a role in establishing the Internet a generation ago. Compelled by the desire to catch up with Russian space exploration in the aftermath of the 1957 launch of the Sputnik satellite, the federal government provided the original funding for what would become the Internet.

The Pentagon provided the money in 1962 for the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and other universities to start a computer-research network, called the Advanced Research Projects Agency

NETwork, or ARPANET.

"While it is well-documented that ARPANET led to the modern Internet that we know, what permitted the Internet's growth were the widespread proliferation of the personal computer, the graphic user interface and the mouse, the advent of the browser, and high-speed access," said Peter Vogel, an attorney with the Dallas office of Gardere Wynne Sewell. "Since the modern browser came about in 1995, the Internet's growth has really blossomed."

Despite these facts, China's ambassador to the United Nations recently lashed out against what he called the U.S. "monopolization" of the Internet and urged the international body to employ what he called a "more rational and just" governance system.

This call to transfer Internet management away from the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers -- ICANN, which is run by a U.S. government contractor -- and into U.N. jurisdiction has grown louder, with a number of countries complaining ICANN operates with something of an American bias.

Many of these countries want to see Internet governance handled by the ITU. The United Nations, seeking to spur the migration, recently established a new Internet governance group dedicated to dealing with spam, cybersecurity and other Internet-related issues, according to information provided by the office of Stephen Ryan, partner at Manatt, Phelps & Phillips, a leading law firm in Washington, D.C.

Despite the moves, companies remain free to host their URLs anywhere they want to online.

"Any system manager who wished to do so could, instead, choose to use a U.N.-based or ITU-based root server in their DNS cache," Semich said, adding that in many ways the argument by the United Nations and its allies is "academic."

Experts think if the United Nations somehow would be able to finagle a deal to seize bureaucratic command of the Internet, it would be a disaster for e-commerce and online communities in general.

"Do we really want a worldwide organization that cannot agree on the color of its uniforms to control the Internet?" Vogel asked. "Or, which countries are 'good' or 'bad'? I doubt it, and as a result I suspect that the United States will continue to assert as much control as possible."

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