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TECH TRENDS

Internet governance goes global as U.S. loosens grip on ICANN

A deal with Internet Corp. for Assigned Names and Numbers allowing the U.S. to review the group expired Wednesday. ICANN now will be reviewed by a group of stakeholders from around the world.

By Dan Fost

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It sounds almost silly to say it, but the Internet is going global.

Of course, it's already global. But the underlying technology that makes the Internet run was developed by the Department of Defense 40 years ago, and the federal government continued to have an outsized voice in how the Internet was run.

Eleven years ago, as the Internet took off, the U.S. turned over some of its governance to an obscure nonprofit group, the

Internet Corp. for Assigned Names and Numbers. ICANN is based in Marina del Rey, where 70 of its 100 employees work, and over the years has been called the "unique and highly technical addressing system" that enables people to surf among 183 million domain names.

The U.S. kept some authority over ICANN, including regular reviews, but the agreement between the U.S. and ICANN expired Wednesday.

The two entities have signed a new agreement that eliminates the U.S. reviews. ICANN now will be reviewed by a broader-based group of stakeholders from around the world.

"One thing this is not is Independence Day," Levins said. "We were independent the day we were established. This is not somehow slipping nooses of accountability or cutting ourselves loose from the U.S."

Instead, he said, the agreement marks a further weaning from U.S. control. The Internet is a public resource that is increasingly managed by its users.

"We've become an organization accountable solely to the Internet community," Levins said. "We will have review teams made up of people from all over the globe, not just a government sitting on Pennsylvania Avenue, although they will continue to play a crucial part."

One sign of increasingly international influence to watch for: Domain names now end in things like .com, .org and .gov, but they can only end in the sort of Latin characters we're used to seeing on Western keyboards. ICANN is working on making it possible for domain names ending in non-Western characters, like Chinese or Arabic.

And when that happens, Levins said, watch for Internet growth to really take off.

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