

US government ceding control of key Internet body

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SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — The U.S. government is relinquishing its control of the Internet's address system in a shift that may raise questions about the future direction of online innovation and communications.

The decision announced Friday begins a long-planned transition affecting the stewardship of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, or ICANN. That's a not-for-profit agency launched in 1998 by the Commerce Department to govern the system that assigns website addresses and directs Internet traffic.

The department's National Telecommunications and Information Administration, or NTIA, hopes to end its oversight of ICANN's Internet Assigned Numbers Authority by the time its contract expires in September 2015. The Internet Assigned Numbers Authority administers the technology that keeps computers connected to the Web and steers Internet traffic.

Proposals for a new ICANN stewardship will be accepted beginning next week at a conference in Singapore.

Although it's too early to tell how future oversight will be handled, the U.S. government appears determined to hand over the reins to an entity without political entanglements.

"We will not accept a proposal that replaces the NTIA's role with a government-led or intergovernmental solution," Lawrence Strickling, assistant secretary at the Commerce Department, told reporters.

That statement may ease concerns that oversight of ICANN will be turned over to International Telecommunications Union, which is part of the United Nations.

Although other countries have had a say in how the Internet works, the U.S. government retained veto power over ICANN. That role has fueled recurring debates about whether the U.S. government exerts too much influence over technology that plays such a pivotal role in society and the economy.

The concerns about the United States' role in ICANN have intensified during the past nine months amid a series of media leaks from former NSA contractor Edward Snowden. The disclosures have revealed that government spy programs have been vacuuming up emails and other personal data off of Internet services for at least the past six years as part of the country's anti-terrorism efforts.

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Strickling said the "timing is right" for the Commerce Department to start to phase out of ICANN.

Some Internet groups contend the U.S. government should remain in a supervisory position to prevent leaders in other countries with a history of suppressing free speech from trying to manipulate ICANN in a way that censors online communications.

"Without the U.S. government providing an effective backstop to ICANN's original operating principles, there would be no mechanism in place to stop foreign governments from interfering with ICANN's operations," Daniel Castro, senior analyst for the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation, wrote in a Friday blog post.

The U.S. government appears to be trying to dictate the agenda for the upcoming changing of the guard at ICANN, said Greg Shatan, a New York attorney specializing in Internet issues for the law firm of Reed Smith. In the process, the U.S. could make it more difficult for other countries seizing upon the Snowden revelations to gain greater control over the agency.

U.S. leaders "didn't like the way the wind is blowing, so they are trying to move the fan to blow the wind in a different direction," Shatan said.

Fadi Chehade, ICANN's president, took a diplomatic stance to the looming shift in power. "All stakeholders deserve a voice in the management and governance of this global resource as equal partners," he said.

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