

THE
NATIONAL LAW REVIEW

Privatizing the Internet's Domain Name System

Friday, September 9, 2016

The US National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) has announced that its agreement with the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) to administer the internet's domain name system (DNS) is terminating on September 30, 2016.

The termination of this agreement is the final step in the NTIA's long-term plan to transition oversight of the DNS functions from NTIA to the private sector. Over the past two years, NTIA and ICANN have been working with the global multistakeholder internet community to establish a governance structure within ICANN for DNS oversight. NTIA has accepted ICANN's plan to transition the stewardship of the Internet Assigned Numbers Authority (IANA).

ICANN is a California-based nonprofit organization set up by the internet community to help coordinate areas of responsibility under the IANA. The main areas of IANA functions are

- to maintain the codes and numbers used in internet protocols,
- to globally coordinate IP addresses, and
- to manage the root zone, which involves assigning the operators of top-level domains (such as .com and .org) and maintaining their technical and administrative details.

Once the NTIA's agreement with ICANN expires, ICANN's multiple stakeholders (including innovators, businesses, technical experts, governments, and others with a vested interest in the systems) will be fully in charge of the IANA functions.

This handover is not going to change the day-to-day operation of the DNS. The purpose of the handover is to help maintain the global open internet by supporting and enhancing the multistakeholder approach to internet governance, because NTIA believes that this has been a key reason the internet has been able to grow so rapidly and meet the needs of so many on a global basis. Although some US legislators have raised concerns with regard to giving up US control of internet operations, the change reflects the international concern that the US government has had too much power over IANA.

Conclusion

In short, as of October 1, 2016, ICANN will fully take over IANA oversight functions. Based on the two-year transition period and the structure established by ICANN, the governance change is not likely to affect internet users in the short run. However, longer term, policies on how to keep the internet running may be subject to a broader range of considerations.

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