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So who controls the Internet?

By Patrick Quirk and Jay Forder, Consultant Editors

Do you believe the traditional view that no single entity controls the Internet? There is wide consultation and discussion of protocols/standards before a community decision is made to adopt them, right? Well, think again! The US Government recently demonstrated who has the real power.

The foundation of the Internet is the "A root server". It holds the original list recording the allocation of top level domain names (Internet addresses). This database is mirrored on another 12 root servers throughout the world. It is updated daily and is responsible for sending **all** Internet communications in the right direction. The US Government has a direct role in operating half of the world's root servers.

Who controls the database? Network Solutions, Inc (NSI), a private Virginia-based company, under a 5 year agreement with the National Science Foundation (NSF). The latter is an agency



of the US Government. It was their research network that was the forerunner of the Internet.

The 5 year agreement with NSI comes to an end this month (although there is an optional "rampdown" period that ends on 30 September 1998). In anticipation of this, for the last 18 months the Internet community has been developing a plan (the Memorandum of Understanding or "MoU") to revamp the domain name system (see the first issue of this Newsletter). The MoU addressed many of the perceived shortcomings of NSI's system. For example, it proposed increasing the number of top level domains, making the registration of

domain names more competitive, and offering an efficient international dispute resolution procedure (see <http://www.gtld-mou.org>).

On 30 January Bill Clinton's Internet adviser, Ira Magaziner, released a Discussion Draft titled "A Proposal to Improve Technical Management of Internet Names and Addresses" (see <http://www.ntia.doc.gov/ntiahome/domainname/dnsdrft.htm>). While it recognises many of the deficiencies of the current system, and acknowledges that control should pass to a non-profit international organisation, it proposes a more gradual transfer of control including a negotiated deal to include NSI's

interests, and the US Government retaining "policy oversight" for as long as another 2 years. As NSI has possession and control of the "A root server" and is contractually bound to a US Government agency, it is difficult to see how the Internet community can insist on the immediate implementation of the plan it has painstakingly developed through wide consultation over the last 18 months. Hopefully the feedback on the Discussion Draft will ensure that the work done on the MoU will not be lost. But we all now know who controls the Internet! 