

## The Robert Bosch Foundation Fellowship Program

High-level professional development for emerging US leaders  
Apply by November 1



Enjoy 12 weeks  
for \$12

Subscribe >

The  
Economist

Subscribe

Log in or register

The Economist explains

# Why is America giving up control of ICANN?

*A crucial internet-governance body is about to become independent*



Getty Images

The Economist explains

Unlock the bigger picture every week with *The Economist*

Subscribe now and enjoy great savings

Subscription offers



BARRING any last-minute hiccups, something remarkable will happen on October 1st. Nearly two decades after it created the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, the body which oversees the internet's address system, America's government will let lapse a contract that gives it control over part of ICANN. This means that a crucial global resource will henceforth be managed by an organisation that is largely independent of national governments. But how did ICANN come about and what is its mission?

Whoever controls the internet's address book can also censor the internet: delete a domain name (such as economist.com) and the website can no longer be found. That is why, as the internet grew up, America decided not to hand control to the United Nations or another international body steered by governments. Instead, in 1998 it helped create ICANN, which is a global organisation that gives a say to everybody with an interest in the smooth running of the network, whether they are officials, engineers, domain-name holders or internet users. Because few precedents existed, and because of a fear that ICANN, which is based in Los Angeles, would lack legitimacy, America kept it on a long leash. American approval is still required in some areas, including changes to the innards of the internet's address system.

Most were happy with the arrangement, at least at first. But American oversight came to seem odd as the internet grew into a vast global resource with much traffic no longer passing over American cables. Then came revelations that the National Security Agency had spied on internet users in America and elsewhere. The snooping was unrelated to the management of internet addresses. But America's Department of Commerce, which oversees ICANN, was provoked to announce in March 2014 that it would relinquish its role if it were convinced that the organisation would be truly independent and able to resist power grabs by other governments and commercial interests. After ICANN agreed to implement a number of reforms earlier this year, the Department of Commerce decided to give the organisation full responsibility.

Yet ICANN and its independence are still controversial. Some—notably Ted Cruz, a Republican senator from Texas, and four state attorneys-general who have sued to block the handover—argue that the handover amounts to giving away the internet. He says that it would allow governments in autocratic countries such as China, Iran and Russia to have greater control over what is available online. By contrast, champions of the organisation reckon that it is just the

Unlock the bigger picture every week with *The Economist*

Subscribe now and enjoy great savings

Subscription offers



nightmare. Yet it may be the best hope for finding common solutions to the global problems created by the internet.

---

[View comments \(6\)](#)

---

Advertisement



Unlock the bigger picture every week with *The Economist*

Subscribe now and enjoy great savings

Subscription offers

