

## Ethics Fight Over Domain Names Intensifies

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PARIS — A boardroom dispute over ethics has broken out at the organization that maintains the Internet address system after its most important supporter, the United States government, reproached the group for governance standards said to fall short of “requirements requested by the global community.”

The Commerce Department said this month that while it was temporarily extending a contract with the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers to manage the allocation of computers’ Internet protocol addresses — and the .com and .net names of Web sites associated with them — it warned the organization that it needed to tighten its rules against conflicts of interest or risk losing a central role.

Icann, as the company is known, has filled that role since 1998. The Commerce Department said it had received no suitable bids for the contract, and was temporarily extending Icann’s services for six months.

After the department’s announcement, the soon-to-depart chief of Icann, Rod Beckstrom, went on the offensive, taking an unusual public swipe at his own organization’s 21-member board.

“I believe it is time to further tighten up the rules that have allowed perceived conflicts to exist within our board,” Mr. Beckstrom said in a speech during an Icann meeting in San José, Costa Rica, last week. “This is necessary, not just to be responsive to the growing chorus of criticism about Icann’s ethics environment, but to ensure that absolute dedication to the public good supersedes all other priorities.”

Icann has come under heightened scrutiny because of an initiative to increase vastly the number and variety of available Internet addresses. Under the plan, which Icann is putting into effect, hundreds of new “top-level domains” — the letters like “com” that follow the “dot” in addresses — are set to be created.

Some business groups say the expansion of domains will cause a rise in trademark violations and cybersquatting, while some governments object to Icann’s move to create address suffixes like .xxx, for pornography.

But the initiative has been cheered by companies that register and maintain Internet addresses. A number of current and former members of the Icann board have close ties to

such registrars or to concerns involved in other areas that stand to benefit from the expansion.

“Icann must place commercial and financial interests in their appropriate context,” said Mr. Beckstrom, who is scheduled to step down from his post in July. “How can it do this if all top leadership is from the very domain-name industry it is supposed to coordinate independently?”

“A more subtle but related risk is the tangle of conflicting agendas within the board that would make it more difficult for any C.E.O. to meet the requirements of this deeply rewarding and sometimes frustrating job.”

Icann directors were taken aback by Mr. Beckstrom’s comments. Stephen D. Crocker, chairman of the board, said the chief executive had merely been expressing his “personal views.”

“The board has been spending a lot of time on ensuring that we are as clean and straightforward as we can be,” Mr. Crocker said. A review of conflict-of-interest policies is under way, he said, and directors already abide by strict guidelines, including a requirement that they file annual statements on potential conflicts.

The dispute comes at a delicate time for Icann. Growing Internet powers like China and Russia chafe at the instrumental role the United States plays in maintaining the Internet.

Those countries are said to be lobbying to gain greater influence over the Internet at the global level by bringing more functions under the auspices of the United Nations. The matter could come to a head in November, at a meeting in Dubai of the International Telecommunication Union, a United Nations body.

This campaign has raised alarms among supporters of an open Internet, who fear that transferring authority to international bodies could politicize governance and lead to restrictions on the flow of information.

Eric E. Schmidt, the executive chairman of Google, said recently that giving the United Nations such oversight would be a “disaster.”

“Be very, very careful about moves which seem logical but have the effect of balkanizing the Internet,” Mr. Schmidt said at a conference in Barcelona. “If the current governance is working pretty well — and I think it is — I wouldn’t move it, or if I did, I would do it very, very carefully.”

Yet the United States government is also dissatisfied with Icann. The Commerce Department said it had canceled a request for proposals to run the so-called Internet Assigned Numbers Authority because none of the bids met its requirements: “the need for structural separation of policy-making from implementation, a robust companywide conflict of interest policy, provisions reflecting heightened respect for local country laws and a series of consultation and reporting requirements to increase transparency and accountability to the international community.”

Eyebrows were raised last year when Peter Dengate Thrush, former chairman of Iann and a fan of the domain name expansion, joined a company that invests in domain names.

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