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ICANN: TLD Threat? What Threat?

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MELBOURNE, Australia -- An Internet startup that plans to create its own top-level domain names is likely to cause bigger trouble for Web surfers than for the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, ICANN officials say. "This idea --- it's a trick, really -- is something that other people have tried before, and it didn't ignite into any large business outcome," said Vint Cerf, a senior vice president of technology at Worldcom and an ICANN board member.

ICANN, the nonprofit organization that oversees the current global system of domain-name registration, began a five-day meeting here Friday. At a previous meeting in November, it approved adding seven new top-level domains: -dot-aero, dot-biz, dot-info, dot-name, dot-pro, dot-museum and dot-coop. Contract talks with registrars of the new domains are underway, and many if not all of the new domains should be up and running later this year.

But this deliberative pace has left some outfits -- among them New.net in Pasadena, Calif. -- highly impatient. Earlier this month, New.net announced plans to create 20 so-called top-level domains (TLDs) that it would administer on its own. These domains would carry names like dot-shop, dot-law, dot-mp3, dot-tech, dot-video, dot-name, dot-sport, dot-kids, dot-chat, dot-inc, dot-med and dot-family.

The system would rely upon either the cooperation of individual Internet service providers or upon a browser plug-in that Web surfers would download and install. Either way, addresses for the new domains would go through the New.net site, and then be directed to locations that would exist essentially as subdomains of New.net. As such, New.net poses no real threat to ICANN's ability to govern global domain name creation.

But it could create other difficulties, warned Cerf. For instance, it could open a gulf between browsers and ISPs equipped with the plug-in and those that aren't. This would make a difference, since Web users would need to bear this in mind if they wanted to know which site they were connecting to. For instance, browsers or ISPs without the plug-in may resolve to redirect the query to some other site -with unpredictable results.

In addition, Cerf noted e-mail to and from the new "domains" could be troublesome for e-mail programs or ISPs not configured to recognize New.net.

In addition, outfits like New.net could present tricky policy problems down the road, Cerf said. That's because, if New.net creates new domains, it could lead ICANN -- in order to reduce potential ambiguity -- not to name any similar domain name itself. This would allow a maverick to influence future ICANN policy, Cerf said.

Nonetheless, there's nothing ICANN can or should do to stop or discourage outfits like New.net from experimenting. That is, unless they compromise the performance of the Internet itself.

"While I'm not sold on this idea, it won't break the Internet," Cerf said.

Instead of resisting, ICANN would be better off working to increase the public's knowledge of the shortcomings of the new domains, -such as the e-mail and routing snafus, he said.

For his part, Louis Touton, ICANN's vice president and general counsel, said much the same thing. "It's a free Internet and they, obviously, can do what they like, but I don't think this will do much for users. Most people want assurances that when they type in a name they know where it's going."

Ultimately, he believes, consumers will decide whether to embrace New.net.

Meanwhile, assuming contract negotiations proceed smoothly with the seven companies selected to manage the official new domains assigned by ICANN, the most aggressive of the bunch could make announcements as early as May regarding when they'll be operational, Touton said.

Cerf said ICANN will want to monitor the performance of the new domains for at least six months, - possibly longer, before making any decision on whether to move forward on any subsequent release of domains.

On Saturday, smaller constituencies within ICANN will be holding meetings on issues surrounding business, connectivity, intellectual property and non-commercial activities. Sunday and Monday will be meetings of larger overarching bodies within ICANN, followed by a board of directors meeting on Tuesday.