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Last Stand of Oz Domain Fight

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SYDNEY, Australia -- It might be described as the last stand of an Internet volunteer against the advance of 21st century technocrats -- the swan song of a beard against the suits.

In one corner sits reclusive, volunteer Australian-network programmer Robert Elz, who communicates only selectively with the outside world by e-mail and avoids being photographed. In the other sits a fledgling Australian national Internet managerial organization known as "auDA."

In the middle sits the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), the global organization overseeing certain technical aspects of the Internet. It had to play hardball in choosing between the two.

The issue is Australia's Internet domain name system, at the pinnacle of which sits "dot-au" -- Australia's equivalent of a national flag in cyberspace.

Fledgling not-for-profit au Domain Administration Ltd. (auDA) already administers more than 85 percent of Australia's domain names through its control of the second-level "dot-com.au" subdomain. And auDA holds the backing of both ICANN and the Australian government to take over the other 15 percent.

But Elz, a University of Melbourne network programmer who managed Australia's Internet domain-naming system for 15 years as an unpaid volunteer, is holding onto rebellious control over two smaller sub-domains, "dot-org.au" for nonprofits, and the idiosyncratic "dot-id.au" -- established for individuals and families.

Whether and how auDA wrests control of these from Elz may indicate how brusquely other Internet old-guard volunteers are shoved aside as the Internet shifts to more commercial management from its largely academic legacy. At stake are huge amounts of emerging property rights in the ephemeral world of website domain names.

To understand the current situation, some history is needed.

Back in the 1980s, when the Internet was younger, University of Southern California computer networks engineer Jon Postel managed the overall global system of top-level domains on an ad hoc volunteer basis -- reigning unchallenged as an enlightened techno-autocrat. In 1986, Postel assigned management of Australia's top-level dot-au domain to Robert Elz, a publicity-shy University of Melbourne engineer.

Nothing unusual there. At least, not at the time.

But as the years went on and Internet use and domain name registration exploded, such one-man shows proved increasingly untenable, requiring time and effort far beyond what a single volunteer could provide. Perhaps nobody realized this more than the volunteers themselves -- people such as Postel and Elz.

After Postel's untimely death in 1998, most of his volunteer functions were taken over by ICANN, a California nonprofit, private-sector corporation for coordinating technical management of the Internet's domain name system. In November 1999, Elz readily relinquished authority over the "dot-com.au" subdomain -- accounting for roughly 85 percent of dot-au registrations -- as a precursor to giving up control over the rest of Australia's 11 subdomains.

So far, so good.

Earlier this year -- supported by the Australian government -- auDA lobbied ICANN to assume more complete control over dot-au from Elz. Elz objected, saying auDA wasn't ready. Instead, Elz suggested turning over administration of the dot-au top-level domain to the Australian government.

In the end, the Australian government supported auDA. Unable to change Elz's mind, ICANN unilaterally took control of dot-au from Elz and gave it to auDA on Oct. 25 as part of a broader agreement with auDA on management of the dot-au domain going forward.

Critics saw ICANN's action as setting a nasty precedent.

"In a watershed moment in Internet history, ICANN declared that the ICANN staff can reassign the dot-au ccTLD (country code top-level domain) at will, without a finding of misconduct, without a public comment process, and despite the opposition of the incumbent ccTLD manager," wrote University of Miami law professor Michael Fromkin in a [commentary](#).

Andrew McLaughlin, ICANN's chief policy officer, disagrees.

"It was the Australian Internet community itself that created auDA, organized elections, and brought together stakeholders from user groups to ISPs to the government," McLaughlin said. "What was primarily at issue in the case of dot-au was the support of the local community."

Since ICANN's redelegation in October, auDA's chief executive officer Chris Disspain has put out to competitive tender management of dot-au's so-called second-level domains: "dot-com.au," "dot-net.au," "dot-asn.au," "dot-org.au," "dot-id.au," "dot-gov.au" and "dot-edu.au."

In coming months, auDA plans to run tests of the companies' abilities to run the services before finalizing contracts.

For his part, Tony Hill, executive director of the Internet Society of Australia, the redelegation of dot-au to auDA is part of the Internet's maturation from military and academic network to the oxygen tank of the electronic age.

Disspain said he doesn't want a fight and he'd prefer it if Elz just came out with his hands up. Elz doesn't respond to e-mails seeking comment.

Calls to Elz's university office go unanswered, and staff at the university give only terse answers when queried regarding his whereabouts -- saying only that he's been on leave for several months and will remain on leave for several more.