Web Naming Group Pushes Ahead on Governance Transition

ICANN Oversight Preparing to Move to New Model

By Lisa Fleisher, June 23, 2014 3:22 p.m. ET

Fadi Chehadé, head of Icann, which oversees Web domain names. Agence France-Presse/Getty Images

The battle for power over control of Web addresses is heating up as domain names including .com, .org and even .london are losing prominence as traffic funnels through mobile apps, search engines and social networks, Internet experts say.

But representatives from businesses, nonprofit organizations and governments who met in London on Monday for the largest-ever meeting of the organization that makes decisions about the names and numbers that make up the Internet's architecture said domain names still serve a core function: proving authenticity.

"If I asked my children [when] is the last time you typed a domain name, they probably wouldn't remember," said Fadi Chehadé, president and chief executive officer of Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, or Icann.

Still, he said, a domain name can assure people that they are visiting an authentic site, helping to prevent fraud or counterfeit websites.

The oversight of Icann is slated to pass by late 2015 from the U.S., which had long controlled the Los Angeles-based nonprofit, to a new, international group that has yet to be formed. Icann has said it would form a committee to come up with a new governance model palatable to the U.S.
The U.S. has long said it intended to give up control, and the move has been particularly welcomed outside the U.S. after government-led spying programs were revealed by former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden.

On Monday, government appointees attending the meeting—one of three annual conventions—said they worried the transition would happen too fast or that the decision-making might not include all views.

The importance of the body was illustrated this week when wine producers pushed back against the planned .vin and .wine domain names, saying they believe the names could confuse consumers into buying inferior wines.

Mr. Chehadé said the wine producers had a valid concern, but they should go through the normal channels of Icann to be heard. He said it showed how important domain names still are for authentication purposes.

In addition, businesses still want control over domain names for branding purposes. "I may care if I'm putting it in my advertising," said J. Scott Evans, an associate general counsel who works on trademarks and other areas for Adobe Systems Inc. ADBE -0.25%

The .london domain name, which became available in April, has started to attract luxury goods retailers who want to attach the cachet of the London city brand to their products, said Jean-Louis Bravard, who is in charge of the .london domain name. "We are seeing London brands perceiving [the domain] as an extension of their brand, he said. He declined to name the retailers.

The meeting, which continues through Thursday at the London Hilton Metropole, attracted more than 3,300 registrants.

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