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The internet is run by an unaccountable private company. This is a problem

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The US government's plan to give up authority over Icann may create the web's answer to Fifa – when problems arise, no one will have the power to intervene

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What if instead of organising a football competition every four years, Fifa took on management of the internet? Leaving aside the arrests and bribery allegations, the organisation might look a bit like the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (Icann), the private California company responsible for overseeing the running of the internet. The scary thing about Fifa is that, when things go wrong, no one else has the power to intervene.

It was thought that 30 September 2015 was supposed to be a significant date in internet governance. The US government was going to hand over key responsibilities to the internet community – but that date will be missed, because Icann's board looks set to oppose plans to make itself more accountable.

If Icann's board can override the consensus of its own community, it casts doubt on the viability of the entire Icann model, and exposes the flakiness of the way essential internet resources are governed.

What is Icann?
You may never have heard of Icann, a Californian not-for-profit, but your online life is influenced by its decisions. Icann coordinates domain names and internet protocol (IP) addresses, the internet's essential protocols.

You might think it's a bit of a risk to leave this important work in the hands of a Californian private company. You'd expect that there would be a government in the background, just in case the power and money went to everyone's heads – and you'd be

right. The US government has been Icann's final backstop of authority since the organisation was created in 1999.

How to replace the US government?

The government's ultimate control over Icann has been controversial for many countries for many years. This is strange to anyone who understands how little the government actually does, because the role is essentially clerical – yet having it there as ultimate authority is enormously significant.

In March 2014, the US government announced that it intended to step back from its role. It tasked the Icann community with finding a suitable replacement by 30 September 2015. Icann's "community" includes governments, business, domain industry and civil society, and its bottom-up policy development is called (in the jargon) "multi-stakeholder governance".

Icann's community of volunteers rose to the challenge. Hundreds of people endured thousands of hours of conference calls, fractious mailing lists and face-to-face meetings to produce – just in time – consensus recommendations.

The problem with giving up power

A key problem was how to improve Icann's accountability. Its board represents the end of the line in accountability terms. Icann's directors can't be fired (except by each other), and they can alter Icann's constitution. Such a concentration of power over globally critical resources – internet naming and addressing – represents a strategic risk and is vulnerable to capture.

Failures of oversight and inbuilt conflicts are apparent from a quick look at Icann's finances: double digit-percentage salary increases in 2012 and 2013; a trading loss in 2014. The domain name industry, nominally regulated by Icann, also provides its funding. This creates at least theoretical governance risks, and opportunities for corruption.

The community's solution is for Icann to become a membership organisation. I agree that this is the only outcome likely to deliver accountability. It's feasible, it gives backstop power to the community and is a well understood model common to many non-profits.

Unsurprisingly, Icann's board – turkeys being asked to vote for Christmas – have not reacted well. During a three-hour conference call, like so many Yes Minister hopefuls, they expressed full support for the plans, while proposing minor tweaks that would deliver the opposite. The Icann board followed up by submitting its own comments to a process which will ultimately be decided – yes – by itself.

The risks of failure

Meanwhile, in a low-key statement the US government extended the target date for another year. So the initial opportunity to

resolve a thorny internet governance problem by 30 September has been missed. If it drags on beyond the next US presidential elections, and a Republican candidate wins, the whole thing will be off. Jeb Bush has indicated he will halt Icann's transition; what Donald Trump would do is anyone's guess.

But there's much more at stake. Icann's board – as ultimate authority in this little company running global internet resources, and answerable (in fact, and in law) to no one – does have the power to reject the community's proposals. But not everything that can be done, should be done. If the board blunders on, it will alienate those volunteers who are the beating heart of multi-stakeholder governance. It will also perfectly illustrate why change is required.

Icann plan to end website anonymity 'could lead to swatting attacks'

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