

Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN)

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Description ICANN was founded in 1998 by a coalition of business, academic, technical, and user groups with an interest in the Internet. It is a non-profit organization whose goals include maintaining the operational stability of the Internet, representing the broad interests of global Internet communities, and developing policy through private-sector advocacy. Although it does not regulate the Internet, its activities do include coordinating the assignment of Internet domain names, Internet Provider address numbers, and protocol parameter and port numbers.

While its origins are to be found in ARPANET, the American military computing project, the Internet's exponential growth truly began in 1991 when the US government, through the National Science Foundation (NSF), removed the ban on commercial uses of the network. The NSF contracted out the operational management of the Internet, and Network Solutions (NSI) — later bought by Verisign — was responsible for the registration of generic top level domains (gTLDs) such as ".com" and ".org". The ad hoc growth of the Internet, however, led to disputes over the rightful ownership and use of domain names, and attracted the interest of governments anxious to stake regulatory claim over the Internet's "borderless" landscape. In 1996, an International Ad Hoc Committee (IAHC) was formed by several international bodies with an interest in intellectual property and telecommunications, including the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) and the International Telegraph Union (ITU). It advocated a global registry for domain names. The United States opposed such a global institution, however, and instead in 1998 created ICANN, a private corporation regulated by the US Congress.

While ICANN oversees issues such as the creation of new gTLDs, it uses outside bodies for dispute resolution, the most important of which being WIPO. ICANN has been criticized for being unrepresentative, however, not the least because of its American roots. Its inability to assert control over the use of the Internet, furthermore, reflects the divided interests of governments, registrars, users, and commercial interests in this most global new arena. The failure of governments and commercial interests to "enclose" the Internet demonstrates that, at least so far, this is one area where globalization has enhanced, rather than hindered, individual autonomy, while stymying both national and supra-national sovereignty.

and Autonomy Online Compendium. The electronic original is available at http://www.globalautonomy.ca/global1/glossary_entry.jsp?id=OR.0012.