

Internet addresses set for change

The internet regulator has approved plans to allow non-Latin-script web addresses, in a move that is set to transform the online world.

The board of Iccann voted at its annual meeting in Seoul to allow domain names in Arabic, Chinese and other scripts. More than half of the 1.6 billion people who use the internet speak languages with non-Latin scripts.

It is being described as the biggest change to the way the internet works since it was created 40 years ago.

The first Internationalised Domain Names (IDNs) could be in use next year.

Plans for IDNs were first approved at a meeting in June 2008, but testing of the system has been going on for two years.

Technical upheaval

The move paves the way for the internet's Domain Name System (DNS) to be changed so it can recognise and translate non-Latin characters.

The DNS acts like a phonebook, turning easily understood domain names into strings of computer-readable numbers, known as Internet Protocol (IP) addresses.

“ This change is very much necessary for not only half the world's internet users today but more than half, probably, of the future users as the internet continues to spread ”

Rod Beckstrom President of Iccann

The Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (Iccann) said the "fantastically complicated technical feature" allowing IDNs would represent the "biggest change" to the coding that underlies the internet since it was invented four decades ago.

BBC technology correspondent Mark Gregory says in the early days of the internet, language posed no problem, as most web-surfers spoke English and those that did not usually wrote in languages based on the Latin alphabet.

But this is no longer true, adds our correspondent.

Iccann said it would accept the first applications for IDNs by 16 November, with the first up and running by "mid-2010".

It is likely the majority of early non-Latin net addresses to be approved will be in Chinese and Arabic script, followed by Russian.

Some countries, such as China and Thailand, have already introduced workarounds that allow computer users to enter web addresses in their own language.

However, these were not internationally approved and do not work on all computers.

Autonomy

Our correspondent says the point of the Iccann vote was to create a universal internet address code that will work in any language and every place so all the world's computers can connect with each other. [HAVE YOUR SAY](#) There is a danger that the internet - a tool for culture, information - sharing and dialog on a non-national level, may become irreversibly fragmented Stefanos Likkas, Athens, Greece

"Of the 1.6 billion internet users today worldwide, more than half use languages that have scripts that are not Latin-based," said Iccann president and CEO Rod Beckstrom earlier this week.

"So this change is very much necessary for not only half the world's internet users today but more than half, probably, of the future users as the internet continues to spread."

Iccann, set up by the US government, was founded in 1998 to oversee the development of the net.

Last month, after years of criticism, the US government eased its control over the non-profit body.

It signed a new agreement that gave Iccann autonomy for the first time. The agreement came into effect on 1 October and puts it under the scrutiny of the global "internet community".

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