

Internet language shake up

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The internet is on the brink of the "biggest change" to its working "since it was invented 40 years ago", net regulator Iann has said.

The body said it that it was finalising plans to introduce web addresses using non-Latin characters. The proposal (initially approved in 2008) would allow domain names written in Asian, Arabic or other scripts. The body said if the final plans were approved on 30 October, it would accept the first applications by 16 November.

The first Internationalised Domain Names (IDNs) could be up and running by "mid 2010" said the president of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (Iann). "Of the 1.6 billion internet users today worldwide, more than half use languages that have scripts that are not Latin-based," said Rod Beckstrom at the opening of Iann's conference in Seoul, South Korea. "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."

Relaxed rules

Plans for ILDs were approved at a meeting in June 2008. However, testing of the system has been going on for much longer, said Peter Dengate Thrush, chairman of the board in charge of reviewing the change. "You have to appreciate what a fantastically complicated technical feature this is," he said. "What we have created is a different translation system."

The changes will be applied to the net's Domain Name System. This acts like a phone book, translating easily understood domain names such as code-authors.com into strings of computer readable numbers known as IP addresses. The tweaks will allow this system to recognise and translate the non-Latin characters.

"We are confident that it works because we have been testing it for a couple of years," said Mr Dengate Thrush. "We're really ready to start rolling it out."

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 necessarily work on all computers.

The meeting in South Korea will also discuss its plans to introduce generic Top Level Domains (TLDs), such as .uk or .com. Last year, the body voted to relax rules on TLDs meaning companies could turn brands into web addresses, while individuals could use their names. Iann, 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, signing a new agreement that gave Iann autonomy for the first time. The agreement came into effect on 1 October and puts it under the scrutiny of the global "internet community".

Story from BBC NEWS:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/technology/8326241.stm>

Net set for 'language shake-up'

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