

THE INTERNET GOES GLOBAL!

For the first time, non-English speakers around the world will have access to domain names in their own non-alphabetic language.

By Chris Gibbons

Imagine for a moment that the Internet had been invented in Russia or China. The whole language of the web we know today would be completely different – and mostly unintelligible to users outside those countries. That is what the Internet looks like to the millions of people around the world whose languages do not use the Roman letters and numbers of the English alphabet, or the ASCII code used to display characters in computers, phones and other digital devices.

But that's about to change. Non-English speakers around the world will soon have access to Internet addresses – the “www.” address line that links users to web sites – in their own language.

In November, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), the organisation that oversees the Internet's unique naming and numbering systems, launched a programme to recognise Internationalized Domain Names (IDNs) in non-alphabetic languages and scripts.

Although there is plenty of web page content in native languages, the top level country domain name system (DNS) which organises web sites has, until now, been totally in English and therefore restricted to the 26 letters and 10 numbers of the Roman alphabet. It is the technical equivalent of having local maps and road signs in a foreign language.

The DNS, developed in the early 1980s, gives every computer and web site on the internet with a unique identifying name or number. ICANN, a global not-for-profit organisation set up in 1998, coordinates these unique identifiers around the world in order to keep the Internet safe, secure and able to be used by everyone with access.

ICANN does not control or govern the Internet or Internet access but its role is critical in the evolution and growth of the Internet. Through its IDN programme, users will now be able to register and use domain names based on their local language scripts. It means, for example, that Arabic users, who read and write from right to left, or non-alphabetic scripts such as Mandarin Chinese, can be used for the first time in domain names.

It is, ICANN chairman Peter Dengate Thrush told *Bermudian Business*, “the biggest technical change in the Internet in years” and arguably the most significant since TCP/IP (Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol) – the code by which one computer finds another on a network – was invented more than 40 years ago. It promises to make the Internet a truly global network.

Thrush, speaking in Bermuda at the Global Public Policy Summit of WITSA (the World Information Technology and Services Alliance) at the Fairmont Southampton hotel, continued: “The IDN program will encompass close to 100,000 characters, opening up the Internet to billions of potential users around the globe.”

It will, he says, change the face of the Internet forever. “More than half the Internet users around the world don't use a Latin-based script as their native language. IDNs are about making the Internet more global and accessible for everyone.”

The process started on November 16 when up to 50 countries with “non-contentious” country code names began applying for Fast Track Process. The list includes countries like Japan who have clear ideas what their country code should be. Other countries like India – which has more than 30 different languages and scripts – may take longer to agree on a country code. Once the requests are evaluated and approved, Internet extensions are expected to come online in many countries during 2010.

One of the first and most significant will be Egypt. At the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) in Egypt in mid-November, Egyptian Minister of Communications Tarek Kamel announced that Egypt’s new domain name would be “.miser” written in the Arabic alphabet, and which translates as “.Egypt”. At present, it goes under the United Nations designation of “.eg”, in the same way Bermuda is listed as “.bm”.

“It is an historic moment for us. The internet now speaks Arabic,” Kamel told the conference and said he believes that the new domain would allow for new means of innovation, investment and economic growth throughout the Arab world.

The impact of the IDN programme will be far-reaching, says Thrush. Firstly, he says, it gives users a sense national identity and means people in countries like Pakistan or China will no longer need to have keyboards that enable them to use English characters in addition to their own.

“It means use of the Internet is going to become very much easier for people in those countries. Young people, old people, newcomers – they are not going to have to learn a strange language to use the internet. It would be like us having to type in Thai characters to get to Google.

“We think there will be more interest in domain names in those countries. Either businesses that haven’t had one so far or have had an English one, will apply for new ones, so there’s going to be a new business opening up in those countries for registrars selling those domain names.”

The changes will likely open up opportunities for improved browser technology, word processing and other tools in those countries. There will be “unimagined innovative development arising from this”, believes Thrush.

But the main advantages are basic cultural ones. Currently, many ASCII-based web addresses, links and email address make no sense to non-English users, often making it hard to recognise the address or it into a browser correctly.

If you are reading an online newspaper in Russian, for example, and there is a link to more information, it simply makes more sense to have a Cyrillic-based address for a site with Russian content.

From a business perspective, reaching different global markets will be much easier with local web addresses – and in deed critical for international firms in the future. Says Thrush: “People who currently don’t deal with those countries or English-speaking people doing business in Saudi Arabia, or China, for example, are going to start getting emails and website addresses from those places and unless their own systems are reconfigured, they might not be able to read the message and reply.”

There are, however, plenty of potential problems that could result from IDNs. Generic domains like .com, .org or .net are not yet open to international characters but could be within a few years.

PC World warned: “If ICANN decides to open generic domains without

extending rights to existing URL holders, international companies and brands might find themselves purchasing URLs in multiple languages to protect the use of their name.”

But, the magazine added, if international companies were granted rights to the .com URLs they already own it could spell an end to selecting a region before entering the site. For example, going to “amazon.com” could lead to the English version of the site, while using a Japanese, Russian, or Korean suffix would take you to a version of the site with that language. “It would also open doors for smaller web sites that are just interested in serving a particular language group.”

There are also concerns that expanding domains beyond Roman characters increases the chances of fraud and scams by sites that use homoglyphs in their names (go0gle.com, or goógle.com, for example, will take you to different sites than google.com). Different languages may also have characters that re the same in other languages leading to confusion at best.

Thrush concedes that there will be teething problems. “It’s technically very complex to allow the Internet to be changed while its still running and to go from 26 letters and 10 numbers to more than 100,000 characters. There will be concerns but we think we have mechanisms to resolve those.”

For more information, go to: <http://www.icann.org/>