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internet and e-commerce

Push against domain name curbs

By Julia Levy in Washington

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Curt Tran, president of VDN Systems, a Virginia-based internet company, is among a new generation of internet entrepreneurs pushing technology designed to quadruple internet space available for "dot-com" domain names.

Mr Tran explains his system by likening it to the international telephone system, which requires dialling a certain set of digits for calls within a country but then affixing an extra code when calling across borders.

The "dot-com" suffix is a global domain name, as opposed to a country-specific domain name such as "dot-UK" or "dot-JP". So, says Mr Tran, even if the Australian Broadcasting Corporation wanted to establish a global presence, it would not currently be able to claim the site "abc.com" as it already belongs to the American Broadcasting Corporation.

Under Mr Tran's plan local internet service providers in a given country would have to agree to localise their systems, so that a local company could claim a "dot-com" name already owned by an outside company. To gain access to the foreign "dot-com" with the same name, people inside the country would have to attach an extra code to the address.

The technology would "de-Americanise" the web and also give governments more power to control and censor how their citizens use the internet, Mr Tran says.

He also claims his model would "localise the traffic jam" building up around an impending bottleneck on the information superhighway.

At the heart of this system - and other, similar proposals - is growing criticism of the current configuration of the internet.

Mr Tran and other critics argue that companies trying to establish internet identities now are at a real disadvantage because many of the useful dot-com

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domain names were snapped up years ago by American corporations.

Mr Tran is hopeful that countries will soon begin snapping up his two-year-old technology, but his system remains one of many as yet untested ideas for changing the current arrangement of the web.

Much of the gusto behind ideas such as Mr Tran's stems from a persistent frustration among many big users with the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (Icann), the internet's international regulatory body.

Seven new top-level domain names approved by Icann, including "dot-biz," "dot-info" and "dot-name," will become operational from this autumn.

The group acknowledges that it faces challenges, but says there are billions upon billions of remaining possibilities within the "dot-com" suffix alone.

Some proposed remedies to perceived shortcomings of Icann's regulations have gained popularity.

For example, New.net is trying to circumvent Icann's slow-moving bureaucracy by introducing new extensions like "dot-arts", "dot-scifi" and "dot-game".

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