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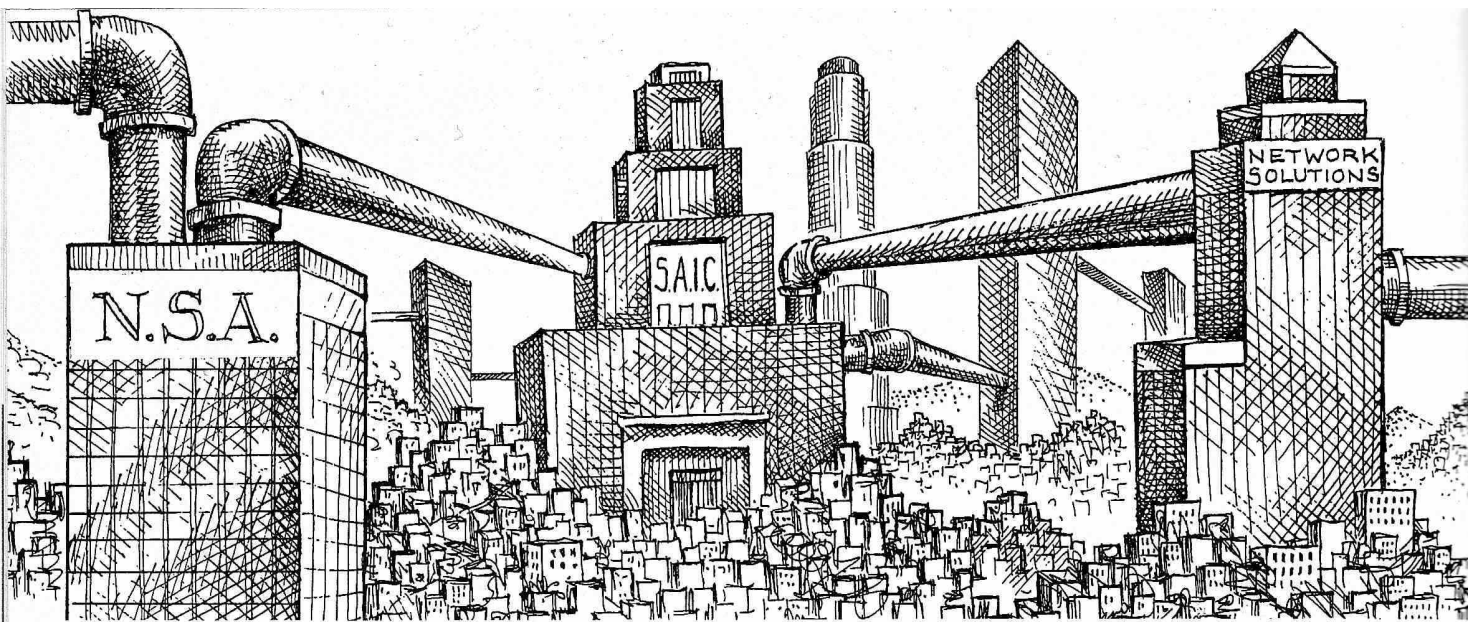
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Networking with Spooks

by John Dillon

The Internet is changing from a public resource to a lucrative operation influenced by spooks and former Pentagon officials. Open access and information are increasingly controlled.

The Internet, the mother of all networks, is a sprawling congregation of connected computers; almost anyone is welcome, almost anything goes.¹ Now, one private company with strong ties to the defense and intelligence agencies has become the prime gatekeeper and toll-taker for the millions navigating the maze. Network Solutions Inc. (NSI) of Herndon, Va., has the government-granted monopoly to issue "domain names" — electronic addresses like <microsoft.com> used to route e-mail and steer traffic through the increasingly commercialized World Wide Web.

NSI's spook connections and its lead role in the privatization of the Internet have raised alarms. Net activists were outraged by the firm's September 1995 decision to charge \$100 a year to register new addresses and \$50 a year to renew old ones. Later, NSI stirred up even more anger when it began removing the addresses of the thousands who refused to pay. The company also has been sued half a dozen times over its policy to give trademark holders priority when a domain name is in dispute.²

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1. For examples of the kinds of political censorship that are creeping onto the Net, see pp. 24-29.

2. Oppedahl & Larson website, <www.patents.com/ansi.sht>.

Who's in Charge

The furor over NSI raises basic questions of who controls and regulates the Internet. Although physically decentralized — with millions of computers linked around the globe — the Net is in fact hierarchically organized. Anyone on the planet who wants an Internet address ending with one of the popular suffixes .com, .edu, .org, .net, or .gov must register the domain name with the Internet Network Information Center, or InterNIC, a US government-created central registry. In 1993, NSI took over the administration of that listing.

This domain name system allows people to substitute user-friendly names such as <ibm.com> for the real Internet Protocol (IP) addresses: hard-to-remember numerical strings like <198.106.242.7>. When you enter an address in your web browser — like <mediafilter.org/caq> to get this magazine's site — your computer first accesses a "name server." The server then returns the unique numeric IP address which your browser uses to find the appropriate place on the Web.

Critics say there is no good reason why Network Solutions should have a monopoly franchise on registering the user-friendly domain names. But NSI

has a great reason: By controlling the keys to prime Internet real estate, it has staked out a phenomenally lucrative business. Although the company does not release financial figures, the Internet's astronomical growth — fueled by the tens of thousands of businesses coming on line each month — has triggered an explosion in domain name registrations. In March alone, about 45,000 names were registered, a 25 percent increase over February. NSI made an estimated \$20 million in the six months from September 1995 to March 1996 from annual registration fees, with an additional \$40 million projected for the next six months.³

"I would think they're making an obscene profit," said Karl Denniger, head of Macro Computer Solutions Inc., a Chicago-based Internet provider that wants to enter the domain name business.⁴ "Their monopoly of this isn't really legally defensible," said Stanton McCandlish, an activist with the Electronic Frontier Foundation in San Francisco.⁵

3. Robert Shaw, "Internet Domain Names: Whose Domain Is This?" Paper presented at the workshop "Coordination and Administration of the Internet," held at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, Sept. 9-10, 1996.

4. David S. Hilzenrath, "Holding the Keys to Internet Addresses," *Washington Post*, July 27, 1996.

5. Interview, Nov. 14, 1996.

Controlling Information

NSI's national security pedigree is even more troubling to some than its monopoly-derived profits. When the government administered the InterNIC, the service was subsidized by tax dollars and was free to users who simply registered their names. In May 1993, the National Science Foundation privatized the name registry and is paying Network Solutions \$5.9 million to administer it.⁶

In September 1995, NSI instituted the fee system. A few months earlier, it had been bought out by Science Applications International Corp. (SAIC). This privately held company with 20,000 employees and 450 offices around the globe has close ties to the Defense Department and intelligence agencies. Its current board of directors includes former National Security Agency chief Bobby Inman, former Defense Secretary Melvin Laird, and the former head of research and development for the Pentagon, Donald Hicks. Ex-CIA Director Robert Gates, Secretary of Defense William Perry, and CIA Director John Deutch have been past members.⁷ Eighty-three percent of the company's \$2 billion annual revenue comes from government contracts, including defense, intelligence, and law enforcement contracts. It is designing new information systems for the Pentagon, helping to automate the FBI's computerized fingerprint identification system, and last year won a \$200 million contract to provide "information support" to the Internal Revenue Service.⁸

Some of these contracts, along with the company's strong intelligence and defense links, raise fears that SAIC will abuse the information it controls through its key Internet role. "I don't want a spook corporation, particularly a private spook corporation, to be anywhere near a control point on the global cooperative Internet," said James Warren, a writer and Internet civil liberties activist.⁹ But McCandlish of the Electronic Frontier Foundation described SAIC's ownership of Network Solutions as a "non issue." "The Internet itself was a Defense Advanced Re-

search Project Agency project. It's been true for a long time. It's not some big secret."¹⁰

Putting A Hold on Names

Another bone of contention is NSI's policy on domain name disputes. For a long time, names were registered on a first come, first served basis. But then some quick-buck artists realized they could register domain names related to famous trademarks and sell the name back to the owner, a process known as trademark hijacking. In response, NSI instituted a policy that gives trademark owners priority in claiming a domain name over someone who has already registered it. While the domain names are in dispute, the company can put the disputed name "on hold," so that it can't be used until the issue is settled.

The company's dispute policy has swung too far to protect trademark owners at the expense of legitimate domain name holders, critics say. They note that trademark law allows different companies to share the same name — McDonald's hamburgers and McDonald's widgets, for example. And they say NSI is ruling on legal questions, such as who owns the name and what it can be used for, without legal authority.

"They are serving as legislators, administrators, judges, juries, and executioners," said Kathryn Kleiman, a lawyer and organizer of the Domain Name Rights Coalition, a non-profit organization that lobbies Congress on domain name issues.¹¹

The company's policy created major headaches for a New Mexico Internet service named Roadrunner Computer Systems, for example, which used the

<roadrunner.com> address for itself and for its customers' e-mail. But last year Warner Bros., which produces Road Runner cartoons and holds a trademark by the same name, tried to establish exclusive rights. Roadrunner Computer Systems obtained a court order barring Network Solutions from putting its name on hold.¹²

Challenging the Monopoly

But NSI's monopoly may soon crumble. Dozens of new top-level domains (the .com or .edu portion of the names) are being considered, and they will be administered by new registration services.

Paul Garrin, a New York media artist, has plans to strike an even more decisive blow for competition and Internet democratization. He and his colleagues have designed an alternative network of name servers. By changing your browser's default settings to find one of the servers Garrin has established around the world, you could locate web sites listed by any chosen name.¹³ The system does not yet work for e-mail.

"We would no longer be restricted to top-level domain, such as .com or .edu," Garrin said. "Under the existing system, there's an artificial shortage of domain names driven by InterNIC's desire to control. By adding new suffixes such as .mag, .inc, .press, for example, numerous companies could use their own names." They could also eliminate NSI's monopoly control. "We're de-territorializing the Internet and bringing it back to the real ideal of virtual space with no national borders of hierarchies," he said. ■

12. Evan Ramstad, "The Net's Traffic Cop," *Austin American-Statesman*, Sept. 2, 1996.

13. Interview, Oct. 1996. Garrin operates CAQ's web site: <<http://mediafilter.org/caq>> on a volunteer basis.

10. Interview, Nov. 1996.

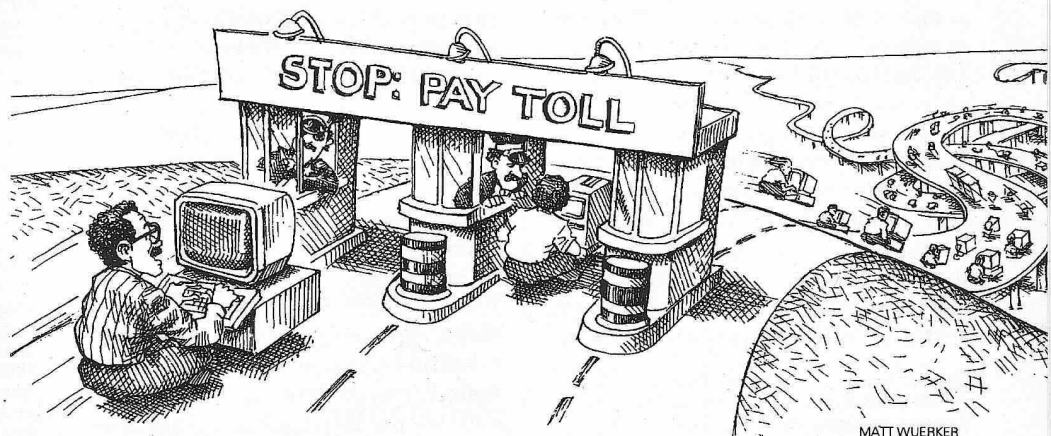
11. Interview, Nov. 1996.

6. Stephen Pizzo, "Domain Name Fees Benefit Defense Contractor: Who Are These Guys?" *Web Review*, Sept. 1995.

7. *Ibid.*

8. SAIC press release, May 24, 1996; and Pizzo, *op. cit.*

9. Glenn Simpson, "Could Big Brother Be Boss of the Internet," *Palm Beach Post*, Oct. 3, 1995.



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