News|Track Robert Fox

ICANN's Domain Name Experiment

Appearing before a congressional panel, the head of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers defended the process ICANN used to select new suffixes to compete with the popular established generic top-level domain—.com. With the number of Web addresses dwindling, ICANN chose seven new domains last fall, along with the companies and groups authorized to sell new names within the domains. Companies rejected for the role later complained the selection process was flawed. ICANN chair Vinton Cerf admitted there was room for improvement, explaining that the selection of new suffixes was essentially an "experiment" and that ICANN's objective was to proceed slowly and get a "test case" of how the new domains influence the market.

Paper Voting Prevails

Long-used methods of casting votes (like paper ballots, optical scanning devices, and lever machines) are more dependable than electronic means (like punch card and cash-machine-like systems), according to a nation-wide study of U.S. voting systems. Conducted by the California Institute of Technology/Massachusetts Institute of Technology Voting Project, the study focused on undervotes and overvotes, which together make a category of votes called "residual votes." Traditional methods yield a residual vote of about 2%; more technology-intensive voting systems yield a 3% residual vote. Project researchers hope to help engineers develop new voting technology that is "robust yet practical," a project member said.

> " It's a clever statement on openness and transparency. It doesn't surprise me that someone might get the kind of information that these corporations get on the public and disseminate it around the world."
>
> —*Juliette Beck of Global Exchange, on hackers stealing database information on Bill Clinton, Yasser Arafat, Bill Gates, and other notable figures from the World Economic Forum*

Printed-On Battery Power

A new ultra-thin flexible battery can be "printed" on packages like ink. International Paper has signed a licensing deal with an Israeli firm, Power Paper, that soon could bring light, sound, and other special effects to the packages of some consumer products. The battery is only about half a millimeter thick and composed of five layers of zinc and manganese dioxide; it can be printed on an ordinary press and is safe for disposal, the manufacturer says. Equipping packaging with a battery and the microelectronics for simple audio-visual effects will add 20 cents to $1 to the cost of each item. Packages powered by the batteries could hit store shelves by late summer.

Campus Net Access Rethought

Colleges and universities say they are reconsidering their approaches to providing Internet access now that they find themselves racing to provide more network capacity only to have students use it for nonacademic pursuits, reports the *New York Times*. The leading bandwidth hogs on campuses are music-trading services, principally Napster, which have caused some

News|Track

campus networks to buckle under the load of large song files. Some schools have responded by trying to shut off such services; others are using a more sophisticated approach, incorporating a "bandwidth shaping" system designed to minimize drain on the network.

Who Let The Robots Out?

Increased power and falling costs of computer technology are fueling the household robot industry, separating robot makers into two camps: those making machines that imitate life and those developing machines that carry out tasks people want done but no longer want to do themselves, reports Gannett News Service. Experts say one of the biggest reasons household robots are fashionable again is the success of Aibo—Sony's robotic dog—and the various copycats that followed. Also cited is the popularity of TV shows like "BattleBots." On the functional side, improved batteries now make it feasible for PC-controlled robots to perform such tasks as running security patrols, vacuuming floors, running room-to-room errands, detecting smoke and toxic gases, as well as monitoring children and the elderly.

U.S. Patent Lead

The U.S filed more international applications for patents in 2000 than any other country, reports the World Intellectual Property Organization. A record 90,948 applications were filed in 2000, a jump of 22.9% from the previous year, with one in five filed in the fields of chemistry and metallurgy. U.S. inventors filed 38,171 international applications; Germans and Japanese filed 12,039 and 9,402, respectively. The annual total included 3,152 applications originating from developing countries, a jump of 80.6%, with South Korea (1,514), China (579), and South Africa (386) topping the list of developing countries.

Taste The Web

A new machine offers a taste of food from data embedded on Web pages and sent to a computer peripheral that works like an ink-jet printer. Its developer, Trisenx, Savannah, GA, hopes that flavors, mixed by computer code and dispensed in tiny droplets from capped cartridges to disks the size of coins, will interest

> " It's no great surprise that if someone has an Internet connection back to a university, their family uses it, sometimes their friends. They're not using it exclusively for work. It became an entitlement. We said 'we don't pay for your phone line at home'; this is not something we're going to subsidize."
>
> *—Michael Palladino, associate vice president for networking and telecommunications at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia*

food companies looking to promote products on the Web. So far Trisenx offers the flavors of chocolate-covered cherries, buttered popcorn, and cinnamon rolls. A handful of companies, including Trisenx and Digiscents, Oakland, CA, are working on peripherals that will emit synthesized scents.

Have Virus, Will Work For Mayor

The 20-year-old who confessed to spreading the Anna Kournikouva virus earlier this year was offered a job interview by the mayor of his Dutch town of Sneek, the Associated Press reports. The mayor said he would wait for the virus writer, who online dubs himself OnTheFly, to finish school first. "I've learned that former poachers make the best game wardens," the mayor told Dutch TV.

But the mayor might be getting a bad deal. OnTheFly confessed that he has no idea how to write code. He just used a computer script to generate the virus, much as you would a program to generate a Web page. **c**

Send items of interest to fox_r@acm.org