

Rivals in battle over internet domain.

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Page 6

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An international challenge has been mounted to US domination of a key part of the internet that ensures the smooth running of e-commerce and the transport of billions of e-mails.

The Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), the net's governing body, has announced it received five applications by a January 19 deadline to run the .net domain in a tendering process due to be decided in March.

Responsibility for the infrastructure behind web addresses ending in .net has always resided in the US. VeriSign, a listed company, maintains them and says it ensures the safe transport of more than 5m domain names, 3,000bn page views, 300bn e-mails and 30 per cent of e-commerce transactions every year.

VeriSign, which runs the .com domain on a permanent basis, is bidding to retain control of .net but internet reformists would prefer a not-for-profit organisation with a more international flavour.

Its four opponents all emphasise non-US credentials in their bids. Afilias is based in the Irish Republic and currently runs the .org and .info domains. Denic of Germany runs the .de domain - the second largest after .com.

NeuLevel of the US, which runs .biz, has teamed up with Japan Registry Services for its bid, while another joint venture Core++ represents the registries of Korea, Brazil and South Africa.

Icann has been involved in along-running legal battle with VeriSign but has promised impartiality by appointing an independent third party to evaluate the proposals.