

emphasizes that the plan is to establish the databases and experimental tools and techniques that are needed by the neuroscience community at the new institute.

Regardless of whether Ito's hopes for closer cooperation among the nation's disparate neuroscience efforts are realized, scientists both at home and abroad have high expectations for the new institute. Kyoto University neuroscientist Shigetada Nakanishi, for example, says he looks forward to the RIKEN

scientists building on their strong record in cognitive neuroscience.

Neuroscience leaders abroad are also hailing Japan's increased commitment to neuroscience and the new institute. Steven Hyman, director of the U.S. National Institute of Mental Health, says, "The [worldwide] community will benefit from the investment." He adds that the emphasis on theory is "very unusual" and bears watching, and that U.S. officials have had preliminary

discussions on possible cooperation with the new RIKEN institute.

Ito acknowledges that some of the goals for the institute, even at the 20-year mark, "may not be possible." But he and others are confident that Japan, by adding money and leadership to a strong scientific base, will be able to make major contributions to what many already see as a golden age of brain science.

—Dennis Normile

INTERNET

Domain Names Windfall Causes Flap

It began as an innocent attempt by the National Science Foundation (NSF) to save money and ease the burden on a beleaguered contractor. But a decision 18 months ago to charge \$50 a year to register Internet domain names—the tail ends of everyone's Web site address, such as "sciencemag.org"—has turned into a free-for-all struggle for the future of the Internet. Along the way, it has created the possibility of a \$60-million-a-year windfall for researchers—and an internal debate within NSF over whether the agency should continue to oversee a medium that it helped create.

At the center of the controversy is the fate of a rapidly growing pot of money being collected by Network Solutions Inc. (NSI), a northern Virginia company that has a 5-year agreement with NSF to manage the registration process. With registrants piling up at the rate of 90,000 a month, last week the number of domain names at NSI hit the 1-million mark. Some 70% of the fee is used to pay NSI's operating costs, while 30% goes into a fund intended to enhance the "intellectual infrastructure" of the Internet.

With that total projected to grow to 4 million registrations by mid-1999, the pot could reach \$60 million a year. Not surprisingly, those dollar signs have attracted attention and spawned debate on the larger question of who should manage the Internet—the government or the private sector. And if it's the government, which agency should do it, and how should the money be spent?

A new report from the office of NSF's inspector general, the agency's in-house financial watchdog, makes the case for a continued NSF role in managing domain names, with the money being used to upgrade the Internet and, more generally, for research of all sorts. That idea also seems to be winning favor with the House appropriations subcommittee that oversees NSF's budget, which last week discussed the still-confidential report

at an open hearing with the president's science adviser, Jack Gibbons. "The government retains an interest in the Internet" for everything from electronic tax filing to processing data from environmental satellites, says a committee aide, and the money should be handled by an agency with links to the community it serves. "The greater the distance between the agency collecting the money and the ultimate user," says the aide, "the less likely it is that the money will go toward upgrading the Internet."

But other senior NSF officials say the Internet is no longer primarily a research tool, and overseeing it shouldn't be their job. They even seem willing to give up the money. "We've got a tiger by the tail, and we're trying to figure out how to let go," says George Strawn, head of NSF's networking

ating an international, self-governing body of service providers, businesses, and other users to manage domain names. Such a group, dubbed the Committee of Registrars, would manage a centralized database of domain names and set policy on any registration fees.

As for what to do with the money already in the pot, NSI itself has proposed to NSF that it be allowed to create a non-profit Internet Foundation to manage the share of revenues intended to enhance the Internet. Such a foundation "would be run by representatives of the Internet community and be independent of both NSI and NSF," says David Graves, the company's Internet manager.

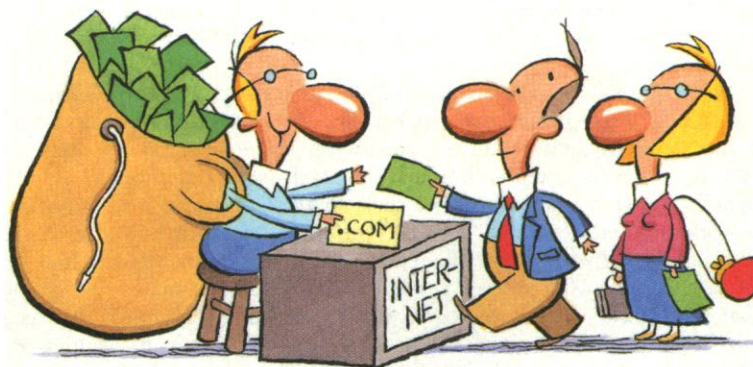
Resolution of the issue may await the findings of an internal White House panel that convened last week to consider a broad range of topics, including the current registration fee, according to an Administration official familiar with the matter.

The task force plans in the next few months to consult with all stakeholders, says the official, adding that no changes are planned in the meantime. Testifying last week on his office's budget, Gibbons refused to be pinned down on what might happen, saying that the money "should go toward a purpose related to its source—improving the Internet. But NSF sees it

as a distraction from its mission."

Whatever the outcome, Widder says NSF welcomes the debate about where the Internet is headed. As for the fund itself, the Administration official responsible for developing an overall federal policy toward the Internet says that it is "not the driving force." But the appropriations staffer holds a narrower view. "We're following it with interest, because the potential revenue is a way of easing pressure on the NSF appropriations," the aide says. "For us, it always comes down to money."

—Jeffrey Mervis



division, which has proposed ending the cooperative agreement with NSI before the contract runs out in September 1998. Adds NSF spokesperson Joel Widder, "The nature of the beast has changed dramatically in the last 4 years. It's no longer a research function, and overseeing a largely commercial operation is not what we should be doing."

Supporting that view is the Internet International Ad Hoc Committee,* a non-governmental body of technical, legal, and business experts. This winter, it proposed cre-

* <http://www.iahc.org>