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Who owns the Internet?

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The Internet's Owners

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AT&T is one of several companies that own part of the Internet backbone
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So who actually owns the [Internet](#)? There are two answers to this question:

1. Nobody
2. Lots of people

If you think of the Internet as a unified, single entity, then no one owns it. There are organizations that determine the Internet's structure and how it works, but they don't have any ownership over the Internet itself. No [government](#) can lay claim to owning the Internet, nor can any company. The Internet is like the [telephone](#) system -- no one owns the whole thing.

From another point of view, thousands of people and organizations own the Internet. The Internet consists of lots of different bits and pieces, each of which has an owner. Some of these owners can control the quality and level of access you have to the Internet. They might not own the entire system, but they can impact your Internet experience.

The physical network that carries Internet traffic between different computer systems is the **Internet backbone**. In the early days of the Internet, [ARPANET](#) served as the system's backbone. Today, several large corporations provide the [routers](#) and cable that make up the Internet backbone. These companies are upstream **Internet Service Providers (ISPs)**. That means that anyone who wants to access the Internet must ultimately work with these companies, which include:

- UUNET
- Level 3
- Verizon
- AT&T
- Qwest
- Sprint
- IBM

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Then you have all the smaller ISPs. Many individual consumers and businesses subscribe to ISPs that aren't part of the Internet backbone. These ISPs negotiate with the upstream ISPs for Internet access. [Cable](#) and [DSL](#) companies are examples of smaller ISPs. Such companies are concerned with what the industry calls the **last mile** -- the distance between the end consumer and Internet connectivity.

Within the backbone are **Internet Exchange Points (IXPs)**, which are physical connections between networks that allow data exchanges. For example, while Sprint, Verizon and AT&T provide part of the Internet backbone's infrastructure, the three networks aren't intertwined. They connect together at an IXP. Several companies and non-profit organizations administer IXPs.

The individual computer networks that make up the Internet can have owners. Every ISP has its own network. Several nations' governments oversee computer networks. Many companies have **local area networks (LANs)** that link to the Internet. Each of these networks is both a part of the Internet and its own separate entity. Depending on local laws, the owners of these networks can control the level of access users have to the Internet.

You might consider yourself to be an owner of the Internet. Do you own a device that you use to connect to the Internet? If so, that means the device you own becomes part of the enormous inter-networked system. You are the proud owner of part of the Internet -- it's just a very small part.

If no one owns the Internet, who is responsible for making sure everything works? Find out in the next section.

IN THE BEGINNING, THERE WAS ARPANET

[ARPANET](#) was a network of computers housed in various universities, [government](#) agencies and research facilities. The people who built ARPANET designed many of the protocols that the Internet uses today. ARPANET connected to several other computer networks and the Internet was born. The agency responsible for ARPANET was the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), a branch of the United States Department of Defense (DoD). Since ARPANET began as a U.S. government-sponsored project, you could argue that at one time, the U.S. government owned the Internet.

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