

Dot-com or Dot-law:

Where was That Information?

by David Whelan



Domain names are part of our lives. We use domain names in Web site and e-mail addresses to get at the information we need — *loc.gov*, *aallnet.org* or *westlaw.com* — as more and more information becomes available on the Internet. Most, if not all, of our organizations will have Web sites ending with one of these suffixes: *com*, *org*, *gov* and *edu*. (Internet syntax requires the use of a period, called a “dot” in Net terminology, before these suffixes in a full site name or e-mail address. This article distinguishes domain names and other fragments of Internet addresses by using italics.) These suffixes are top-level domain names. The top-level domain system describes the types of Internet sites using a particular suffix. For example, commercial sites will normally use the *com* top-level domain. For a brief explanation of top-level domain names, visit <http://whatis.techtarget.com> and search on “gTLD.”

Two recent developments have made the domain name system more complicated. The first came last November, when the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers decided to create seven new top-level domains. Then, in March a for-profit company decided to create an alternate domain name system with additional top-level domains. This new system, not sanctioned by ICANN, is accessible only through certain Internet Service Providers or when using a special Web browser plug-in. These domain names can be viewed in a normal browser by adding *new.net* to the end of the Uniform Resource Locator, or site name. For example, if the URL was <http://www.library.law>, you would type “<http://www.library.law.new.net>” to reach the same site; the name is registered but does not point to any site. It is notable in that the new system includes a *law* top-level domain.

Seven New Top-Level Domains Approved

ICANN is the quasi-nongovernmental body overseeing the domain name system. The system currently has more than 200 top-level domains; most of those are country-code top-level domains (ccTLDs) — e.g., *us*; *jp*, for Japan; and *uk* for the United Kingdom. The generic top-level domain (gTLD) name group includes *com*, *org* and *net*. Some of the gTLDs are restricted to domain-name holders that meet certain criteria: *mil* for military sites and *edu* for educational sites — primarily universities. More than 60 percent of domain names use the *com* gTLD, according to Domainstats, <http://www.domainstats.com>.

ICANN approved seven new top-level domain names in November 2000 in response to an apparent dearth of “good” domain names. An April 24, 2000, *Wall Street Journal* article, “Dot.coms’ Furnish English Language with German Twist,” estimated that more than 98 percent of the words in Webster’s English Dictionary have been registered. The congestion in the *com* TLD has been cited as one of the causes for cybersquatting. The new gTLDs will provide a new outlet for domain name owners frustrated by the lack of choice in the *com* space. Two of the new names — *biz* and *info* — will provide a new pool from which commercial domain name registrants can draw. The complete list of seven approved gTLDs are: *biz*, *info*, *pro*, *museum*, *aero*, *coop* and *name*. RegistryPro is planning a second-level domain, *law.pro*, specifically for legal professionals. The definition of the “professional” who may participate has not been created.

When these new top-level domains become active in late 2001, it will be important to know that your search tools

are indexing these new areas or your “invisible Web” may grow. (The “invisible Web” is that information on the Web that is not normally indexed. For example, until recently, most Adobe Portable Document Format documents, *pdf*, were not indexed and were not included in search results. Google, <http://www.google.com>, added this capability in early 2001). Additionally, the ability to create regional or otherwise logical search segmentation, already made difficult by the popularity of *com*, will become more complicated as these new, cross-border domains become available. (See “How Major Search Engines Regionalize” at the web site [Searchenginewatch.com](http://searchenginewatch.com), <http://searchenginewatch.internet.com/facts/regional/regionalize.html>, for more discussion.) This may be offset by new subject-focused domain areas like *law.pro*, but this will depend largely on how the domain advisory boards define those who may participate in the domain. Too-broad a definition and the usefulness of the restricted domain will be dramatically reduced.

Alternative Domain Name Systems Enter the Picture

Far more complex is the March 2001 announcement by New.net that it was creating an alternate domain name system and offering 20 new “top-level domains,” none of which were approved by ICANN. These are not true top-level domains, although they purport to have the same affect. Instead, they are “third-level domains” that appear to the user as top-level domains if your browser has a plug-in or you are using one of a number of Internet Service Providers that have partnered with New.net. New.net is offering *law*, one of the top-level domains ICANN did not select in the recent selection process.

A third-level domain name is most commonly the *www* in a Web address, although it can be much more descriptive. For example, in the American Bar Association's Web site, www.abanet.org, *abanet* is the second-level domain name and *org* is the top-level domain name. As mentioned above, the New.net "top-level domains" are inserted before the *new.net* domain name. The *new.net* domain name itself is invisible when using the plug-in or a partner ISP.

Alternate domain name systems are not new. The Pacificroot Network has operated separately from the ICANN system, and one of its customers has challenged the ICANN selection of *biz*. Atlantic Root Network indicates it has been offering *biz* domain names since 1995 and wants ICANN registrars to honor those registrants. ICANN has attempted to avoid conflicts with other domain name systems, but there is no guarantee that a registration in one system will be honored by another should the latter create an identical top-level domain. The Pacificroot Network also offers *law* as a true top-level domain. Each of the alternate domain name systems offers explanations on how to configure a computer to work with

their servers. For example, to use the Pacificroot system, visit its configuration page at <http://www.pacificroot.com/updatedns.shtml>. Other alternate root systems include the Open Root Server Confederation at <http://www.open-rsc.org> and the International Root Server Confederation at <http://www.irsc.ah.net>. Once configured, the root-specific top-level domains as well as those in ICANN's root can be seen.

New.net has an opportunity to usurp ICANN's role if it can generate enough interest for its offering and gain enough momentum. Ordinarily this might not work, but some of the ISPs have large customer bases, which may be enough to make the top-level domain a fixture.

This alternative domain-name system, particularly with a *law* top-level domain, raises again the importance of knowing where we are searching when we are on the Internet. The days of searching solely the ICANN-approved top-level domain names may be vanishing.

Enter the Savvy Librarian

Librarians are not typical Internet searchers. Savvy and sophisticated,

librarians can get around this nonsense. Relying on good search tools and knowing what their scope is will largely avoid any problems raised by the new domain names. Indeed, one argument raised is the importance of the new domain names in light of the reality that most Web sites are found using search engines, not typing in the direct Web site address.

The proliferation of new top-level domains should be kept in mind, however. Whether librarians are conducting research or responsible for their organization's Web presence, new top-level domains can change how they go about business and how the clients get access to the information resources they provide. If the walls between the alternate domain-name systems are, as some observers anticipate, breaking down, the scope of our search tools will need to reach further than they do right now. Staying informed and being prepared for these changes will benefit librarians and their clients.

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