

## The race is on: Get your own Internet domain

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Dirk Krischenowski created a company to campaign for a .berlin domain. (Thomas Rosenthal)

When Internet regulators started gathering in the French capital last week for a global conference that starts here Monday, the marquee event was a quirky catwalk for cities and regions competing for domain names like .berlin, .paris, .quebec and even .cat - for Catalonia.

The mighty dot, New York City boosters said, could transform the metropolis into "the master of its future," with a .nyc label helping to build "trust, justice and civic pride." Berlin supporters insisted that a super-dot would establish the city's global reputation.

Super or not, officials at the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers - the main oversight agency for the underpinnings of the Internet - said they were poised to bring the most dramatic change to the Internet in four decades by opening up domain names to endless variations.

"We're talking about introducing potentially thousands more names," said Paul Levins, executive officer of Ican, the California-based nonprofit company that is the host of the Paris conference, which has drawn more than 1,300 delegates from 130 countries. "The addressing system hasn't fundamentally changed since its invention. These changes have the potential to have a huge impact on the way we express ourselves on the Net."

A "generic top-level domain" is essentially the label for the letters that come after the dot in an Internet name. Dot-com is the most celebrated, but the handful of existing domains range from .asia and .travel to .biz, .info and .mobi.

After debating the system for years, Ican's board is poised to vote on whether to set up the broad criteria for approving new domain names with limitless possibilities. It would allow companies to turn their own brands into domains or to create broad product groups such as .car, .sports or .bank - all candidates for dots. Ebay is already a contender to use its name, according to Levins, who added, "You can imagine the branding opportunities."

If, as expected, the 21-member international board adopts a new system, the vote would set in motion a process that eventually would start to open up the Internet to hundreds of new names by the beginning of next year.

With the current system, some inventive cities and companies have already maneuvered to virtually seize their own domains.

Many Los Angeles companies adopted the .la label for Laos while Bavarian government agencies in Germany registered .by from Belarus, part of the former Soviet Republic. The tiny nations of Tuvalu (.tv) and the federated states of Micronesia (.fm) have also ceded their domains to media companies, reaping millions of dollars in licensing fees from third-party registrars that are not connected to the countries.

But other cities do not want to borrow from obscure republics. The city of New York has been angling for its own dot since 2001, but most domain candidates agree that Berlin appears to be moving the furthest. A separate company, called dot-Berlin, was formed to campaign for a domain, and it has signed up nearly a dozen corporate sponsors, from the Grand Hyatt hotel to Lotto Berlin and the local yellow pages publisher.

"We saw there was a growing need in countries like Germany with very dense and complicated names," said Johannes Lenz-Hawliczek, a spokesman for the company, which has three employees. "There is a need for significant and easy-to-remember and intuitive addresses."

The pressure to open up the system to allow more choices comes at a time when the Internet's addresses are rapidly being depleted with the explosion of computers and devices that connect to it. By last autumn, Icann estimated that only 17 percent of an available pool of 4 billion network addresses remained, and they are expected to run out in the next five years.

While passage of the plan is expected, some opponents say the new system would create bureaucratic headaches for companies fending off people seeking to create new domains that infringe on their trademarks.

At its meeting this week, Icann is also promoting an additional, number-based address system, IPv6, which could add trillions of new addresses. But international adoption of the new standards has been slow, in part because of the costs of switching and concerns that the new technical standard will make it easier for governments or companies to track what individuals are doing on the Internet.

In preparation to dazzle Internet regulators, a number of the city and regional candidates for domain names met together on Friday for what was billed as the "2008 Top Level Domain Catwalk" to try to persuade any doubters about the benefits of opening up the naming system. "It's better to have a community," said Sébastien Bachollet, who is leading the .paris campaign, which started last May.

"If you have a dedicated population for .paris, it will help people to understand what they're using and how to use it."

The Paris project is in its infancy and trying to enlist financial backers, while the Berlin project has raised almost €1 million from sponsors. Many other cities estimate that they will need about that amount to negotiate through the bureaucratic process.

Other organizers in New York and Hamburg have created nonprofit groups in a bid to build community support for the names.

The application fee for a domain name under the proposed system has not been set, but candidates estimate that it could range from €25,000 to €250,000, or about \$39,000 to \$390,000. Icann is also prepared to set up an auction system if competing groups bid for the same name. Private companies would reap their profit by selling the domain names to registrars, which would then sell them to individual customers.

Icann is also setting up standards that would allow the regulator to reject applications from people who try to grab trademarked names or to rebuff proposals on moral grounds or because of community objections.

"They've discussed scenarios where someone wants to have .football and how to cope with it if it means soccer or football. And they've also talked about what happens if someone proposes .jihad," said Lenz-Hawliczek, from the Berlin project. "It's a really complex issue, and we've been discussing it for the past three years. It's not easy."

The Berlin company has learned that lesson through hard experience. Last year, some politicians raised questions about protecting their own site, Berlin.de, because they did not want to compete with a .berlin portal. Those are some of the same delicate issues that organizers are facing in other cities when they approach officials for their blessings.

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