

Global agency reconsiders '.xxx' for porn sites

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In this March 22, 2007 file photo, Stuart Lawley, chief executive of ICM Registry Inc., poses for a photo in his Jupiter, Fla home, Thursday, March 22, 2007 by one of his computers. A key global Internet oversight body is reopening discussions about whether to create a ".xxx" address for pornographic Web sites after an outside panel questioned the grounds for earlier rejecting such an online red-light district.(AP Photo/J. Pat Carter)

(AP) -- A global Internet oversight agency is reopening discussions about whether to create a ".xxx" domain name as an online red-light district where porn sites can set up shop away from the wandering eyes of children and teenagers.

Parents would be able to use the system to help block access to porn sites, though because its use would be voluntary, the ".xxx" suffix

wouldn't keep such content entirely away from minors. Religious and other anti-porn groups worry that ".xxx" would legitimize porn sites, and the proposal has already been rejected three times since 2000.

But the [Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers](#), which oversees the allocation of [Internet](#) addresses globally, may revive ICM Registry LLC's bid yet again as [ICANN](#) meets this week in the Kenyan capital of Nairobi.

Last month, responding to complaints from ICM, an outside panel questioned ICANN's grounds for the latest rejection in 2007. As a result, board members have been weighing the matter ahead of formal consideration of the ".xxx" bid on Friday, ICANN CEO Rod Beckstrom said in an interview.

Beckstrom said he was not able to give details of those discussions for legal reasons, and he could not say when ICANN may reach a decision.

Stuart Lawley, ICM's chief executive, said he has been the victim of a process that he considered far from open and nondiscriminatory.

ICM, which planned to charge \$60 for a site to register a ".xxx" name, first proposed ".xxx" in 2000 as a way to help the online porn industry clean up its act. Those using the domain would have to abide by yet-to-be-written rules designed to bar such trickery as spamming and malicious scripts.

And parents could set up Internet software to automatically block any site ending in ".xxx," reducing the chances that minors and other Internet users would accidentally stumble on pornography online.

Given its voluntary nature, however, ".xxx" would unlikely have much effect on parents' ability to block porn sites. And because a domain

name serves merely as an easy-to-remember moniker for a site's actual numeric [Internet address](#), even if its use is required, a child could simply punch in the numeric address of any blocked ".xxx" name.

Anti-porn activists, meanwhile, worry that the creation of a virtual red-light district would serve as an endorsement of the adult-entertainment industry, as ".xxx" would be sitting alongside other suffixes such as ".com" for commercial sites and ".edu" for schools.

Skeptics note that porn sites would likely keep their existing ".com" storefronts, even as they set up shop in the new ".xxx" domain name, thereby expanding the number of porn sites on the Internet.

When ICANN last considered ".xxx," board members also expressed worries that the suffix would leave the agency in the business of regulating content, or the type of material that would find itself there.

The board also questioned whether ".xxx" had the support of the adult-entertainment industry, as many operators of porn sites were concerned that governments would later make the voluntary red-light district mandatory.

ICANN still wasn't swayed after ICM said that the content-regulation role would have been left solely with the company and that ICM would fend off efforts to mandate its use.

Lawley challenged ICANN's rejection before an independent review panel appointed by the International Centre for Dispute Resolution. That panel largely sided with him and concluded that ICANN's decision was "not consistent with the application of neutral, objective and fair documented policy."

The panel said that after ICANN gave the bid preliminary approval in

2005, it shouldn't have revisited some of the key issues already reviewed. Board members had used the new evaluations in deciding to reject the bid two years later, in 2007.

Although the panel's findings are nonbinding, ICANN's board was scheduled to discuss them Friday. It was not clear whether the board would vote on the matter or defer a decision for more discussion.

Lawley said the review panel was supposed to be ICANN's mechanism for accountability, and how the organization responds to the panel's findings "will provide great insight into the true accountability of this vital organization."

He said the process has so far cost his company about \$8.5 million.

ICANN tabled and effectively rejected a similar proposal in 2000 out of fear the ".xxx" domain would force the body into content regulation.

ICM resubmitted its proposal in 2004, this time structuring it with a policy-setting organization to free ICANN of that task. But many board members worried that the language of a proposed contract was vague and could kick the task back to ICANN. The board rejected the 2004 proposal in 2006.

ICANN revived the proposal months later after ICM agreed to hire independent organizations to monitor porn sites' compliance with the new rules. But ICANN ultimately rejected that bid in what was to be its final consideration.

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