

Porn sites closer to .xxx Web address (Update)

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A man surfs an internet sex site in Brussels, Friday, June 25, 2010. On Friday, June 25, 2010, porn sites stepped closer to a new ".xxx" Internet address after the global Internet oversight agency said it made mistakes in rejecting it three years ago. The board of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, or ICANN, says it will now start the process of registering ".xxx" by making checks on ICM Registry LLC, the company that wants to run it. (AP Photo/Virginia Mayo)

(AP) -- It may soon be easier to block Internet porn: The agency that controls domain names said Friday it will consider adding .xxx to the list of suffixes people and companies can pick when establishing their identities online.

The California-based nonprofit agency, ICANN, effectively paved the way for a digital red light district to take its place alongside suffixes such as .com and .org, finally ending a decade-long battle over what some

consider formal acknowledgment of pornography's prominent place on the Internet.

While the move may help parents stop their children from seeing some seedy sites, it wouldn't force porn peddlers to use the new .xxx address - and skeptics argue that few adult-only sites will give up their existing .com addresses.

Still, it's seen as a symbolic step in the opening up of Internet domain names and suffixes, coming on the same day the agency said it would start accepting Chinese script for domain names.

The decision is primarily a victory for U.S. company ICM Registry LLC, which has applied repeatedly to be able to register and manage the .xxx suffix.

The Internet names agency has rejected its application three times since 2000, partly under pressure from Christian groups and governments unhappy with the spread of online porn, said ICM's chief executive, Stuart Lawley. He pitches the suffix, in part, as protection for parents, arguing it will make it easy for Web blocking software to filter out ".xxx" sites, marking them clearly as porn.

"People who want to find it know where it is, and people who don't see it or want to keep it away from their kids can use mechanisms to do so," he said

ICANN's board, at a meeting Friday in Brussels, said it had not treated the company's application fairly three years ago when it reversed an earlier decision recognizing .xxx as the representative of the porn industry. ICANN is now promising to move swiftly with standard checks on Lawley's company.

Peter Dengate Thrush, the chairman of ICANN's board, said the Friday decision "does not mean the .xxx application has been approved ... It means that we are returning to negotiations with the applicant." He estimates that it could take a year for full approval, far longer than the few months ICM says it would take.

He shrugged off criticisms that ICANN was creating a new platform for Internet porn.

"We're not in the content business, and that's up to national governments and lawmakers and people who are qualified to make judgments," he said.

He also warned that .xxx might not necessarily be a success - and that some new Internet suffixes have failed to attract many signups. Some note that most porn sites would likely keep their existing ".com" names, to allow their businesses to be found more easily.

"If it is still going to be available on other domains, it just sounds ineffective" as a way of regulating adult content, said Cathy Wing, of Media Awareness Network, a Canadian nonprofit that advises parents and teachers about Web use.

She also said filters are "easily bypassed" and would not stop children accessing porn.

Pornography is a huge business: The adult entertainment industry is worth some \$13 billion a year, according to the California-based Adult Video News Media Network.

Lawley said he thinks the new address could easily attract at least 500,000 sites, making it - after ".mobi" - the second biggest sponsored top-level domain name. He expects to make \$30 million a year in

revenue by selling each .xxx site for \$60 - and pledges to donate \$10 from each sale to child protection initiatives via a nonprofit he has set up.

In comparison, a .com address costs just \$7 but ICANN sells 80 million a year.

There are already 112,000 reservations for the new .xxx domain, Lawley said - with the publicity over Friday's decision attracting an extra 2,000 in the previous day. The company could get the Internet suffix up and running within six to nine months after ICANN checks that ICM has the financial means and technical know-how to run it, he said.

"I think we could do a million or more. There are several million adult top-level domain names already out there," he told the AP. He called the .xxx suffix a "quality assurance label."

The porn industry isn't completely behind .xxx, because some see the site as creating a ghetto for adult content and setting rules where they don't want any.

"The XXX domain concept may just be a slippery slope for the legal adult business. Our customers should not need to go to an .XXX domain to seek us out any more than they would go to .violence or .R-rated for these categories of entertainment," said Steven Hirsch, founder/co-chairman of the Vivid Entertainment Group.

"We need to be concerned with what will follow the implementation of this domain. Will all adult dot coms be mandated into the XXX corral and if not, what makes some exempt but not all?"

Still, Lawley claims to have the support of many large providers and between 60 percent to 70 percent of the entire industry.

Loic Damilaville, deputy director of AFNIC, the association that manages the French .fr suffix, said the moral debate between some family groups and porn firms has been more of an American than an international issue.

"It's mostly a debate on symbols: on the space porn should be allowed on the Internet," said Damilaville, who attended the ICANN board meeting in Brussels.

What's really at stake, he said, is setting the ground rules for how Internet suffixes will be created in the future and how much say governments have in the process. The availability of new suffixes is in itself a good thing for freedom of expression on the Web, he said.

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