

New .sucks domain stirs up storm over free speech

April 9 2015



The new Internet domain .sucks has stirred up a firestorm over free online speech and the potential for extortion against companies and individuals

The new Internet domain .sucks has stirred up a firestorm over free online speech and the potential for extortion against companies and individuals.

The company operating this new domain claims it is "designed to help

consumers find their voices and allow companies to find the value in criticism."

But critics see it as a shakedown scheme designed to force companies and individuals to fork over cash to keep an unfavorable or offensive website offline.

According to media reports, Microsoft, Facebook, Google and other large companies have bought up the domains by exercising their trademark priority rights, presumably with no intent to use them. Music star Taylor Swift reportedly did the same thing.

What has fueled concerns is that the domain registrar, a Canadian-based company called Vox Populi, is charging \$2,500 for the website names—far more than a typical website registration of \$10 to \$25—before the names are opened to the public on June 1.

The Intellectual Property Constituency, an advisory group to the global Internet domain regulator, complained last month that the "exorbitant sums" are effectively a "shakedown scheme" to get money from companies and others.

After the June 1 deadline, online trolls or "cybersquatters" could buy up the names and then extort even higher prices, according to the group which includes film, software and music industry associations and other trademark organizations.

The group last month urged the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), which manages the domain system, to stop the .sucks domain before it goes live.

But ICANN says it lacks the authority to look into questions of pricing or other abuses and that it does not interfere with online free speech.

Not a 'content' regulator



Microsoft, Facebook, Google and other large companies have bought up the .sucks domains by exercising their trademark priority rights, presumably with no intent to use them

"We do not get into the content or the business model or the pricing of a registry," said Akram Atallah, who heads ICANN's global domains division.

Vox Populi followed all procedures for its application, with no formal objections lodged during the comment period, he added.

Atallah told AFP however that as a result of the complaint, ICANN decided to forward the matter to regulators in the United States and

Canada.

On Thursday, ICANN asked the US Federal Trade Commission and Canada's Office of Consumer Affairs to determine if Vox Populi is doing anything illegal.

In a letter to the two agencies, ICANN said it was "concerned about the contentions of illicit actions" by Vox Populi but that it lacks the expertise or jurisdiction to evaluate them.

If the agencies find Vox Populi is violating local laws, ICANN could void the contracts, according to Atallah.

"They have a contract and have to abide by local laws," he said.

John Berard, chief executive at Vox Populi, told AFP the new domain is something that companies can use to engage with consumers, and that he sees the word "sucks" as "edgy" but not pejorative.



Akram Atallah, chief operating officer of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, at the company's headquarters in Palo Alto, California, on April 14, 2011

"We think we're creating an opportunity for interaction that is meaningful," he said.

"If a company were to establish its own .sucks site and drive that discussion to a centralized location it might be quite a valuable asset."

Berard added that the pricing "reflects what we believe to be the value of the names."

Asked about ICANN's letter to regulators, Berard said, "I don't think that anyone who takes a look will find a problem."

Greg Sterling, an analyst for Opus Research who contributes to the Marketing Land blog, said .sucks "appears to be more about extortion than free speech, though it's wrapped in the latter to justify its existence."

The situation is "the latest version of longstanding efforts to hijack brands and outrank them with negative or critical information," Sterling told AFP.

The debate comes with ICANN acting to vastly expand the number of so-called generic top-level domains (gTLDs) from the traditional ones like .com and .gov, including some such as .porn and .wine.

© 2015 AFP

Citation: New .sucks domain stirs up storm over free speech (2015, April 9) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-04-domain-storm-free-speech.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.