

“Cybercultures” grab expired Internet domain names

Report by Eugene Oscapella

ORGANISATIONS THAT ALLOW THE REGISTRATION of their Internet domain names to lapse risk serious business consequences as “cybercultures” step in to grab the expired names. And information freely available on the Internet about the original holder of the domain name is greatly helping those seeking to assume the names.

Canada’s *National Post* newspaper reported on March 8th that purveyors of pornography seem particularly adept at this technique. “At some point,” says the report, “the Tourism Toronto website probably gave you information about tourist attractions in Toronto. These days, the site’s URL links you to a list of porn sites.”

The results can be both embarrassing and potentially costly for companies. The *National Post* report continues that accounting firm, Ernst & Young, let its registration for the domain name “moneyopolis.org” expire. The name was used for its finance learning game for children. After the registration lapsed, a speculator acquired the name and linked it to a porn site. Ernst & Young received hundreds of complaints from outraged parents and organisations.

On March 5th, the *National Post* reported that a UN agency for women’s issues forgot to pay an Internet registration fee, enabling a pornographic company to snap up one of the sites and plaster it with pictures of naked women. The newspaper reported that the UN agency’s domain name is now registered to a company based in Estonia. The company paid US\$12.95 for rights to the site for one year.

Not only pornographers, but also political and ideological opponents, can benefit from these clever tactics. The office of the US “drug czar” is

officially known as the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP). The ONDCP is charged with pursuing the American “war on drugs”. A logical domain name for the office might be based on its initials, “ONDCP”. However, the domain names “www.ondcp.org” and “www.ondcp.com” both lead to the site of an anti-drug war organisation with the same initials, entitled the “Oppressive Network Drug Content Propaganda.” This website disseminates “information regarding the US government secretly paying major television networks in the US to insert anti-drug messages into their programmes,” a practice first uncovered by an American investigative journalist in January 2000. And searching for “ONDCP” on the Internet search engine “altavista.com” leads the searcher to both the drug czar’s website and that of its ideological opponent.

In some cases, even failing initially to identify and register domain names that Internet users might associate with an organisation can have dramatic consequences if someone else acquires the name first.

The information that those seeking to register domain names must supply to registrars may inadvertently help cybercultures to acquire expired domain names.

Anyone who wishes to register a domain name must give the registrar

a name, mailing address, e-mail address, phone number and other information (of course, some registrants will provide false information about their identities).

This information is then made available on the Internet through a free search service entitled “Whois” (www.betterwhois.com). For example, a search of Whois for “ondcp.org” reveals significant information (which may or may not be accurate) about the person registering the domain name. It also reveals one piece of information that is accurate, since it is placed on the file by the registrar, and not by the person holding the domain name. That information is the expiration date of the registration. In the case of “ondcp.org”, the date is January 14th 2004. Knowing this expiry date is a bonus to any cyberculture seeking to grab the domain name if its current holder allows the registration to lapse. Understandably, this has led to growing concern over the disclosure of such information on domain names and their holders.