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Legally Speaking-Domain Names, Cybersquatting, and the ICANN System

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Effect of the Use on the Market
Music companies have a right to license their recordings. 17 U.S.C. § 106. MP3.com fell back on the argument that what they were doing would only enhance sales since the subscriber had to buy the CD. But of course, a positive impact has nothing to do with it. You start messing around with my product, you might get a positive impact or a negative one. If I don't want to take the risk, I tell you, No, keep your hands off my product. Otherwise, I license you the right to mess around with it.

Huh?
MP3.com's final argument was if they didn't do it, "real" pirates would. In other words, there's consumer demand out there, and music companies may as well face up to it and let MP3.com take the product for semi-free.

Of course, there's a certain logic to it. MP3.com's system forced a sale of a CD with profits flowing to the music companies. Truly pirated copies bring no income flow. And yes, it's going to happen anyway. But this flies in the teeth of what everyone deep down believes about private property. If it's mine, I have a right to refuse to evolve with consumer demand and run the industry into the ground. I'm entitled to be a fool.

So How Bad Is It for MP3.com?
Rather than appeal — and what earthly basis did he have for appeal? — Robertson chose to negotiate a settlement of $170 million, the largest copyright settlement in history. And, of course, there are many record companies not in the suit so there are still big damages lurking.

Forbes has Robertson thinking in Internet terms where six months is a long time. Beam It is only a small part of the larger game plan. He has a car music player that holds 100 gigabytes — that's 2,200 CDs ready to serve all those techno and trance fans.

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Legally Speaking — Domain Names, Cybersquatting, and the ICANN System
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"What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet."

This column is about names, because in these days of the Internet, domain names do make a big difference. Yet how much do we really think about the names that we enter to find Websites? Without the Domain Name System (DNS) currently in place, we would have links such as 255.15.5432. Needless to say, this would make the Web much less useful. In order to make sure that the DNS registry runs smoothly, all of us need to understand how it operates, and what the laws are that regulate domain name disputes. The Internet is like the Wild West—there are many disputes, but also attempts to introduce order.

Those of us who were early users of the World Wide Web remember when big corporations like McDonald's didn't have their domain names f.
own domain names. At that time, a big corporation might have had a URL something like: www.internetproviders.net/members/businesses/corporations/mcdonalds. This kind of domain name is also unusable for Web surfers, because of its length and complexity. Of course, now McDonald’s is very easy to find at www.mcdonalds.com.

The Internet was formed in 1969 by the U.S. Defense Department as a communications system that would be able to function in the event of a nuclear attack. It was originally called ARPANET (Advanced Research Projects Agency Network). Around the same time, the National Science Foundation (NSF) developed the NSFnet. Eventually the two systems were merged under the NSF. With the introduction of the World Wide Web in 1994, the Internet became very popular and widely used.

The U.S. government developed a coalition of contractors and private companies to manage the functions of the Internet—especially the DNS registry, allocation of IP address space, management of the root server system, and coordination of protocol number assignment. The DNS registry was maintained for a number of years by a company called Network Solutions. As the Web grew, however, it became clear that another system of management needed to be developed. In 1998, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) was formed as a non-profit, private-sector corporation. ICANN has been designated by the U.S. Government to serve as the global consensus entity to which the U.S. government is transferring the responsibility for coordinating four key functions for the Internet: the management of the domain name system, the allocation of IP address space, the assignment of protocol parameters, and the management of the root server system.

There are a number of Top-Level Domain Names (TLDs). The original TLDs consisted of .com for commercial businesses, .org for non-profit organizations, .edu for educational entities, .net for network providers, .gov for the government, and .mil for the military. And, of course, most of the time we remember to look for the official White House Website by entering www.whitehouse.gov instead of www.whitehouse.com. Those who make the mistake of entering www.whitehouse.com are taken to a pornographic Website.

Soon after the establishment of the World Wide Web, TLDs were approved for geographic entities, such as .il for Israel, .cz for the Czech Republic, and .ky for the state of Kentucky. For example, the URL for legislation from the state of Minnesota is http://www.leg.state.mn.us/leg/logis.htm, and the city of Fresno, California, is at http://www.ci.fresno.ca.us. The geographic TLDs have proved to be very popular and are helpful to those of us who work in the library profession.

In November 2000, ICANN granted approval in principle to seven new TLDs. According to ICANN, “The selected TLD proposals are of two types. Four proposals (.biz, .info, .name, and .pro) are for relatively large, un-sponsored TLDs. The other three proposals (.aero, .coop, and .museum) are for smaller ‘sponsored’ TLDs.” The “un-sponsored TLDs operate under policies established directly by ICANN.” “Sponsored TLDs are operated by a sponsoring organization representing a specialized community with specialized rules.” ICANN is currently in the process of negotiating the operating agreements.

In the early days, people would register the domain names of companies, and then attempt to sell these names for large sums of money. This is called cybersquatting, and is prohibited by the Anticybersquatting Consumer Protection Act of 1999, as well as by trademark law. It is now illegal to register a name and then attempt to sell it to the trademark holder. ICANN has also created dispute resolution rules. A challenge is afoot, however, to ICANN’s system, and this challenge is not in the best interests of consumers. ICANN is an imperfect entity, but the Internet needs some impartial administrator to administer the system and resolve disputes.

Last fall I received notification that ICANN was considering .law as a new domain name. The organization that submitted the proposal was named DoItlaw, Inc. After a study of the issue, I sent ICANN a letter in support of the proposal. According to my comment, “Creation of a .law top-level domain would make legal research far more accessible to attorneys, librarians, and the general public. I believe that the establishment of a .law top-level domain name would empower people, giving them a place to go to look for legal content.”

A few weeks ago, I received a message via a discussion list I subscribed to that a new .law domain name was available. The TLD came from a company called new.net. I had never heard of new.net, but I was still pleased that the .law domain name had been approved. After all, “one of the biggest barriers to the effective use of the Internet is the uncataloged nature of Cyberspace. ‘The institution of a .law scheme would in effect be a way of cataloging legal sites for easy retrieval.” I realized that users need to download a piece of proprietary software or reconfigure their browsers in order to access these sites, which was disconcerting. After all, not everyone will have that software, and many people don’t like to download for fear of viruses. Yet without this software, .law is not available. However, it took a revelation from Michael Geist, a fellow law librarian, before I realized what was happening. He informed me that new.net is a competitor to ICANN, and that was why .law required proprietary software.

According to Geist, “The reason you need a browser plugin is that the .law domain is really just a layer on top of the existing domain system — when someone types in ‘bryan.law’ they are actually just accessing the new.net system.” Upon learning the truth about new.net really operates, I investigated the new.net system by registering a domain name, going all the way except for the credit card payment. It turned out that new.net is simply re-directing URLs from other sites.

I also wrote new.net a letter requesting that the .law domain contain some additional language to ensure that it is used for reliable information. After all, one of the major reasons that I supported the introduction of .law as a TLD was because it “will enable people to find reliable legal information quickly and easily.” This will help to protect the consumer, and will make the .law TLD a more impressive and more important domain name.” The reply I received indicated that “We are currently not restricting registrations in any of our TLDs.”

While new.net is somewhat unapaptizing, it is not in any way illegal or unethical. However, there are other companies who are actively trying to mislead the public. In December 2000, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) issued a consumer alert entitled “What’s Dot and What’s Not: Domain Name Registration Scams.” Domain names are the newest area of opportunity for confidence games. Having once been fooled, I’m determined that—in the immortal words of The Who—“We won’t get fooled again!”

Domain names can also become a source of conflict and litigation, even in the absence of bad intentions. One example that is currently taking place in the area of legal research involves the dispute between legal researcher T.R. Horson and the Lexis-Nexis Corporation. An experienced legal researcher and author of "Law of the Super-Searchers: the Online Secrets of Top Legal Researchers," T.R. created a free legal research Website entitled LexNotes. According to the Website, “LexNotes is a new online resource for legal research professionals. It provides categorized and searchable links to legal research resources, bibliographies, pathfinders, articles, reviews, papers, legal news, and tips.” This Website is primarily aimed at lawyers and law librarians, although it is accessible by the general public as well.
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On March 12, 2001, Lexis-Nexis informed Halvorson that they believed LexNotes was infringing on the Lexis trademark, and requested that Halvorson cease and desist using the domain name www.lexnotes.com.26 According to Halvorson, “While acknowledging that LEXIS never has used the mark LexNotes, LEXIS claims that my use of it infringes on a family of marks that begin with the Latin word lex, meaning law.”27

One issue involved in this dispute is whether “lex” is a generic word. According to law librarian Karen Mahnk, “Lex is not a name but a generic word for ‘law.’ Generic words are tough cookies to trademark, i.e. Aqua/aqua/water. Note that there are numerous water companies with the name root Aqua (not to mention AquaVelva). Also, ‘Pizza Hut’ certainly didn’t have much luck keeping ‘pizza’ out of all the other restaurant names. So too any legal entity may include the word lex, or law. So, unless ‘law’ can be trademarked, I doubt they have much standing.”28

LexNotes has compiled a partial listing of domain names beginning with “lex.” The list contains over 4,000 domain names.29

Another product with a similar name is the luxury automobile “LEXUS.” Mead Data Central, the previous owner of Lexis-Nexis, sued Toyota, the producer of Lexus automobiles.30 The 2nd Circuit ruled in favor of Toyota. According to the opinion:

Mead introduced evidence that its president in 1972 “came up with the name LEXIS based on Lex which was Latin for law and IS for information systems.” In fact, however, the word “lexis” is centuries old. It is found in the language of ancient Greece, where it had the meaning of “phrase,” “word,” “speaking” or “dictum.” Pinkerton, Word for Word, 179 (1982). “Lexis” subsequently appeared in the Latin where it had a substantially similar meaning, i.e., “word,” “speech,” or “language.” Oxford Latin Dictionary (1984); Lewis and Short, A Latin Dictionary (1980); Lewis, An Elementary Latin Dictionary (1979).

Like many other Latin words, “lexis” has been incorporated bodily into the English. It can be found today in at least sixty general dictionaries or other English word books, including Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary and Webster’s New World Dictionary. Moreover, its meaning has not changed significantly from that of its Latin and Greek predecessors; e.g., “Vocabulary, the total set of words in a language” (American Heritage Illustrated Encyclopedic Dictionary); “A vocabulary of a language, a particular subject, occupation, or activity” (Funk & Wagnalls Standard Dictionary).…

Moreover, the record discloses that numerous other companies have adopted “Lexis” in identifying their business or its product, e.g., Lexis Ltd., Lexis Computer Systems Ltd., Lexis Language and Export Information Service, Lexis Corp., Maxwell Labs Lexis 3. In sum, we reject Mead’s argument that LEXIS is a coined word which originated in the mind of its former president and, as such, is entitled per se to the greater protection that a unique mark such as “Kodak” would receive. [Citations omitted.]

The court also compared “LEXUS to NEXUS, a nationally known shampoo, and LEXIS to NEXIS, Mead’s trademark for its computerized news service. NEXUS and NEXIS have co-existed in apparent tranquility for almost a decade.”31 The 2nd Circuit concluded that LEXIS as a computer research database did not dilute Toyota’s mark of LEXUS for automobiles.32

In fact, there are 102 words in Black’s Law Dictionary that begin with the root word “lex.”33 Several of these words have more combinations in which they can be used. Some of the more important ones include lex loci delicti, the “law of the place where the tort was committed,” as well as lex naturae, which means “natural law,” and lex generalis, “A law of general application, as opposed to one that affects only a particular person or small group of people.”34 continued on page 74
At this time, the dispute between Halvorson and Lexis-Nexis is still going on. Disagreements over domain names such as this occur with some regularity now that the Internet has become popular. The Domain Name System does provide a possibility of both abuse and unintentional conflicts. However, ICANN, trademark law, and the Anticybersquatting Consumer Protection Act of 1999 are trying to bring order to the system. The .new.net challenge to ICANN is a troubling prospect. Still, sometimes disputes do arise over domain names, even without any bad faith on the part of anyone. The more we know about trademark law, the easier it becomes to avoid trouble.

The Internet is still in the Wild West days of its beginning. However, ICANN and its allies are trying to bring law and order to the system without bringing control. We who work with the Internet still have a hard road to travel, but the Wild West came to order, and even the most infamous territories were tamed. So, too, can the Internet become civilized.