

## ICANN's Study on the Prevalence of Domain Names Registered using a Privacy or Proxy Service among the top 5 gTLDs

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Registered name holders have the option to limit the amount of personal information that is made available to the public through Whois queries of registrar domain name databases. To do so, they generally use a privacy or proxy registration service when registering their domain name. The main objective of this study was to establish baseline information to inform the community on the prevalence of the use of privacy and proxy services when registering domain names. The preliminary results from the initial coding of a random sample of two thousand four hundred domain names registered under the top 5 gTLDs reveal that anywhere from approximately 15 to 25 percent are likely to have been registered using a privacy or proxy service.

## **Background**

To ensure that the community can identify who is responsible for a domain name, a registered name holder is required to provide and update, as needed, their contact information with their registrar of record. Registrars are required by ICANN to collect and provide free public access to the name of the registered domain name and its name servers and registrar, the date the domain was created and when its registration expires, and the contact information for the Registered Name Holder, the technical contact, and the administrative contact.

In some instances, a registered name holder chooses to limit the amount of personal information that its registrar of record makes available to the public via a Whois query of their database. To do so, a registered name holder generally uses a privacy or proxy registration service. For the purpose of this study, the definitions of privacy and proxy services, as they relate to their use in the domain name system, are as follows:

***A privacy service provider** offers the registrant an opportunity to register a domain name while concealing some personal identifying information listed in a WHOIS directory, such as his or her address, telephone number, or email address, by providing alternate contact information, often that of the privacy service provider.*

***A proxy service provider** registers the domain name on the registrant's behalf and then licenses the use of the domain name to the registrant. The contact information in a WHOIS directory for a domain name registered with a proxy service is that of the proxy service provider.*

The ICANN community has expressed a considerable amount of interest in and raised questions about domain names registered using a privacy and proxy service. However, there is an absence of factual information on the prevalence of their use by registered name holders, which is why ICANN conducted an exploratory study.

## **Objectives**

The study had two objectives:

- (1) establish an approximation of the percentage of registered name holders of domain names (through a statistical sampling plan) contained in gTLD registries that used a privacy or proxy registration service; and
- (2) determine the prevalence of each of these types of registrations, i.e. privacy service vs. proxy service.

## **Data Source and Methodology**

To conduct this study, ICANN relied on a sample drawn in March 2009.<sup>1</sup> According to the National Opinion Research Center (“NORC”), that sample will result in an approximation of proxy/privacy usage within a +/- 2 percent margin of error at a 98 percent confidence level. The sample was selected from domain names registered under the .com, .net, .org, .info, and .biz generic Top Level Domains (“TLDs”), which collectively account for greater than 99% percent of the domain names registered today.

The sample was randomly selected by ICANN technical staff in accordance with a design advised by statisticians from National Opinion Research Center (“NORC”), a research firm affiliated with the University of Chicago. The sample was a systematic random sample drawn within strata, or categories, formed by each of the top five gTLDs, with the number of selections in each strata strictly proportional to the number in the entire domain name universe. For instance, since most domain names have been registered under .com, it was expected that the majority of the domain names contained in the sample were also associated with the .com top-level domain. This made the sample self-weighting, meaning that whatever percentage of the sample was found to be of domain names registered using a privacy or proxy service, no further adjustment to that statistic was needed and it could be inferred that an equal percentage of the broader population of domain names was also

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<sup>1</sup> The final estimates discussed in this report are based on a sample of 2352 domain names.

linked to a privacy or proxy service. The Whois information for each domain name contained in the sample was extracted by ICANN and provided to NORC.

The process for identifying the percentage of domain names that were registered using a privacy and proxy service involves an *initial classification* (completed here) and a *final classification* (to be completed later – using comment to this report).

### **1. Initial Classification**

*(domain names that were potentially registered using a privacy or proxy service)*

These cases were identified by NORC in a coding exercise from which registrant details appear to be third party arrangements. NORC developed a scale, ranging from 3 to 0, reflecting the registrant’s information and how they generally resembled the characteristics those domains registered using one of these services. For example, those domain names that were identified as “3” had the name of the proxy service provider in the “registrant name” field in Whois, rendering them as being “highly probable” to be using a privacy or proxy registration service.

#### “Highly Probable”

Domain names that were identified as “3” had the terms “privacy” or “proxy” in the registrant name field in Whois and multiple domain names of the sample shared the same address, indicating that it wasn’t an individual registrant using that name. Therefore, domain names labeled “3” had a “high probability” of being registered using a privacy or proxy service.

#### “Probable”

Domain names labeled “2” either (a) contained the terms “privacy” or “proxy” in the registrant name field in Whois and had a unique address or (b) did not contain the terms “privacy” and “proxy” or the name of a registrar in the registrant name field in Whois, but shared the same address of other domain names of the sample.

### “Less Probable”

Domains labeled as “1” shared the registrant address of other domain names in the sample but contained the name of a known registrar in the registrant name field in Whois.

### “Not at all Probable”

Lastly, domain names labeled “0” lacked any characteristics to suggest that they had been registered using a privacy or proxy service. To reduce the level of error in this final classification, the city and zip code associated with the Whois records for these approximately 1700 domain names was compared to those of the known providers of privacy and proxy registration services to see if there was a match.

### Findings of Initial Classification

While the final proportions are subject to the validation stage, from the initial coding, ICANN found that:

- When taking into account all domain names from the sample labeled “3”, “2” and “1”, 580, about 24.6 percent of the sample, appear to have been registered using a privacy or proxy service.
- When taking into account all domain names from the sample labeled “3” and “2”, 528, about 22.4 percent, appear to have been registered using a privacy or proxy service; domain names labeled “3” account for 14.6 percent of the sample.
- The data collected from the sample suggests that, of registrants using a proxy or privacy service, approximately 85% used a proxy service to register their domain name and 15% of registered name holders used a privacy service. This is supported by the fact that the registrant name field in 580 Whois records for those domain names contained the key word “proxy” or the term “privacy.”
- Assuming that the 580 domain names from the sample are found to be registered using a privacy or proxy service upon validation, when analyzed by the gTLD under which they were registered, these domains are distributed as follows:

- 453 domains, or 78 percent, were registered under *.com* (compared with, at this writing, a 74.9% market share)
- 67 domains, or 11.5 percent, were registered under *.net* (11.3% share)
- 29 domains, or 5 percent, were registered under *.org* (7.1% share)
- 26 domains, or 4.48 percent, were registered under *.info* (4.6% share)
- 5 domains, or .86 percent, were registered under *.biz* (1.8% share)

## **2. Final Classification**

ICANN will send validation requests to the registrars of record for domain names that were identified with some level of probability that they had been registered using a privacy or proxy service (labeled “3”, “2,” and “1” in the coding process). The extent of participation will lead to results with more certainty. The validation will also query as to whether the domain name should be classified as one that was registered using a privacy or proxy service. Individual responses to the validation requests will be held confidential but the effect of the aggregate response on the certainty of the estimation will be published.

### **Scope limitations**

This study did not attempt to answer questions related to:

- The typical cost(s) associated with using a privacy or proxy service when registering a domain name.
- The differentiation of privacy and proxy registration services offered by registrars or other entities.