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Urban Identity by City Top-Level Domains

Posted by [Dirk Krischenowski](#) on Jan 01, 2006



This document is intended to be a starting point for a discussion on upcoming city Top-Level Domain Names (city TLDs) such as .berlin, .nyc, or .london. It reflects considerations about the impact of city TLDs on the city society, the individuals in the city, the regional and global environment, and the Internet at large.

Cities are building their Lobby

The world goes city: The "Urban Millenium" is beginning, Kofi Annan mentioned at the foundation congress of the United Cities and Local Governments ([UCLG](#)) taking place May 2004. UCLG is the united voice and world advocate of democratic local self-government and the largest local government organisation in the world, representing cities with over half the world's population. Based on the United Nations Millenium Development Goals (MDG) the UCLG World Council adopted in June 2005 in Beijing the Local Government Millennium Declaration targeting unsolved problems of mega cities worldwide.

Also other initiatives and organisations like the [Cities Alliance](#), the Council of European Municipalities and Regions ([CEMR](#)), Metropolis (World Association of the [Major Metropolises](#)), and the World Urban Forum are promoting strong and effective democratic local self-government and trying to strengthen the worldwide influence of metropolitan cities and governments.

Today nearly half of the world's population is living in cities, by 2030 it is expected that 2 billion people will live in cities, that is two-third of the world's population at this time. This fast urbanization development implicates enormous social, economic, ecological and political challenges for government, administration, the private sector and the civil society. Terms like metrolization, urban primacy, urban phenomenons, swarm intelligence, self-assembly and community building have been invented to describe how cities breathe and influence their environment.

The reasons why cities are also gripped by the accelerated change are manifold. The information society is one of the drivers behind urban change. Globalization is another driver because cities and regions are nowadays competing on human resources, investments and image on a global basis. Cities are considered as engines behind the economy and major contributors to economic growth. On one hand increasing interdependencies between cities and regions by global trading have to be mentioned, on the other hand differences among traditionally industrialized countries and emerging East-European and Asian countries are going to diminish. But also differences between rural areas and cities increase and downsides of this development are social polarization and spatial fragmentation.

The consequences and responsibilities for cities are manifold. At the same time global competitiveness has to be safeguarded as well as social inclusion has to be stimulated. In times of globalisation, growing personal mobility and a media driven society, city marketing has gained a lot of attention as an instrument to compete with other cities and regions. City image and urban identity have become key issues of mayors, city managers and urban planners. It has become essential to emotionally bind local residents and businesses to a city (civic pride), and to attract outside interest and invest in the city. Tools used to market the city to citizens and abroad are branding, websites, sporting and cultural events and institutions, landmark buildings and projects, architecture and public space.

A Mirror of Globalization and Regionalization

Globalization and regionalization represent both sides of the same medal, since they reflect

two major global trends nowadays. There's still an ongoing trend for globalization triggered by corporate and economic integration of governments and global companies. But on the other hand regional self-confidence and regional self-government is emerging and increasing in developing countries as well as in industrial countries. These trends are reflected in economic, cultural and socio-political issues and are visible anywhere.

Both trends are - and should be - mirrored logically by Top Level Domains: .com, info, .jobs and other so-called gTLDs are targeting global audiences on a generic basis. The new TLD proposals like .eu, .cat, .asia, .sco, .nyc and .berlin represent regional interests based on political, regional, cultural or urban sponsoring communities. Before these sponsors announced to apply for their TLD the Internet neglected regional communities and cities for more than a decade. Even small countries with a population of some 10,000 inhabitants, like Cook Islands and Tuvalu have been granted TLDs by ICANN. But there are no TLDs supporting bigger natural communities like a metropolis or a region with some million inhabitants yet.

"An invasion of armies can be resisted, but not an idea whose time has come." Victor Hugo said in 'Histoire d'un crime' 1852. Accordingly we think that regional deliberation is an issue of today's world and it should be considered that, besides global identities by TLDs like .com or .biz, a strong trend in regionalization by regional TLDs already started to emerge.

A special kind of regional TLDs will be the sub-class of so-called city TLDs, not to mistake with the dotcity TLD (.city TLD). City TLDs are Top-Level Domains for a city community which signify the complete name or a common abbreviation of a city. Good examples for city TLDs are .berlin or .nyc.

"The best ideas are common property." Greek philosopher and statesman Seneca said 5 BC (before Christ). It's the same with city TLDs. The idea to create them is a common and generic one and must be at least as old as the first TLDs like .arpa and .com. But the first documented citation about city TLDs can be found in the late 90's when the first round of new TLDs was announced. Although city TLDs are an interesting topic to discuss no serious literature has been published so far apart from a few resources about .nyc published by NYC Community Board Director Thomas Lowenhaupt. His basic quote "For a City-Friendly Internet" can be seen as starting point of the discussion about city TLDs. We based our reflections on his article.

We think, that city TLDs will become reality sooner or later and will restore the balance between the regional and the global in commerce, in culture, and in government and will equalize the inequities and competitive advantages a few cities (e.g. .sg, .hk, .la, .va) or small countries (e.g. .cc, .ws, .tv) are having by their own TLDs.

City TLDs are of public interest and offer significant advantages

Of public interest are initiatives, which directly serve the interests of the general public in a substantial, intellectual and moral area and lead to added value for the community. City TLDs fulfill these criteria in multiple ways because they,

- create an economical and relevant long-term advantage for the location of the city against other cities and regions and thereby safeguard the city's competitiveness,
- support city's and citizens identity and corporate feeling,
- enhance local competition in manifold ways,
- increase communicative and cultural plurality,
- strengthen the power of the brand name and city image.

Since domain names have been issued they are used as a clear identification of individuals, projects or businesses on a global (by TLDs like .com or .info) or national (by ccTLDs like .de or .co.uk) basis. Although the current Domain Name System offers multiple options to individuals and small businesses to feel as global player, in almost every country worldwide the majority of people are living, working and acting locally for most time in their lives. Even Internet traffic is getting more and more local. The urban primacy plays a vital role in this fact since a growing percentage of today's population is living in multimillion-resident

metropolises. Only a minority of individuals really need to register domain names to create national or international identities which match their needs or support their identity online. Local and regional requirements are not addressed by the current Top Level Domains:

- .com and .biz are generic, they are identifiers of businesses and organisations which act globally
- ccTLDs are identifiers of businesses and organisations which act nationally
- city TLDs could be the missing link to millions of small to medium enterprises (SMEs) and individuals which act locally. They are also a chance to give individuals a virtual identity with a relation to their local community

By their own city TLD like .berlin, .nyc, or .london cities will benefit in multiple ways. Advantages such TLDs might offer for their cities are:

- New Name Space - The limited number of today's available domain name extensions has created weird competition between people, businesses and organisations with the same name. A growing number of domain name disputes on this topic are a clue that existing ccTLDs and gTLDs are not sufficient to differentiate between 6 billion individuals and some hundred million businesses and organisations worldwide. Also the name space for artificial names is getting tight since a lot of companies register many gTLDs and ccTLDs when launching a business or product. City TLDs will calm this competition down, since a nearly infinite number of new combinations will be available with them. In addition a large demand for city TLDs will arise from the rapidly growing number of non-English-speaking users that use Chinese, Indian or Arabic or other non-Roman scripts. Additionally city TLDs will open up a new opportunity for local brands. Local brands with generic and descriptive names like magic, blue, link, sun, angel, york, cook, star, or american very often didn't get their desired ccTLD because of the multiple usage of the particular name in different trademark classes on a national level.
- Strategic advantage for location and competition - City TLDs will provide a complementary choice to existing country code TLDs and generic TLDs, and consequently will increase choice and competition for the regional city community in an environment of national and international competition on investments.
- Intuitive usage – City TLDs offer the opportunity to start on a green field and to optimize the nutrient solution on which the TLD will grow. Due to the possibility to reserve domain names in public and community interest, many important yellow page terms like weather, traffic, taxi could become more intuitively accessible and usable by a descriptive URL.
- Innovative e-gouvernement – City TLDs will enable a modern e-government communication infrastructure on domain name basis and thereby ease the interaction of the city government, administration and institutions with residents, organisations and businesses. Self-explaining URLs like `senat.berlin`, `mayor.nyc`, and `taxoffice.london` with content users expect will make a city's resources readily available and easier to locate by the regional, national and international audience.
- Increased local economy - City TLDs will increase electronic commerce in the city, especially for small, new portal and community businesses and for businesses in which the revenue was based so far on an national or international TLD (`hotel.de` vs. `hotel.berlin`). Additionally a city TLD will provide the city with increased taxes due to revenues based on city TLD businesses.
- Global city branding - City TLDs will ease the marketing of the city brand and city image to prospective residents, tourists, businesses and investors from all over the globe. Websites like `jobs.berlin`, `hotels.nyc`, and `offices.london` will make the city's resources intuitively accessible to the world.
- Equality of opportunity - City TLDs will establish a focal point for bringing the benefits of the information society to the city community and help combat the rise of a digital divide within and between communities and their individuals.
- Quality of search - Navigating by using an organized city domain extension can become reality. Wiki technology could help to create a searchable city directory on domain name level. For instance each domain name owner could have the possibility to place his domain name in a variety of pre-offered or newly creatable horizontal and vertical

categories.

- Learning curve – Through local academic, educational and research organizations the city, other cities and the global Internet community can learn to leverage the knowledge created by observing city TLDs in a scientific environment. This information can conduct a proof of concept on the efficiency of city TLDs, one that will provide the ICANN with all necessary information upon which to judge the validity of issuing additional city TLDs.
- City name community – Other locations worldwide with the same name, even if small villages or towns, should also be part of the community. They will profit from the increased visibility of the city name and should have equal rights to register domain names under the city TLD.

The application costs for a TLD and the cost related with maintaining a TLD registry should not be underestimated. Today only big cities bring the necessary potential of economic power, human resources, infrastructure and market with them to operate a TLD successfully. But we estimate that with a liberalization of TLDs within a decade also cities with below 1 million inhabitants will have the chance to get access to their own virtual urban identity.

City TLDs are offering value, quality and identity

What is in a city TLD? On first sight and technically seen, it's a Top Level Domain and technical identifier of a city community within the Internet, but what is a city TLD to the city, its community and all others?

The identity of a city is quite difficult to describe and conceive. It is the identity as perceived by the entirety of all individuals and stakeholders, in the city and from outside. The urban identity is a virtual phenomenon resulting from different perspectives like inhabitants mood, their personal experiences and satisfaction, quality of the urban area, goals and values, pace, architecture, commerce, traffic, stories, community identification, sense of cohesion, cultural heritage, and differing individually. By this the city identity is multi-dimensional, there is not just one city identity, there are characters and personalities. Some of these identity attributes and properties develop slower (like cultural heritage) and some faster by adopting new influences more easily. Even a single event like Olympic games can be crucial to the city's identity.

City TLDs are likely to develop and move the city's image and urban identity in many ways. One of the most important changes for the identity of the city will be the perceived identity of the city's individuals. If marketed appropriately to the population first and adopted by them in their daily lives, city TLDs are likely to trigger the development of identification and pride as well as corporate feeling, which are some of the most valuable changes in the mindset. Marketed to the world outside, city TLDs could likely create a product with a clear branding. Such brands help to build a city's identity, the New York slogans "Big Apple" and "I love NY" are good examples for this. Values perceived from outside for cities with an own TLD could comprise modern and traditional attitudes in conjunction: sustainability, diversity, openness, self-fulfillment, prospect, potential, and option.

City TLDs are the Long Tail

City TLDs are what Tim O'Reilly described in Web 2.0 as the "Long Tail" and "Users Add Value".

Today a city portal like Berlin.de is a single URL, address and identifier of the city and its institutions and cannot be not actively shaped and diversified by the city community. A city portal like Berlin.de is what O'Reilly described as the center or head. But tomorrow a city TLD like .berlin and the many, many thousands of .berlin URLs will be identity for 3.4 mio citizens, their businesses and organisations - and this is the long tail, because it reaches the entire community to the edges. City TLDs will open up a myriad of opportunities for participation, contribution and social networking of everybody in the community.

Collaborative Development of City TLDs

The last months we stayed in contact to Thomas Lowenhaupt who is the leader for the idea of a .nyc TLD. In contrast to the .nyc initiative which is driven by a governmental organisation our idea for a .berlin TLD derived from a private initiative and is based on the strong support and participation of the Berlin community. It is organised as a company with the support of several partners representing the community. These partners are associations, societies, and foundations from government, administration, business, culture, science, and sports as well as companies, citizens and representatives from other places with the name Berlin. It will be interesting to follow the different organisational approaches and to learn from our experiences.

Aim of the collaboration of .nyc and .berlin is a cooperative development effort which will lead to policies, guidelines and a common sense for a good practice on city TLDs which other cities might find helpful for their own application and which ICANN might use when it comes to validate city TLD applications in the future. For both of us the grassroots involvement of the community and the consideration of the community need in the upstream design of the TLD is very important. Together .nyc and .berlin will have the unique opportunity to create a role model for the worldwide implementation of city TLDs.

Comments

By [Daniel R. Tobias](#) | Jan 03, 2006, 11:30 pm MET

There are a few errors or misstatements in this article. 2 billion will only be two-thirds of the world's population if half of the current 6 billion die off. **co.uk** is not a "ccTLD", but a second-level domain within the ccTLD of **.uk**, parallel to others such as **.org.uk**. And **.la** is not a "city TLD", but the ccTLD for Laos; it's being abused by marketing types as an alleged domain for Los Angeles, but that is not its official purpose.

By [Colin Dijkgraaf](#) | Jan 04, 2006, 09:37 pm MET

Why do you even need TLD's for this? As a city is in a particular country, why not just use the domain city.cTLD and allow people to have sub domains of that? Yes there might be some cases where these domains are taken by people who don't want to share the domain, but these things can be worked out. Possibly the local government should register these city.cTLD's and then allow people to register sub domains through them.

By [Dirk Krischenowski](#) | Jan 05, 2006, 12:10 am MET

Indeed, the URL <http://www.city.cctld> is often owned by the city itself. In Berlin we have <http://www.berlin.de>. This website is owned by the city government and used as portal for governmental issues, administration and workspace for official institution.

The idea of using subdomains makes sense and would be an easy way to broaden the namespace, but there are several reasons why <http://subdomain.city.cctld> are used very seldom. It may be conceivable that institutions and organizations related to the city use third-level-domains like police.berlin.de, but for economy, culture, private households and others it seems hard to visualise. Why this?

First of all it seems to be hard to imagine that the city government would allow a free registration of subdomains. That would mean that URLs like <http://sexy.berlin.de>, <http://i-hate-the-mayor.berlin.de> or even more disgusting URLs would be available. By this the city governments image could be damaged and there would be a broad loss of credibility in the city portal.

Secondly there are legal issues to be taken into account with 3rd-level-domains in Germany and I think in some other countries as well:

- Competition laws (who should get certain generic subdomains?)
- Trademark laws ("first-come, first-serve" or "age of trademark" or "size of company"?)

- Content responsibility (e.g. laws in Germany make the owner of the 2nd-level-domain responsible for all content also on their respective 3rd-level-domains)

Furthermore 3rd-level-domains are not appropriate to serve the demand of businesses and individuals. Subdomains are

- not intuitively learned and remembered by users (<http://www.xyz.com-centred> Internet)
- not accepted as an ideal communication tool for everyone
- not accepted by the economy for security and reliability issues

Finally and most important a .berlin top-level-domain creates a unique local identity for citizens, companies, organisations and institutions which a 3rd-level-domain would never be able to.

I would like to close my comment with the clue that TLDs are in several countries like Germany not subject to any governmental regulation. TLDs are born in the Internet community and managed by organisations based on this community. Giving city governments the power to decide which entity could register which <http://subdomain.city.cctld> would thwart the Internets bottom-up principle.

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