October 2025

A Brief History of Domains

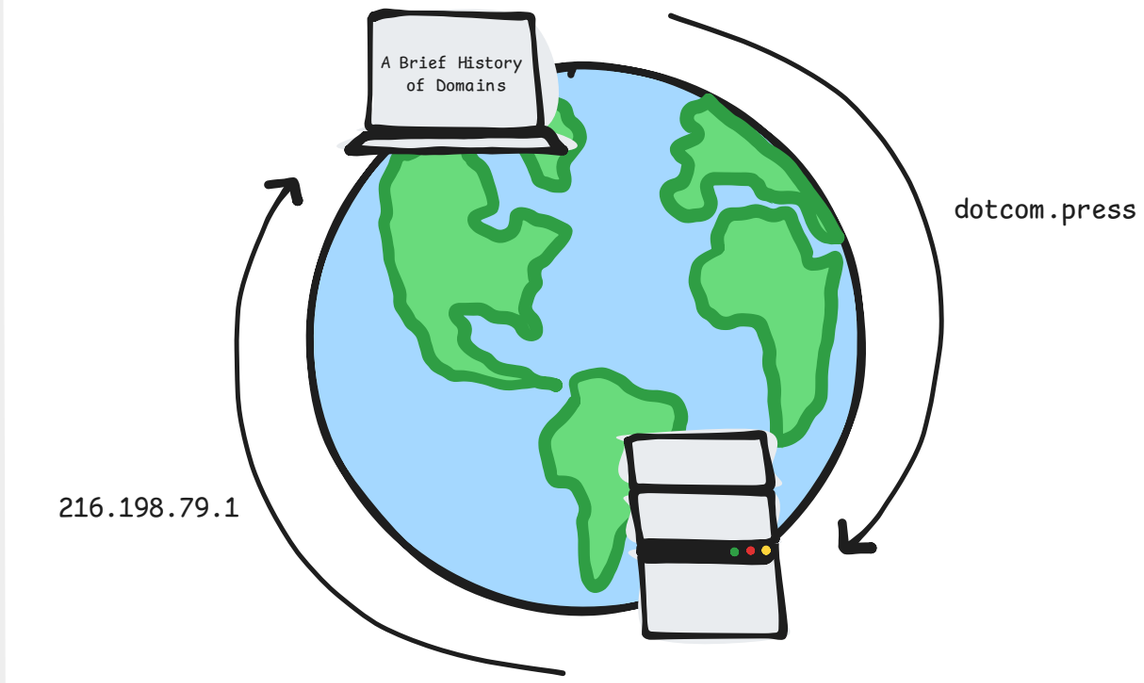
This year, dot com turned 40.

Four decades ago, the first domain was registered and the initial batch of top-level domains came to be. Nearly a billion domains have been registered since then. Let's take a tour of domain milestones over the last forty years...and ask what comes next.

1983 ◆ DNS

Paul Mockapetris invented the Domain Name System at USC to map names (domains) to numbers (IP addresses). While DNS is an amazing system of global coordination, it is a point of centralization in an otherwise decentralized Internet. As Tim-Berners Lee put it in *Weaving the Web:*

> *For all its decentralized growth, the Web currently has one centralized Achilles' heel by which it can all be brought down or controlled.*



1984 ◆ The first TLDs

There were six original *top-level domains* (TLDs): `.com`, `.org`, `.net`, `.edu`, `.gov`, and `.mil`.

These extensions were defined in RFC 920 in October 1984 but not live until 1985. In his book, *Declaring Independence in Cyberspace*, Milton Mueller credits internet pioneer Jon Postel:

> *Postel played a leading role in defining the original top-level domains (.mil, .gov, .edu, .org, .net, .com)*

This was five years before Tim Berners-Lee would propose the World Wide Web, so *domains preceded the Web!*

1985 ♦

The first ccTLDs

Jon Postel also set up the first *country-code top-level domain* (ccTLD): `.us` in February 1985. Later that year `.uk` (United Kingdom) and `.il` (Israel) were established, and dozens more followed. Now there are 316 ccTLDs, including many popular ones that aren't often associated with the country:

- `.ai` (Anguilla)
- `.io` (British Indian Ocean Territory)
- `.co` (Colombia)
- `.me` (Montenegro)
- `.tv` (Tuvalu)
- `.sh` (Saint Helena)
- `.fm` (Federated States of Micronesia)

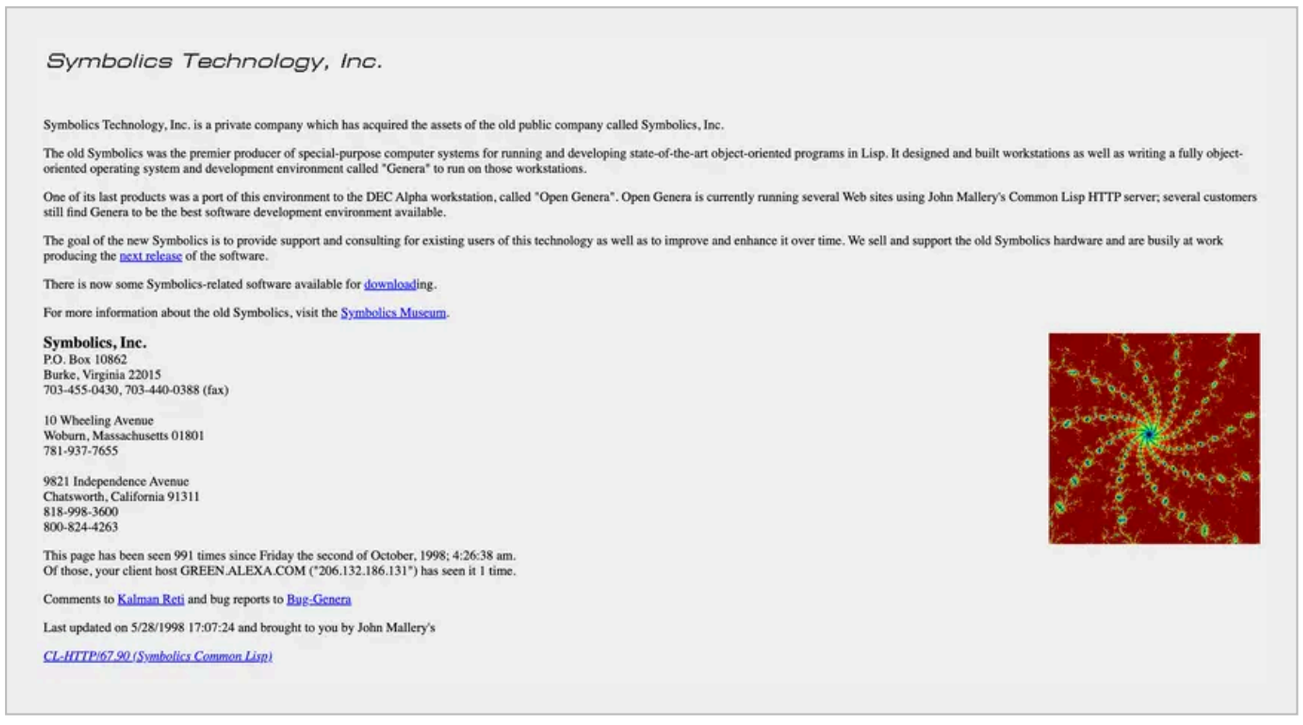
In fact, *any two-letter extension you see belongs to a country!*

1985 ♦

The first domain

On March 15, 1985 a computer company in Cambridge, Massachusetts called Symbolics registered `symbolics.com`.

It is the first and longest tenured domain, although it changed hands in 2009. The oldest snapshot saved in the Wayback Machine is from 1998:



Symbolics Technology, Inc.

Symbolics Technology, Inc. is a private company which has acquired the assets of the old public company called Symbolics, Inc.

The old Symbolics was the premier producer of special-purpose computer systems for running and developing state-of-the-art object-oriented programs in Lisp. It designed and built workstations as well as writing a fully object-oriented operating system and development environment called "Genera" to run on those workstations.

One of its last products was a port of this environment to the DEC Alpha workstation, called "Open Genera". Open Genera is currently running several Web sites using John Mallery's Common Lisp HTTP server; several customers still find Genera to be the best software development environment available.

The goal of the new Symbolics is to provide support and consulting for existing users of this technology as well as to improve and enhance it over time. We sell and support the old Symbolics hardware and are busily at work producing the next release of the software.

There is now some Symbolics-related software available for downloading.

For more information about the old Symbolics, visit the Symbolics Museum.

Symbolics, Inc.
P.O. Box 10862
Burke, Virginia 22015
703-455-0430, 703-440-0388 (fax)

10 Wheeling Avenue
Woburn, Massachusetts 01801
781-937-7655

9821 Independence Avenue
Chatsworth, California 91311
818-998-3600
800-824-4263

This page has been seen 991 times since Friday the second of October, 1998; 4:26:38 am.
Of those, your client host GREEN.ALEXA.COM (*206.132.186.131") has seen it 1 time.

Comments to Kalman Reti and bug reports to Bug-Genera

Last updated on 5/28/1998 17:07:24 and brought to you by John Mallery's

CL-HTTP/67.90 (Symbolics Common Lisp)

1988 ♦

IANA

The Internet Assigned Numbers Authority formed officially in 1988 (via RFC 1083) to manage globally unique IP addresses. Jon Postel and Joyce Reynolds at USC had been running things informally for years, and they continued to run it for the better part of the next decade. As Milton Mueller put it:

> *In effect, Jon Postel was the registry personified.*

And as Tim-Berners Lee wrote in his (first) book:

> *IANA was set up, was run by, and basically was the late Jon Postel...*

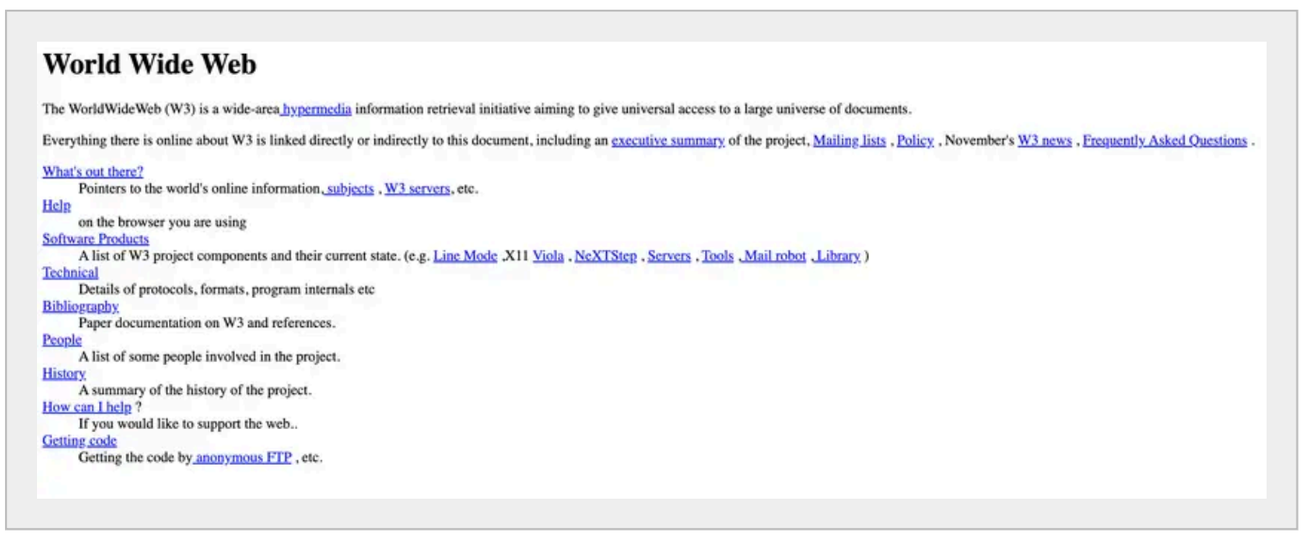
1991

The first website

Tim Berners-Lee proposed the World Wide Web in 1989 while working at CERN in Switzerland and put up the first website in 1991. It's still live today at info.cern.ch!

In *Weaving the Web*, TBL talks about the domain's role:

> *I registered an alias for it—"info.cern.ch"—with the CERN computer system folks. That way, the server would not be tied by its address to my machine; if I ever moved its contents to another machine, all the hypertext links pointing to it could find it.*



1992

Yugoslavian domain heist

In July 1992, during the wars in fracturing Yugoslavia, a group of Slovenian scientists broke into an IT building, stole the `.yu` domain records, and cut the literal cord to the network with scissors.

It was an early example of countless geopolitical dramas involving domains.

1993

The first registrar

The Web wasn't even open for commercial use until 1992 when Congress updated the National Science Foundation Act. In 1993 the U.S. government awarded a five-year contract to run domain registrations to Network Solutions, a then small IT company in Northern Virginia. They had trouble keeping up with registration demand. Per David Kesmodel in his book, *The Domain Game*:

> *Eventually Network Solutions' tiny staff...became so overwhelmed by the flood of e-mailed applications that it was unable to carefully screen each request...[Net Sol] gave up trying to prevent multiple registrations by the same person or company. It also dropped efforts to allocate domains to specific types of registrants...It was basically a free-for-all.*

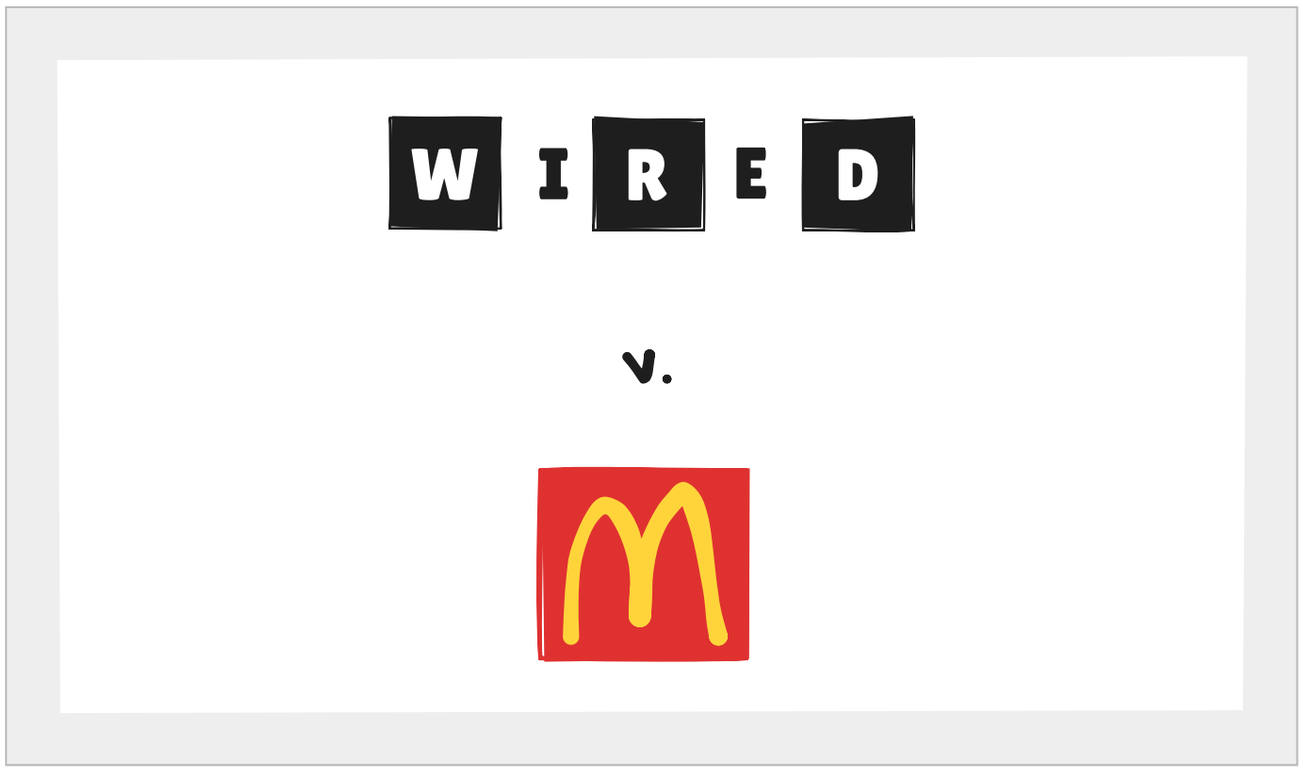
1994

Journalist buys mcdonalds.com before McDonalds

Josh Quittner bought `mcdonalds.com` before the hamburger people could and wrote about it in a WIRED feature: *Billions Registered*.

> *Right now, there are no rules to keep you from owning a bitchin' corporate name as your own Internet address.*

Quittner spoke to a McDonald's PR person who asked him, "Are you finding that the Internet is a big thing?"



1995 ♦ **$100 registration fees**

Domain registration was free for the first two years until September 1995 when Network Solutions started charging $100 for a two-year registration and $50 for yearly renewal thereafter. The National Science Foundation had been subsidizing admin costs before that point. In April 1998, Network Solutions lowered registration fees to $70 for two years and $35 per year renewal.

1998 ♦ **ICANN**

ICANN is the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers. What sounds like boring, bureacratic alphabet soup has actually been the center of constant geopolitical controversy over the years.

When money entered the chat in the mid 90s people started questioning the informal governance run by Jon Postel and Co. Businesses, trademark lawyers, the Clinton administration, governments, civil society groups, and the technical community itself all had their own perspectives (protect trademarks! block unsavory internet content! don't censor the web! etc.).

The NTIA, part of the US Commerce Department, wrote a whitepaper in June 1998 proposing ICANN to resolve thorny governance issues. ICANN launched in November.

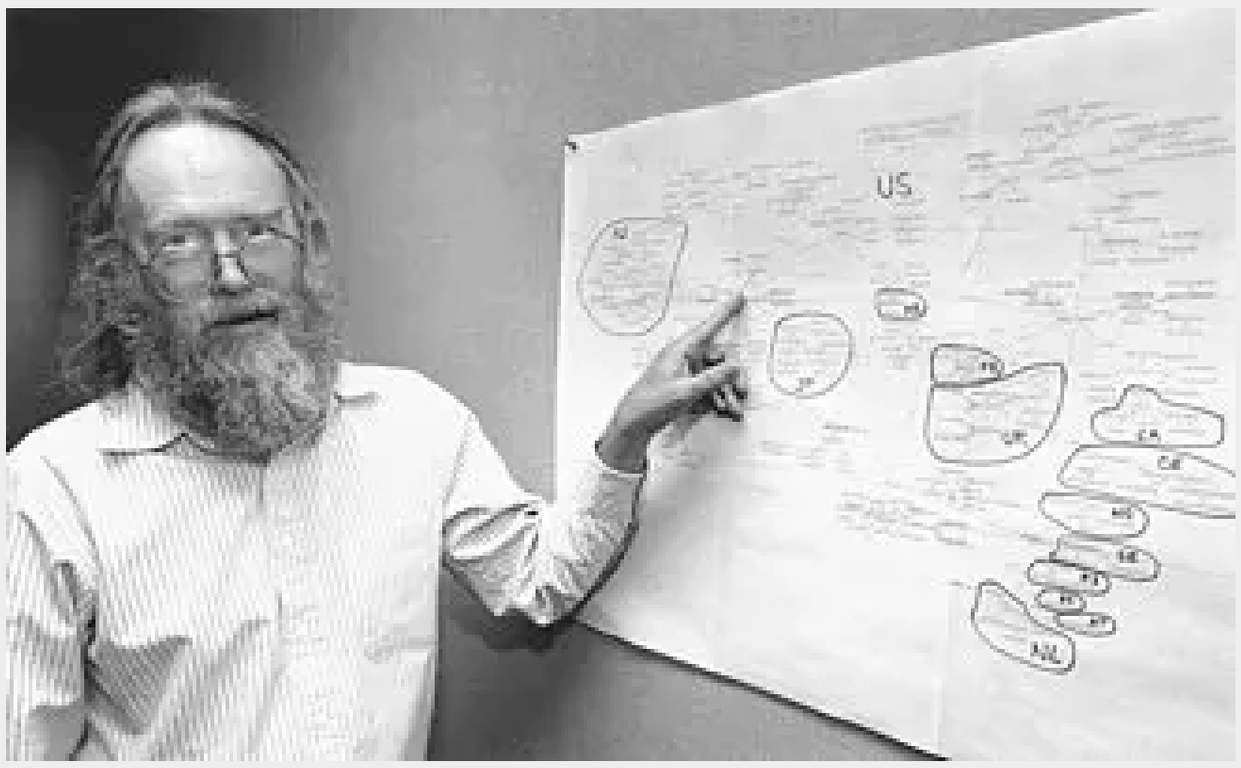
1998 ♦ **Jon Postel passes away**

Jon Postel passed away just 10 days before the ICANN announcement. He was set to serve on ICANN's board. Milton Mueller:

> *Sadly, the one person everyone respected, the only one who could lend this gang of strangers legitimacy—Jon Postel—died 10 days before the move was made public.*

Tim Berners-Lee again:

> *Jon managed IANA as a public trust, a neutral party. Much of the growth of the Web and Internet dependent on his integrity as the ultimate trusted authority who saw to it that the delegation of domain names was fair, impartial, and as unfettered as possible. Because of the sort of person Jon was, it worked. The Web and Internet as a whole owe a lot to Jon, who died in October 1998 at age fifty-five.*



1999 ◆ **Registrar competition**

Network Solutions' monopoly over domain registration ended in 1999 at the direction of ICANN, but they retained registry rights over `.com`, `.net`, and `.org` (for the time being).

Net Sol began selling domains wholesale for $9 a piece to other ICANN-accredited registrars who'd turn around and mark up domains sold to end customers. The wholesale price dropped again, from $9 to $6, in January 2000.

1999 ◆ **UDRP**

In December 1999, ICANN launched the Uniform Domain-Name Dispute-Resolution Policy, or UDRP (one of the worst acronyms ever?). UDRP answered the "trademark dilemma" with a process that trademark holders could use on to challenge infringing domain registrants.

2000 ◆ **Verisign acquires Network Solutions for $21 billion**

Verisign has been called a monopoly as the sole registry of `.com` and `.net`, with over 170 million registrations as of Q2 2025, earning about $1.5 billion annually. By 2000 they held 80% of the entire domain market. To their credit, they claim 100% reliability in over 28 years of DNS queries—pretty amazing!

They also run one of 13 root nameservers (along with 11 other orgs including NASA, ICANN, and University of Maryland). Verisign was founded in 1995, took over the `.com` registry around 1999, acquired Net Sol in 2000, then later divested the registrar business. Warren Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway invested in Verisign in 2012.

2001 ◆ **The first gTLDs since .com**

In June 2001, `.biz`, `.info`, and `.museum` were launched in a batch of seven ICANN-approved TLDs from its call for proposals the year before. `.name`, `.coop`, `.pro`, and `.aero` followed shortly after.

2004 ◆ **Sponsored TLDs arrive**

In April 2004, ICANN approved a batch of "Sponsored TLDs" (sTLDs): `.asia`, `.cat`, `.jobs`, `.mobi`, `.tel` and `.travel`. After this batch, ICANN stopped using the "sponsored" label to distinguish gTLDs.

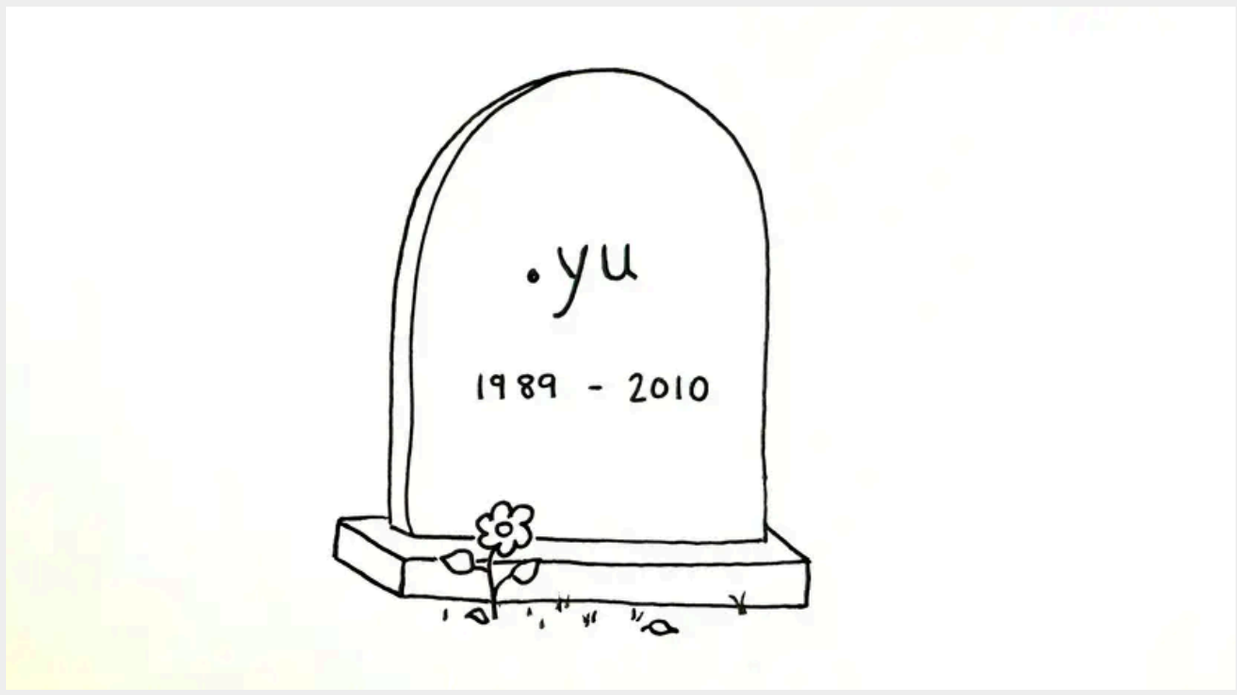
2005 ◆ **The first GoDaddy Super Bowl commercial**

GoDaddy—probably still the most widely known registrar—ran their first Super Bowl ad in 2005. Andy Reid still coached the Eagles back then, who lost to the Belichick-Brady Patriots 24-21. Pro racing driver Danica Patrick became the prominent spokesperson for GoDaddy starting in the 2009 Super Bowl.

2010 ◆ **.yu is officially retired**

`.yu` was officially retired in March 2010 years after the domain heist and Yugoslavia splitting into `.si`, `.hr`, `.ba`, `.mk`, `.me`, and `.rs`.

> *Over 4,000 websites, some of the earliest examples of internet culture from the region, suddenly became inaccessible via their original domain. For many, the deletion of .yu represented the final loss of the former country... -Kaloyan Kolev, Yugoslavia's Digital Twin*



2011 ◆ **Porn TLD .xxx gets approved**

`.xxx` was first proposed in 2000 by ICM Registry as a dedicated TLD for adult content, like pornography. Advocates argued that it would be better to silo adult content in its own TLD, which would make it easier for parents,

schools, and employers to filter. `.xxx` had many opponents and was shut down by the NTIA in 2004 during the Bush administration.

ICM later appealed the ruling through ICANN's independent review process and won, paving the way for other TLDs like `.sex` and `.porn`.

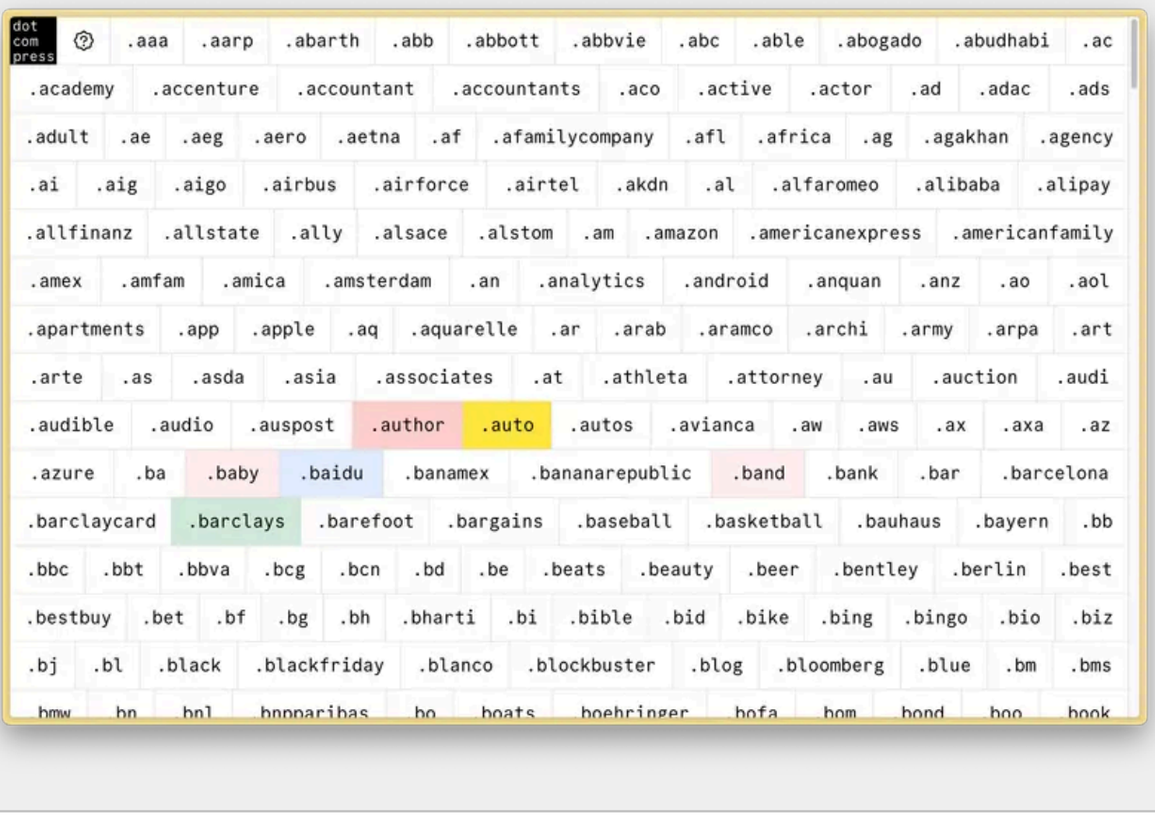
2012 ◆

A thousand new gTLDs

ICANN launched its first major expansion round of gTLDs in January 2012, which brought us over a thousand new extensions like `.app`, `.pizza`, and `.sex`.

Google won 46 strings, like `.dev` and `.dad`, paying $25 million in an auction for `.app` alone. Amazon owns 54, like `.wow` and `.prime`. Whole companies sprung up, like Donuts (now Identity Digital) which raised hundreds of millions to build a portfolio of 270+ TLDs like `.cool`, `.run`, and `.studio`.

You can explore all 1,592 TLDs here:



2016 ◆

.web auctioned for $135 million

To handle multiple applications for gTLDs, ICANN held "auctions of last resort" like the one for `.web` in July 2016. Nu Dot Co—funded by Verisign—outbid Google and others with $135 million, which is still the high-water mark for a gTLD auction. Nearly ten years later, `.web` is still stuck in legal limbo.

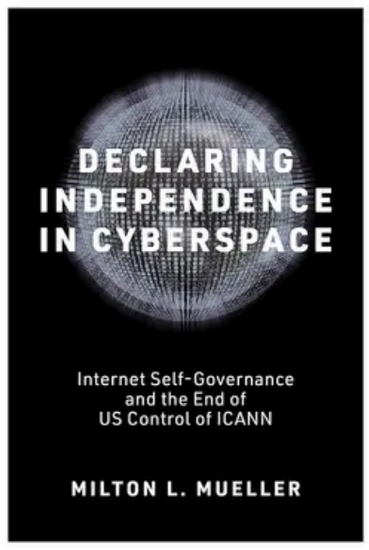
2016 ◆

US control over ICANN ends

The US government's contract with IANA (through its NTIA agency in the Commerce Department) expired on September 30, 2016 after a major political battle both inside the US and around the world.

Since its inception in 1998, ICANN was supposed to be a global organization not controlled by governments. Pressure to undo the US's outsized power boiled over after Edward Snowden leaked thousands of classified NSA documents revealing widespread US surveillance in 2013.

Milton Mueller's book *Declaring Independence in Cyberspace* focuses on this fascinating transition and its implications both in the last decade and looking ahead at the future of internet governance.



2019 ♦ **voice.com sells for $30 million**

A blockchain company (Block.one) bought `voice.com` for a record-smashing $30 million in June 2019 from MicroStrategy, facilitated by GoDaddy. There's nothing but a logo and an email link on the website (as of October 2025).

2020 ♦ **$1.1 billion .org sale blocked**

In November 2019 the Public Interest Registry (PIR) agreed to sell `.org` to a Private Equity group including former ICANN CEO Fadi Chehadé for $1.1 billion. Tim Berners-Lee and others opposed the sale. The reason PIR existed in the first place was to divest `.org` from Verisign in 2002. The ICANN board pulled the plug on the deal in April 2020, saying it was "the right thing to do."

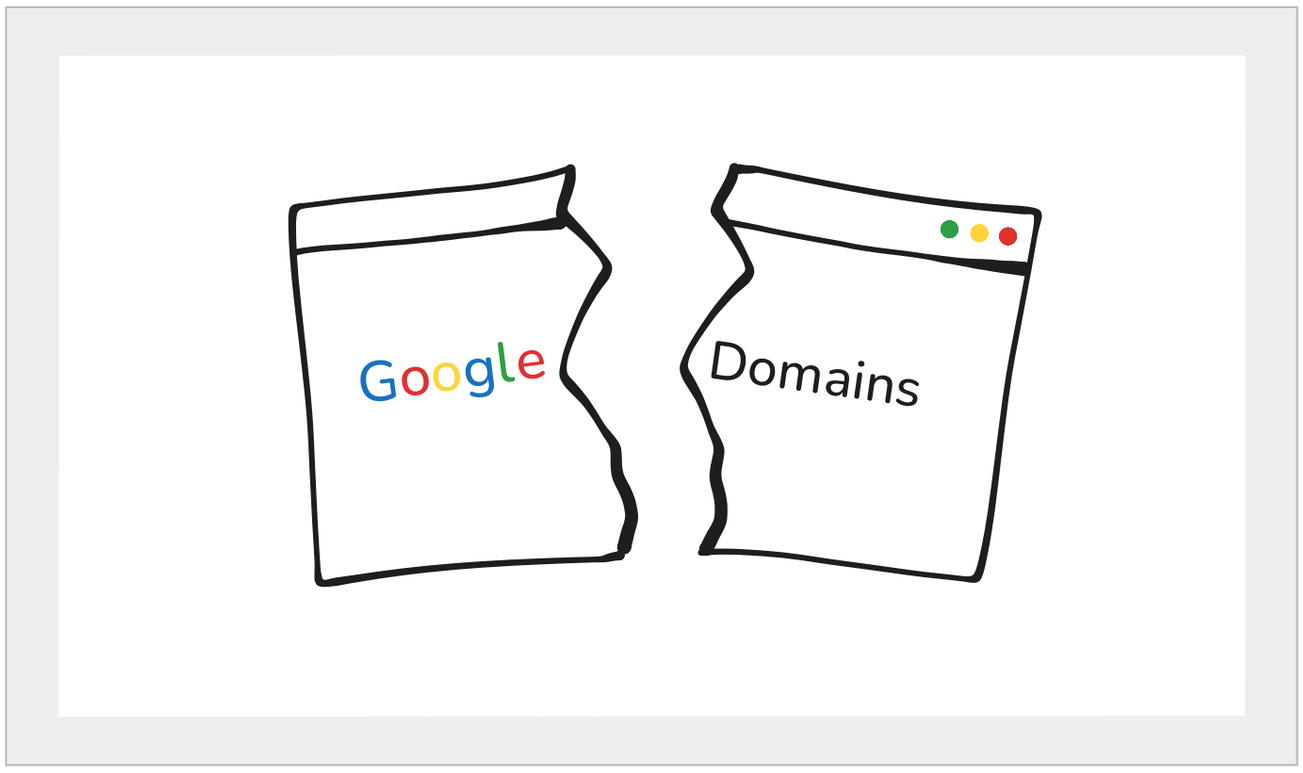
2022 ♦ **Ukraine asks ICANN to remove Russian domains**

In February 2022, Ukraine asked ICANN to shut down Russian domains `.ru` and `.рф`. ICANN declined.

> *...the Ukrainian government proposed to ICANN that it should remove the top-level domains for Russia (.ru, .рф) from the DNS root registry. ICANN's board flatly refused to do this, but if it had, it would have disrupted Internet connectivity, both inside and outside Russia. Anyone using a Russian domain might not be able to communicate with people on an ICANN-supported domain. ICANN's refusal to follow the Ukrainian request evinced a clear policy choice: global Internet compatibility is more important than the foreign policy goals of any one government.*

2023 ♦ **Google Domains shuts down**

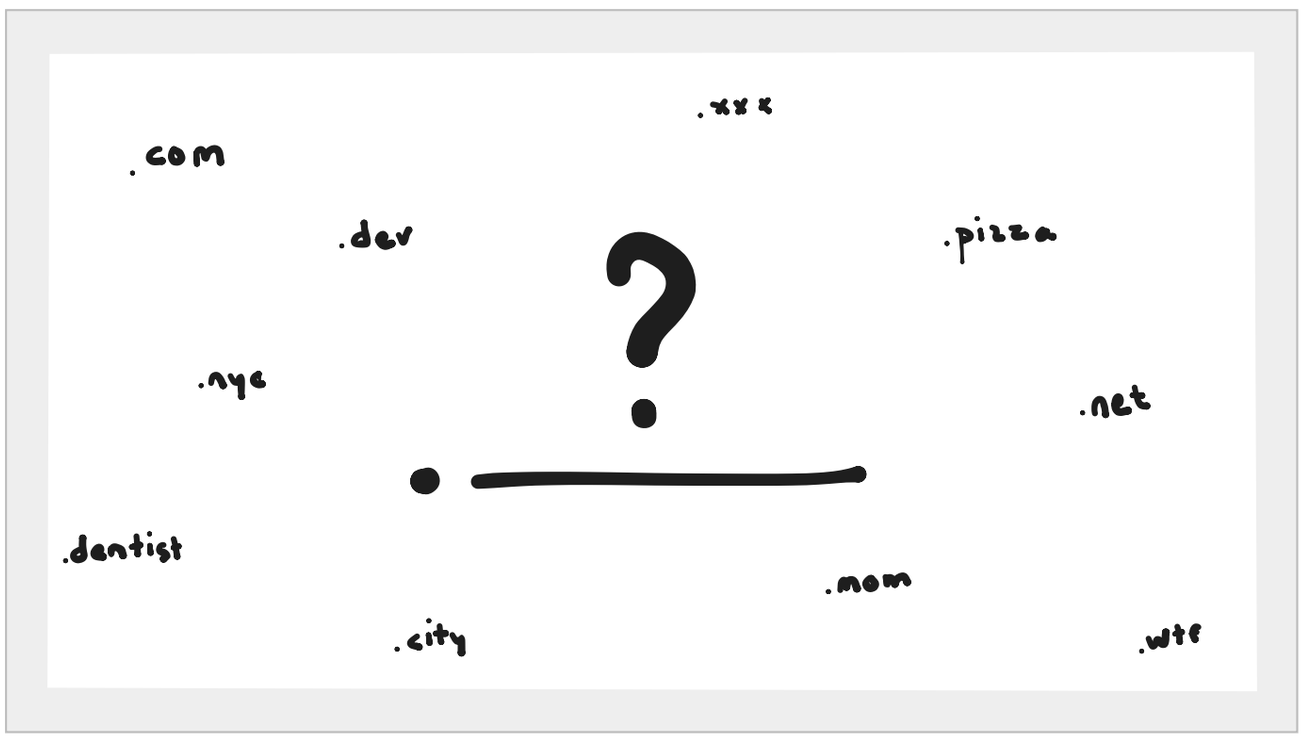
Google Domains launched in 2015 and became the third most popular registrar by the time it sold to Squarespace in June 2023. Many developers lamented the announcement. Google also runs its "Charleston Road Registry" with 46 TLDs. Google has been heavily involved in the domain world, from many angles.



2026 ◆ **The next wave of gTLDs**

A new round of gTLDs—the first since 2012—will open in April 2026. The base application fee is $227,000 for companies to apply for new extensions, with auctions of last resort as a possibility for competing bids.

The 2026 round will be one of the major topics at ICANN84 in Dublin (email me if you'll be there!). Whether you are a diehard dot com believer or not, there's no doubt generic extensions will continue to proliferate across the web.



If you're all the way down here, you might like my book: ***dot com et al: the secret life of domains***. Subscribe to the mailing list and read past emails in the archive :)

A Brief History of Domains was inspired by Deno's Brief History of JavaScript and Neal Agarwal's Internet Artifacts. Thanks to Milton Mueller's *Declaring Independence in Cyberspace*, David Kesmodel's *The Domain Game*, Tim Berners-Lee's *Weaving the Web*, the Wayback Machine, Wikipedia, and many other sources for this brief history.