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Australian Parliament's access to '.info' TLD blocked

Domain names

Australia - Hogan Lovells International LLP

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In February the Australian Parliament launched its new [website](#). Fortunately for those who work at Parliament House, it is not associated with a '.info' domain name or it would have been blocked to them (along with around 35 million other websites on a separate block list) as the result of a security measure implemented late last year by the [Department of Parliamentary Services](#). The block on access by the Australian Parliament to the '.info' top-level domain (TLD) was put in place on the advice of the [Defence Signals Directorate](#), an Australian government intelligence agency responsible for information security, in consideration of the disproportionate number of spammers and scammers operating under the '.info' TLD.

In the kind of internet censorship move seen more often in less democratic countries, the blocking filter on '.info' was switched on in October 2011 and was brought to the attention of the public in a media release by Australian Green Party Senator Scott Ludlam on February 13 2012. If senators wish to request that individual '.info' websites be unblocked, they can contact the [Usher of the Black Rod](#); however, according to reports, only 68 such websites have been unblocked in this way since the ban was imposed.

The policy appears to have come in response to cyber intelligence contained in reports such as those by internet security company [McAfee](#) entitled "[Mapping the Mal Web: the world's riskiest domains](#)". This report, which was released in 2010, makes for interesting reading and contains the surprising finding in relation to '.info' that "clicking on a link to this domain had a 47% chance of landing you on a risky page."

The '.info' TLD's notoriety as home to a host of colourful cyber nasties, such as zombies, phishers, botnets and Trojans, is said to be a legacy of its previous low cost (the registry fees saw a price hike from \$0.67 to \$10.60 per year only in July of 2011) and lack of registration requirements. Other bargain basement TLDs such as '.tk', which [allows users to register up to three free domain names](#), and the second level '.co.cc', have also experienced similar levels of unsavoury activity in the past, with '.co.cc', even being entirely [de-indexed by Google](#) in July 2011 for this very reason.

Although there is justifiable concern about the level of threat posed by rogue elements operating via the '.info' TLD, the Australian Parliament's action seems rather excessive. It is also somewhat illogical given the fact that the '.com' domain is actually judged to be slightly riskier than the '.info' domain name space by the McAfee report (31.3% for '.com', as opposed to 30.7% for '.info').

Apart from the entirety of the '.info' domain name space being blocked to the Australian Parliament, a further 35 million websites deemed inappropriate are shut off to senators and their staff. This censorship move comes in the wake of a fierce debate that has been raging in Australia since 2007, when conservative politician Stephen Conroy proposed the implementation of a mandatory nationwide internet filter to block overseas websites that had been refused classification within Australia. Although the proposal has not yet made it into legislation, a version of it seems already to be in operation within the microcosm of Parliament House. Senator Scott Ludlam **said** of this: "I spent two years campaigning to prevent a filter being imposed on the general public, who might now appreciate the irony of a vastly more expansive filter being imposed on MPs."

With the impending release of new gTLDs, the lesson to be learned from the Australian Parliament's ban is that those wanting to operate a domain name registry should do their best to implement appropriate policies and mechanisms to discourage, and to deal with, abuse within their namespace, or risk having their TLD blacklisted by end users.

David Taylor and Cindy Mikul, Hogan Lovells LLP, Paris

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