

**STATEMENT OF DISSENT ON RECOMMENDATION #6 OF  
GNSO'S NEW GTLD REPORT FROM  
THE NON-COMMERCIAL USERS CONSTITUENCY (NCUC)**

20 July 2007

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NCUC supports most of the recommendations in the GNSO's Final Report, but Recommendation #6 is one we cannot support.<sup>1</sup>

We oppose Recommendation #6 for the following reasons:

- 1) It will completely undermine ICANN's efforts to make the gTLD application process predictable, and instead make the evaluation process arbitrary, subjective and political;
- 2) It will have the effect of suppressing free and diverse expression;
- 3) It exposes ICANN to litigation risks;
- 4) It takes ICANN too far away from its technical coordination mission and into areas of legislating morality and public order.

We also believe that the objective of Recommendation #6 is unclear, in that much of its desirable substance is already covered by Recommendation #3. At a minimum, we believe that the words "relating to morality and public order" must be struck from the recommendation.

**1) Predictability, Transparency and Objectivity**

Recommendation #6 poses severe implementation problems. It makes it impossible to achieve the GNSO's goals of predictable and transparent evaluation criteria for new gTLDs.

Principle 1 of the New gTLD Report states that the evaluation process must be "predictable," and Recommendation #1 states that the evaluation criteria must be transparent, predictable, and fully available to applicants prior to their application.

NCUC strongly supports those guidelines. But no gTLD applicant can possibly know in advance what people or governments in a far away land will object to as "immoral" or

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<sup>1</sup> Text of Recommendation #6: "Strings must not be contrary to generally accepted legal norms relating to morality and public order that are enforceable under generally accepted and internationally recognized principles of law. Examples of such principles of law include, but are not limited to, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, intellectual property treaties administered by the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO) and the WTO Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS)."

contrary to “public order.” When applications are challenged on these grounds, applicants cannot possibly know what decision an expert panel – which will be assembled on an ad hoc basis with no precedent to draw on – will make about it.

Decisions by expert panels on “morality and public order” *must* be subjective and arbitrary, because there is no settled and well-established international law regarding the relationship between TLD strings and morality and public order. There is no single “community standard” of morality that ICANN can apply to all applicants in every corner of the globe. What is considered “immoral” in Teheran may be easily accepted in Los Angeles or Stockholm; what is considered a threat to “public order” in China and Russia may not be in Brazil and Qatar.

## **2) Suppression of expression of controversial views**

gTLD applicants will respond to the uncertainty inherent in a vague “morality and public order” standard and lack of clear standards by suppressing and avoiding any ideas that might generate controversy. Applicants will have to invest sizable sums of money to develop a gTLD application and see it through the ICANN process. Most of them will avoid risking a challenge under Recommendation #6. In other words, the presence of Recommendation #6 will result in self-censorship by most applicants.

That policy would strip citizens everywhere of their rights to express controversial ideas because someone else finds them offensive. This policy recommendation ignores international and national laws, in particular freedom of expression guarantees that permit the expression of “immoral” or otherwise controversial speech on the Internet.

## **3) Risk of litigation**

Some people in the ICANN community are under the mistaken impression that suppressing controversial gTLDs will protect it from litigation. Nothing could be further from the truth. By introducing subjective and culturally divisive standards into the evaluation process Recommendation #6 will increase the likelihood of litigation.

ICANN operates under authority from the US Commerce Department. It is undisputed that the US Commerce Department is prohibited from censoring the expression of US citizens in the manner proposed by Recommendation #6. The US Government cannot “contract away” the constitutional protections of its citizens to ICANN any more than it can engage in the censorship itself.

Adoption of Recommendation #6 invites litigation against ICANN to determine whether its censorship policy is compatible with the US First Amendment. An ICANN decision to suppress a gTLD string that would be permitted under US law could and probably would lead to legal challenges to the decision as a form of US Government action.

If ICANN left the adjudication of legal rights up to courts, it could avoid the legal risk and legal liability that this policy of censorship brings upon it.

#### **4) ICANN's mission and core values**

Recommendation #6 exceeds the scope of ICANN's technical mission. It asks ICANN to create rules and adjudicate disputes about what is permissible expression. It enables it to censor expression in domain names that would be lawful in some countries. It would require ICANN and "expert panels" to make decisions about permitting top-level domain names based on arbitrary "morality" judgments and other subjective criteria. Under Recommendation #6, ICANN will evaluate domain names based on ideas about "morality and public order" -- concepts for which there are varying interpretations, in both law and culture, in various parts of the world. Recommendation #6 risks turning ICANN into the arbiter of "morality" and "appropriate" public policy through global rules.

This new role for ICANN conflicts with its intended narrow technical mission, as embodied in its mission and core values. ICANN holds no legitimate authority to regulate in this entirely non-technical area and adjudicate the legal rights of others. This recommendation takes the adjudication of people's rights to use domain names out of the hands of democratically elected representatives and into the hands of "expert panels" or ICANN staff and board with no public accountability.

Besides exceeding the scope of ICANN's authority, Recommendation #6 seems unsure of its objective. It mandates "morality and public order" in domain names, but then lists, as examples of the type of rights to protect, the WTO TRIPS Agreement and all 24 World Intellectual Property (WIPO) Treaties, which deal with economic and trade rights, and have little to do with "morality and public order". Protection for intellectual property rights was fully covered in Recommendation #3, and no explanation has been provided as to why intellectual property rights would be listed again in a recommendation on "morality and public order", an entirely separate concept.

In conclusion Recommendation #6 exceeds ICANN's authority, ignores Internet users' free expression rights, and its adoption would impose an enormous burden on and liability for ICANN. It should not be adopted by the Board of Directors in the final policy decision for new gtlds.