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Who Needs WHOIS Privacy?

By Mark Costlow

To say who needs it, we should first describe what **WHOIS Privacy** is. And that means explaining WHOIS. OK, let's back up. Way up.

The Internet's predecessor was the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network, ARPANET. It was created in the mid 1960s to share information over computer links between research facilities in the US. Early on, they needed a directory to keep track of what computers were connected to the network, where each computer resided, and who was responsible for them.

In the 1970s the Network Information Center (NIC) was established to manage the registry, which was in the form of a **physical book**. The book was created and managed by a single person, **Elizabeth Feinler**. She was the **contact point** to ask questions, add new entries, or make corrections in the 1000-page Resource Handbook for ARPANET. Feinler's group recorded two contacts at each computer node site, for issues technical and administrative. This process and organization was the core of what became the WHOIS database.

By the 1980s, the network was growing too fast to keep track of individual computer names and addresses. The DNS system was created, which is a distributed database of computer names and IP addresses. DNS manages the names we use to navigate the Internet like **google.com**, **swcp.com**, or **newmexicopbs.org**. However, it does not attempt to keep track of any of the humans or organizations responsible for those computers. DNS is vital internet infrastructure, but **WHOIS solves a different problem**. Not "how do I connect my computer to company.com?" but rather, "how do I talk to a technical or administrative human at Company?"

Evolution of WHOIS

From the mid 1980s until 1998, the WHOIS database / service was controlled by a single entity. The stakeholders expanded from just researchers needing to contact other researchers, to domain name registrants, law enforcement, trademark owners, businesses and individuals. In 1998, the international nonprofit organization **Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers** (ICANN) was assigned responsibility for the internet domain name system, including WHOIS.

This change saw the creation of dozens domain registrars, companies that could register new domains for people and business and charge a fee for managing each domain's connection to the global system. Part of that service is submitting and updating the contact information to the WHOIS database.

Among other uses, WHOIS remains the best place to find out if a certain domain name is available or has been snapped up. Sadly, you can't tell by just typing the name into a browser since the owner may not have a web page for it. Two good places to do a WHOIS lookup are **whois.icann.org** and **viewdns.info/whois**.

Thanks to the new fast-moving commercial domain registrars, millions of new domain names were being registered every year. For each one the WHOIS data includes name, address, email, and phone numbers for the domain owner and administrative and technical contacts.

Many concepts and processes for domain names were solidified at this time, such as the fact that a domain name belongs to the entity which owns the intellectual property of the name (e.g. Trademark), not the person who registered it. Often those two parties are one and the same, but now there is a framework for resolving ownership disputes. Dozens of thorny domain issues, are governed by the **ICANN Consensus Policies**.

This new well-organized and openly available database of contact information was immediately abused by spammers. Of course it was. The character of the internet changed dramatically between 1990 and 2000. At the start of that decade, open information sharing was valued, promoted, and expected. The first spam email had not yet been sent. 10 years later the net was crawling with hucksters, grifters and criminals on the make, alert to any opportunity to use the Internet's open nature to separate netizens from their money.

The earliest widely known WHOIS privacy service is **Domains by Proxy**, founded in February 2002 by GoDaddy's founder Bob Parsons to offer proxy registration that hid domain owners' personal data in WHOIS listings. The way it works is the WHOIS records are filled with addresses and phone numbers for Domains by Proxy instead of the domain owner. If someone contacts the company about the domain with a legitimate non-spam request, they pass it on to the domain owner, who can decide whether to respond or not.

This satisfies ICANN's requirement to have the legal representatives of all domains be reachable, while also preserving the privacy of domain owners. There are now a handful of domain proxy companies available to do this. Most domain registrars

partner with one and will streamline the interface to turn privacy on and off as needed. The typical charge to add WHOIS privacy to a domain is $5-10 per year.

ICANN and Privacy

In the "old days" (before 2018) doing a **WHOIS lookup** as described above would tell you everything about a domain's owner, complete with physical addresses, phone numbers, and email addresses. These days the search results will include some basic details like when it was registered and when it will expire if not renewed, but no ownership information.

The **General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR),** the sweeping privacy laws that affect all of the European Union, went into effect in May, 2018. ICANN was forced at that point to allow domain owners to remove their information from public databases, or face ruinous fines. In the same way California emissions laws resulted in cleaner cars for the entire US, Europe's privacy laws have improved privacy for most domain owners worldwide. With some notable exceptions, most domain registrations now have public WHOIS information that looks like this:

```
Domain Name: SWCP.COM
Registrant Name: REDACTED FOR PRIVACY
Registrant Organization: REDACTED FOR PRIVACY
Registrant Street: REDACTED FOR PRIVACY
Registrant City: REDACTED FOR PRIVACY
Registrant State/Province: NM
Registrant Postal Code: REDACTED FOR PRIVACY
Registrant Country: US
Registrant Phone: REDACTED FOR PRIVACY
Registrant Phone Ext:
Registrant Fax: REDACTED FOR PRIVACY
Registrant Fax Ext:
Registrant Email: https://taccess.com/952d8fa5-9654
```

Note that the state and country are still revealed. This is because the GDPR only applies to information that could **identify an individual**, so revealing the general location to this level is allowed.

Who Needs a Proxy?

The new ICANN redaction rules provide most of the privacy that WHOIS Privacy services offer, so one might wonder why the privacy services are still in business. The answer is that it's a matter of degree. The default privacy cloaks a certain amount of data in most situations, but not all data in all situations.

While your information is not generally disclosed, there are provisions for law enforcement or governmental entities to request and receive the true contact details for a domain from domain registrars. It is not an automatic process. They must justify the request. The difference with a privacy service is such services are devoted to privacy and may resist bogus or unfounded requests more strongly than a domain registrar which has many other competing concerns.

One might also consider if a privacy service is more equipped to keep the information secure than a domain registrar. Data leaks and breaches happen all the time, and insiders are often involved. It may be easier to trust a smaller entity focused on protection of this information than a larger one with, again, many competing concerns.

And finally, the default privacy does not include a real proxy service. They may attempt to forward contacts to you, but a true proxy service will offer more concrete assurances to do that.

The final answer to our question, "Who needs this?" is that many people do not. The default GDPR-driven privacy controls are often sufficient. But if your situation demands strict controls on identifying information, or exposing even your state and country is too much, it may be worth the small extra cost.

One last note: some domains prohibit all privacy services. Of note in that list are **.in (India)**, **.au (Australia)**, and **.us (the United States)**. One should consider this carefully before using those top-level domains.

This Month in Ideas & Coffee

- **August 12 6pm-8pm: Intro to CiviCRM** – **CiviCRM** is an open-source Constituent Relationship Management (CRM) platform designed specifically for nonprofits and advocacy groups. It manages contacts, memberships, donations, event registrations, email campaigns, case tracking, and more. It works as a plugin for WordPress, Drupal, and other systems.
- **August 13 6pm-7:30pm:** Phish Proof Founders - come learn about security issues and how to solve them, hosted by Rick Myers of Caldera Cybersecurity Services. Geared towards small business owners, nonprofit leaders, and tech-curious folks coming together to learn.
- **August 19 6pm-7:30pm –** WordPress Work Along - Bring questions, ideas, and conversation about WordPress. If you want to work on your website or show us a problem, please bring your laptop.
- **August 27 6pm-8pm: Intro to Rust** – Join Cliff Matthews for topics on the Rust programming language, from what makes it so robust, to how it works with other frameworks like Tauri.

Check the Ideas & Coffee schedule on the SWCP calendar at **https://swcp.com/calendar** and/or the Meetup site at **https://meetup.com** to find out when new events are happening.

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