A short history of the Catalan campaign to win the *cat* Internet domain, with implications for other minority languages

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Abstract

On 15 September 2005 ICANN approved the first top-level Internet domain to be devoted to a particular human language and culture: *.cat*. This paper describes the history of the Catalan campaign to win the *.cat* domain against political opposition from the former conservative Spanish government and the reluctance of some decision-makers within ICANN circles. While *.cat* creates a precedent for greater use on the Internet of 'minority languages', there are significant hurdles for other candidates for language-based top-level domains. The paper discusses the concomitant factors needed to support the greater use of any minority language on the Internet.

Keywords

sociolinguistics, Catalan nationalism, minority languages, Internet history

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Resum

El 15 de setembre del 2005 la ICANN va aprovar el primer domini d'Internet de primer nivell destinat a una llengua i cultura humanes en particular: *.cat*. Aquest article explica la història de la campanya catalana per aconseguir el domini *.cat* en contra de l'oposició política de l'antic govern conservador espanyol i la resistència d'alguns dels encarregats de prendre les decisions en els cercles de la ICANN. Mentre que el *.cat* crea un precedent per a un major ús de les «llengües minoritàries» a Internet, hi ha importants obstacles per a altres candidats a dominis de primer nivell basats en la llengua. L'article parla dels factors concomitants que calen per a donar suport a un major ús de qualsevol llengua minoritària a Internet.

Paraules clau

sociolingüística, nacionalisme català, llengües minoritàries, història d'Internet

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Peter Gerrand

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Introduction

The Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) announced in September 2005 its approval of the application from the Associació puntCAT (Association for dotCAT) for the creation of a top-level domain name (TLD) *.cat* for the Catalan linguistic and cultural community.

This is the first top-level Internet domain name to be devoted to a particular human language and culture at the global level, as distinct from representing the geopolitical state or entity that includes most of their members (such as *.dk* for Denmark or *.eu* for Europe). This is a historically significant event with strong linguistic and political implications. Indeed, winning the *.cat* TLD was only possible thanks to a campaign that was strategically guided to overcome political, administrative and cultural obstacles.

The campaign was masterminded and led by an exceptional individual, Amadeu Abril i Abril. He is a law lecturer at the Ramon Llull University in Barcelona, an attorney-at-law in competition law, IT law and distribution contracts, and has worked for the European Commission's Directorate General for Competition Policy in Brussels. He is the only Catalan and one of only two Spaniards to have been a member of ICANN's Board of Directors (from 1999 to June 2003), and was active in establishing the Catalan domain name registrar Nominàlia and the CORE Consortium of International Internet Registrars, both in 1997.[1]

According to Amadeu Abril,[2] the campaign for "a TLD for our people" began in 1996, after Jon Postel, the co-ordinator of the Internet's numbering and addressing allocations prior to ICANN, issued a discussion paper (Postel, 1996) on the future of the Internet domain name system, opening up the possibility of additional TLDs.

A campaign was launched in 1996 to seek a TLD for Catalonia, with Abril one of the participants. The Catalan Autonomous (regional) Parliament was persuaded to consider a motion to seek *.ct* as the TLD for Catalonia, and voted unanimously in favour.

As a consequence, a civil servant from the Catalonian Autonomous Government wrote formally to the Maintenance Agency for the International Organization for Standardization (ISO)'s standard 3166 (Country Codes)[www1] requesting allocation of *.ct*, but the request was rebuffed, as Catalonia does not qualify as an independent country, being a region of Spain. The *.ct* protagonists realized that it would be impossible to get official support from the Government of Spain for a separate country code, as that would be tantamount to accepting Catalonia as being a separate nation state — an exceptionally sensitive issue in Spanish politics over the past 300 years.

Abril remembers that the protagonists then split into two camps: those who would prefer to lose, rather than give up their vision of a separate Catalan nation-state, and "were used to reinforcing their sense of national identity through having someone as the enemy, whether that be Madrid or whoever" and those "who look for a way around the wall". Abril belonged to the second camp.

Moves to allow new top-level domains: The birth of ICANN

In 1996 and 1997 Abril was active in founding the international CORE Council of Registrars and working with the International Ad-Hoc Committee. This Committee was set up to develop a process for introducing competition into the registration of Internet domain names, once the Virginian company Network Solutions Inc.'s (NSI) five-year contract as monopoly registrar for *.com*, *.net* and *.org* expired in 1998 (Postel, 1996).

Unfortunately for CORE, the U.S. White House announced an 18-month moratorium on the process, and finally the U.S. Department of Commerce issued a Green Paper in January and a White Paper in June 1998, leading to the founding in November 1998 of the ICANN.[www2] Under a memorandum of understanding with the U.S. Department of Commerce (ICANN, 1999), ICANN was mandated to manage the ongoing technical development of the Internet's Domain Name System (DNS), including the licensing of international domain name registries and registrars under a more open and competitive regime. In April 1999 CORE[www3] became one of the first five international registrars licensed by ICANN to compete with NSI in the licensing of second-level *.com*, *.net* and *.org* domain names.

In November 1999 Abril joined the ICANN Board as a nominee of the Domain Name Supporting Organization, one of ICANN's key constituencies. From that point on he was able to use his increasingly intimate knowledge of ICANN policies, politics and personalities to guide the campaign for a Catalan TLD.

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1. Abril's formal biography can be found at http://www.icann.org/biog/abriliabril.htm, accessed at 11 November 2005.
2. I interviewed Amadeu Abril in Barcelona on 21 September 2005 on the history of the Catalan campaign to win a TLD for their language and culture, and he confirmed all the quotations in this paper by e-mail on 3 November 2005. I have also checked key events against data on the ICANN web site at www.icann.org and with Madrid and Barcelona newspapers, and consulted other correspondents who were actively involved in ICANN's decision-making processes during this period.

[www1]: http://www.iso.org
[www2]: http://www.icann.org/
[www3]: http://www.corenic.org/

Peter Gerrand

In 2000 ICANN opened its first selection round for additional generic Top-Level Domains (gTLDs), the first move to extend the initial set of eight TLDs (*.arpa*, *.edu*, *.gov*, *.com*, *.mil*, *.org*, *.net* and *.int*) created in 1984 at the birth of the domain name system. This selection round was cautiously described by ICANN as a 'proof of concept' exercise (ICANN, 2000).

The Catalan group decided not to take part in this round. "I was convinced we would have no chance", said Abril. "There would be a large number of proposals, and ICANN would only choose a small number of gTLDs. All the difficult proposals would be put aside. Also I was a member of the ICANN Board. This would have put the rest of the Board in a difficult position. If the rest of the Board did vote in favour of such a proposal, it would have looked like insider dealing." (Abril, 2005)

Transforming *.ct* to *.cat*: "From the passport to the dictionary"

In November 2000 ICANN selected seven new gTLDs (*.aero*, *.biz*, *.coop*, *.info*, *.museum*, *.name*, *.pro*), introducing the new category of 'sponsored TLDs' such as *.aero*, *.coop* and *.museum*. A 'sponsored TLD' (sTLD) is subject to eligibility conditions imposed by a sponsoring organization, licensed by ICANN to manage the registration of domain names under that sTLD, under broad powers delegated by ICANN. By contrast an 'unsponsored TLD' (uTLD) — such as *.com* or *.biz* or *.name* — is subject to eligibility conditions fully controlled by ICANN. A sponsoring organization "should address the needs and interests of a clearly defined community (the Sponsored TLD Community), which can benefit from establishment of a TLD operating under a policy formulation environment in which the community would participate" (ICANN, 2003b).

ICANN published a Request for Proposals for new sTLDS (ICANN, 2003a) on 24 June 2003 — Abril's last month on the ICANN Board. The Catalan group was well prepared.

Back in 2001, Abril had canvassed the idea of redefining the Catalan interest group:

"What are we? A nation? A region? On the Internet we are a *community of interest.* After all, the main means of communication in the Internet is via the written language." (Abril, 2005)

Abril and others then sought to develop a formal association, Associació puntCAT, whose members would all be organizational entities (not individuals or commercial corporations) supporting Catalan culture. This would need to be global in reach, extending beyond the traditional *Països Catalans* (Catalan-speaking lands)

in Spain (Catalonia, Valencia and the Balearic Islands), France (Roussillon), Andorra and Italy (Alghero in Sardinia). Its chief and foundation supporter would be the ultimate authority on Catalan language and culture, the Institut d'Estudis Catalans (Institute of Catalan Studies) — the Catalan equivalent of the French or Spanish royal academies.

Associació puntCAT (hereafter called puntCAT) was founded on 23 November 2001. More than ninety additional supporting organizations were mobilized around the world.

puntCAT sought a non-confrontational way of gaining support, since language was to be the most important element in the argument. The *.ct* domain as a political concept would have excluded Andorra, Roussillon, Valencia, etc., whereas *.cat*, as a language-based cultural concept, is inclusive. According to Abril, "our clever solution was 'to change the passport for the dictionary'."

And 'cat' is the international code for Catalan, following the ISO Standard 639-2 for three-letter codes for human languages.

Abril recalled the arguments he used in the discussions held with ICANN staff and directors.

"ICANN asked: 'Why do you need a Top-Level Domain?' It is true that a lower level domain would have technically sufficed. But a TLD puts you in the top league. You are not then just a regional team. *Prestige* and glamour are important for sustaining a living language. It is important to demonstrate that Catalan, with its ten million speakers, is a top-division language.

Secondly, it was a matter of *identity*. For Catalans in the nineteenth century, a critical step was having our own literature — and later in that century, our own newspapers. In the early twentieth century a critical step was having Catalan schools, because without the schools our language would have died out. Then the next battle was to have radio and TV channels in Catalan. Books, newspapers, schools, radio and TV are still important. But in the twenty-first century the Internet is also important.

Thirdly, a TLD gives *visibility* to the language. Seen from Reston or Seattle you are on the map. They think: Oh, we should also publish a version of our software in Catalan.

Fourthly, it gives us the opportunity to *aggregate* our cultural activities on the Internet." (Abril, 2005)

In March 2004 puntCAT submitted a formal application to ICANN for a *.cat* sponsored TLD (Associació puntCAT, 2004). The ICANN Request for Proposals (ICANN, 2003a) of 15 December 2003 did not appear to anticipate or encourage proposals for language-based special interest groups. The term 'sponsored TLD' is so broadly defined that ICANN approved *.xxx* in principle as a new sTLD.[3]

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3. "ICANN Approves *.xxx* Sponsored Top-Level Domain Application", at http://www.icmregistry.com/ICMPressRelease.html, accessed 30 December 2005; and private communication to the author from Bruce Tonkin, 10 November 2005.

The selection criteria put emphasis on demonstrating "broad-based support from the community it is intended to represent." puntCAT was able to demonstrate 68,000 individual messages of support, as well as a supporting membership of over 90 affiliated Catalan cultural organizations from around the world. The proposal drew on Abril's experience with the CORE registry to meet the selection criteria for a sound business model (to ensure financial stability) and for a sound technical strategy (for operational stability). But Abril stresses that the application was an extensive team effort, drawing upon active support from numerous Web designers, technical advisors and translators as well as from banks and governments.

puntCAT's formal application to ICANN for *.cat* defined its community of interest as follows:

"The *.cat* TLD is intended for the Catalan linguistic and cultural community, *i.e.* for those identifying themselves and/or their activities with the promotion of those areas on the Internet." (Associació puntCAT, 2004)

The application cited studies showing that Catalan was between the nineteenth and twenty-third most common language used on the Internet — but dispersed over many ccTLDs and gTLDs (Associació puntCAT, 2004; Mas, 2003).
The *.cat* registry would be controlled by Fundació puntCAT (puntCAT Foundation), to be created as the successor to the Associació puntCAT, and which would be

"a non-for-profit, non-partisan [organization], representative of the whole community. Participation in the policy-making procedures and election of the Trustees will be open to all registrants in a structured way that will prevent any given sector of activity or special interest to prevail in the long run. It is not a pre-existing entity from that community trying to evolve into new fields of activity, but a platform created by the community itself for the sole purpose of collectively managing the *.cat* TLD." (Associació puntCAT, 2004)

The application provided a list of 67 supporting Catalan cultural institutions, federations, centres, professional associations and learned societies, from Europe, North, South and Central America, and Australia.

Political interference — and support

The *.cat* application was submitted in time for the ICANN deadline of 16 March 2004 — five days after the tragic Madrid train bombings, and two days after the Spanish national elections.

These elections brought a change of national government, in part because of the outgoing Aznar government's attempts to gain political advantage by blaming the bombings on the Basque terrorist organization ETA, contrary to rapidly leaked advice from its national police force that the massacre was the work of an Al Qaida-like group.

ICANN advised Abril that the outgoing Spanish Government was against the *.cat* idea. Apparently the Aznar government, supposedly operating purely in caretaker mode, had sent an emissary to Washington to attempt to persuade the U.S. Departments of State and Commerce to block the *.cat* application. But Abril realized that with the change of government puntCAT had a chance.

As a lawyer, Abril was well aware that the Spanish constitution requires the national government to

"Protect all Spaniards and all the peoples of Spain in the exercising of human rights, their cultures and traditions, *languages* and institutions." [my translation; italics used to add emphasis]

Abril commented: "In the new government, the Spanish Secretariat of State for Telecommunications (including Internet policies) was moved to the Industry, Tourism and Commerce portfolio, which by good luck was headed by a Catalan, José Montilla. [...] He was the first politician to understand the major difference between the *.cat* community language proposal and a new ccTLD (country code TLD) proposal. So he said no to *.ct* but yes to *.cat*." (Abril, 2005; confirmed in *La Vanguardia,* 2004)

Through Montilla's help, puntCAT was able to gain a formal letter of support from the Spanish Government, as well as another from the Government of Andorra. ICANN had asked for these letters of support because they are the only two governments where Catalan is an official language either at a regional level (Spain) or at a national level (Andorra).

In May 2004 ICANN Chairman Vint Cerf and ICANN Board Liaison member John Klensin visited Barcelona as part of INET 2004, and participated in a public meeting to discuss *.cat*. According to Abril, both Cerf and Klensin were at this time resistant to the notion of an Internet community being defined by language and culture, for the purposes of an sTLD.

ICANN's Independent Evaluation Panel produced its report on ten new sTLD proposals in time for ICANN's Board meetings in December 2004 and January and February 2005. They decided that the following five proposals passed all of ICANN's selection criteria: *.cat*, *.jobs*, *.mobi*, *.travel* and *.xxx*.[4] At its February 2005 meeting, the ICANN Board empowered its President and General Council to enter into negotiations with puntCAT on *.cat* (ICANN, 2005).

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4. Private communication to the author from Bruce Tonkin, 10 November 2005.

Then ICANN started worrying about the precedent implied in approving *.cat*, because it was seen as a precedent for the allocation of a TLD for a minority group that might be associated with terrorism. Abril was not asked about ETA or Al Qaida, but he was asked by members of the ICANN Board: "What if we received a proposal for *.nazi* or for *.islam*?" His response was simple: "Say no."

He was then asked: "But doesn't *.cat* create a precedent for thousands of minority languages, all wanting a TLD?" Abril's response was:

> "You can set thresholds to meet ICANN's goal of financial viability for a registry. How many minority languages are spoken in more than one country? Of these, how many are written languages? Of these, how many have at least, say, five million speakers? You might find perhaps 15 languages satisfying those criteria. That is not too many to introduce as language-based sTLDs." (Abril, 2005)

The ICANN Board considered the Independent Evaluation Panel's report between November 2004 and its formal meeting on 13 January 2005, and on 18 February voted in favour of *.cat*, and instructed their staff to negotiate a contract with the Fundació puntCAT (ICANN, 2005). But they refrained from publicising their decision.

By the end of July 2005 the contract between ICANN and the new Fundació puntCAT had been negotiated and was finalised. But at the same time ICANN's CEO, Paul Twomey, told the Board that he needed to consult the Spanish and Andorran Governments to be sure of their support for *.cat*. According to Abril, Twomey wrote to them in August, and both governments replied by early September confirming their stated positions (Abril, 2005).

As a result ICANN made public its decision approving the new *.cat* TLD on 15 September 2005.[5]

Implementation of *.cat*

Amadeu Abril has estimated the cost of the *.cat* campaign as about €150,000 (about US$180,000) over 18 months. This included the $45,000 non-refundable ICANN fee, legal fees and travel, but not the considerable *pro bono* contributions of the puntCAT contributors. It also includes the cost of the premium for the $1 million letter of credit required by ICANN, and provided by the Catalan savings bank La Caixa, which was borne by puntCAT members (Abril, 2005).

The *.cat* registry started by February 2006. Its registry platform is provided by CORE, who provide the same registry service to the *.aero* and *.museum* sTLDs, at a commercial fee. The *.cat* name servers are provided by the Catalan Supercomputer Centre (CESCA),[www4] and by the Spanish, Andorran, German and Swiss ccTLD registries, as well as by the ISC F-root name server in California — free!

Implications for other languages

There are reportedly more than 6,800 human languages and dialects in use today (Grimes and Grimes, 2000), each one providing both a means of communication and a sense of cultural identity, including a distinct historical context, for its speakers. But of course the numbers of speakers of these languages varies hugely. Only 122 of these languages have more than one million speakers, 83 more than five million, and only 60 with more than 10 million speakers (Associació puntCAT, 2004).

Most of the 100 most spoken languages are also extensively read and written, providing access to distinct literatures, histories and other cultural resources, as well as providing (for the more fortunate readers, writers and speakers) the ability to participate in relevant economic, administrative, religious and judicial systems, as well as within relevant communities.

The Internet is serving as a cost-effective means of communication by e-mail or blogging in any of these languages, given the power of the underlying Unicode standard to encode, store and transfer all the characters used in all the known languages of the world. However the visibility on the Internet of many of the 'top 100 living languages', and the cultural diversity they manifest, is not obvious to the average Anglophone Internet user. To what extent are these languages used on public Web sites?

Measuring the usage of human languages on the Internet is a very inexact science, but Table 1, based on work by Guinovart (2003), shows the relative proportions of 45 languages identifiable by the search engine Alltheweb amongst the 729 million Web pages it had trawled by 26 March 2002. Regrettably the current Google and Alltheweb search engines only offer up to 36 language choices, which makes it impossible to repeat the experiment to get more up-to-date snapshots of the Web in the same languages.

ICANN's approval of *.cat* provides a precedent for other single-language communities, if they so wish to apply for their own sponsored Top-Level Domains (sTLDs). And they need not be restricted to minority languages.

If ICANN maintains the same evaluation criteria for future sTLD proposals, then the following criteria will be significant hurdles:

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5. See the ICANN Board resolution of 15 September 2005 at http://www.icann.org/minutes/resolutions-15sep05.htm, accessed 30 December 2005.

[www4]: http://www.cesca.es/

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Table 1: Languages on the Internet

Rank	Language	Pages	% total	Rank	Language	Pages	% total
1	**English**	**442M**	**60.727**	24	Slovenian	681K	0.093
2	German	51.2M	7.035	25	Greek	648K	0.089
3	Japanese	43.2M	5.926	26	Indonesian	597K	0.082
4	Chinese	26.2M	3.600	27	Ukrainian	588K	0.081
5	French	24.6M	3.379	28	Croatian	521K	0.071
6	Korean	20.4M	2.799	29	Hebrew	514K	0.071
7	Russian	19.6M	2.689	30	Icelandic	441K	0.061
8	**Spanish**	**16.4M**	**2.254**	31	Romanian	419K	0.058
9	Italian	15.1M	2.077	32	Arabic	328K	0.052
10	Portuguese	12.5M	1.718	33	Lithuanian	328K	0.045
11	Dutch	11.2M	1.533	34	Bulgarian	319K	0.044
12	Polish	7.46M	1.024	35	Malay	194K	0.027
13	Swedish	6.56M	0.900	36	Latvian	156K	0.021
14	Czech	5.94M	0.815	**37**	**Galician**	**99.0K**	**0.014**
15	Danish	5.03M	.690	**38**	**Basque**	**80.3K**	**0.011**
16	Norwegian	3.64M	0.499	39	Afrikaans	71.9K	0.010
17	Finnish	3.02M	0.414	40	Vietnamese	48.4K	0.007
18	Slovakian	1.97M	0.270	41	Byelorussian	43.6K	0.006
19	Hungarian	1.91M	0.262	42	Welsh	42.7K	0.006
20	Turkish	1.51M	0.208	43	Faroese	37.3K	0.005
21	Thai	855K	0.117	44	Albanian	33.0K	0.005
22	Estonian	811K	0.111	45	Friesian	21.0K	0.003
23	**Catalan**	**681K**	**0.094**		*All the above*	*729M*	*100.00*

"3. [...] Proposals will receive a higher score the more value that would be added to the DNS by launching the proposed sTLD, and the more it is clear that a top level domain name is required to achieve the stated objectives." (ICANN, 2003b)

This criterion would make it very difficult for a language community whose language is already associated with a country name and hence an existing country code, *e.g.,* Italian with Italy (*.it*), French with France (*.fr*), to be assigned a new TLD, given ICANN's desire to minimise the release of new TLDs, even if an argument is mounted for a country-independent global language.

"4. [...] Given that choices need to be made, all other things being equal, greater weight will be given to sTLDs that will serve larger user communities and attract a greater number of registrants." (ICANN, 2003b)

This criterion will make it difficult for language communities with fewer than one million users to get a high score.

Lastly ICANN's requirement for a non-refundable fee of US$45,000, to fund the costs of their evaluation, plus the additional much larger costs of a campaign for selection, will be a deterrent for the smaller and poorer minority language communities.

Conclusions

The history of the campaign to win *.cat* clearly began as an expression of traditional Catalan nationalism, as shown by the initial preference for a country code *.ct* that had no chance of being accepted by the ISO Standard 3166 or by ICANN. Having been thwarted on that choice, the more astute protagonists developed the idea of 'changing the passport for the dictionary', putting aside any frustration with current political boundaries in Spain for the goal of achieving a truly global cultural focus in cyberspace

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for Catalan. Whereas support for *.ct* would have necessarily been limited to the region of Catalonia, the *.cat* concept was enthusiastically supported by 68,000 Catalan-speaking individuals and 98 organizations worldwide.

But the last hurdles to be faced were the cultural ignorance of some key individuals in the ICANN decision-making processes, and the sensitivities of ICANN Board members to the known sensitivities of the U.S. Government, which has the ability to veto ICANN decisions. The same political sensitivities and cultural limitations will face other language communities wishing to use the *.cat* precedent to win sponsored Top-Level Domains for their own *global* language-based culture.

Epilogue

Associació puntCAT launched its registration of *.cat* domain names on 13 February 2006 with a carefully staged process, aimed at protecting the names of Catalan cultural institutions and other entities active in promoting Catalan culture, up until 21 April 2006. Examples of eligible organizations include Catalan-promoting schools, cultural organizations, radio stations, newspapers, sporting clubs, and public administrations. This staged 'sunrise' process — similar to processes used when launching more commercial TLDs such as *.biz* and *.info*, designed to protect the intellectual property of established trademark holders — also allowed early registration (from 20 February) for pre-existing Catalan language websites and (from 27 February) for the remainder of the 68,000 founding supporters of the puntCAT bid. A block grant of €200,000 from the Generalitat (Autonomous Government of Catalonia) has funded the early registration of public institutions in Catalonia. The online newspaper *VilaWeb* reports an early application from the City of Alghero (Sardinia).

Amadeu Abril, working full-time as CEO of puntCAT during the sunrise registration phases, reports that 9,000 applications were received in the first week. All registrations must take place via licensed ICANN registrars who have signed up with puntCAT; eight had committed by early March 2006.

From 21 April, the registry will be open to receive applications from all other sources. One suspects that there will be a certain friendly rivalry to outdo the number of domain names registered with the other new sponsored TLDs.

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