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The Tiniest Dots on the Web

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SYDNEY, Australia -- Ever visited a website ending in dot-hm, dot-bv or dot-sj?

It's unlikely. But that doesn't mean they can't exist.

These three top-level domains (TLDs) were assigned in the Internet's early days to a series of frozen, isolated, largely uninhabited islands pounded by polar winds in the Arctic and sub-Antarctic. After more than a quarter-century of fevered transformation of the Internet, from a defense network to mass communication medium, these TLDs remain as sleepy, isolated and forgotten as the islands they refer to.

Now, as new top-level domains such as dot-biz, dot-info, dot-museum, dot-name, dot-coop and dot-pro jockey for new registrants -- and countries such as Tuvalu (dot-tv) cash in on the random luck of their two-letter monikers -- administrators for these three TLDs seem disinterested in the lure of lucre, even if it were to dangle in front of them.

Of the trio, dot-hm stands for Australia's Heard and McDonald Islands -- two islands in the sub-Antarctic Indian Ocean. Apart from the random fishing vessel, the islands are only visited every few years by scientific research boats.

Scientists monitoring volcanic eruptions on Heard do so by requesting commercial airliner pilots flying between Perth and Harare or Johannesburg to look out their cockpit windows en route across the oceanic expanse and report what they see. That's how isolated the two islands are.

Meanwhile, dot-bv stands for Norway's Bouvet Island, located in the South Atlantic off South Africa. And dot-sj stands for the Svalbard and the Jan Mayen islands in the Arctic Ocean north of Norway itself. Of the five, only Jan Mayen and Svalbard have any people.

In the early 1970s, the Internet's early managers faced a dilemma: How to allocate global, top-level domains without stepping into every unsettled political, territorial and sovereignty dispute on Earth. To keep things apolitical, they opted to follow the International Organization for Standardization ISO 3166 [list](#), which gives an easily identifiable two-letter code to each country as well as a few oddball sub-units, including these three.

Australia's 412-square-kilometer Heard and McDonald Islands were included on the ISO list because -- even though uninhabited -- scientific research took place on them. Bouvet and Svalbard were included for similar reasons. Jan Mayen was included because it had a weather station.

This somewhat random inclusion in the ISO list -- given that hundreds of islands could satisfy those same criteria -- meant Heard/McDonald, Bouvet and Jan Mayen/Svalbard were issued top-level domains. With few other exceptions, nearly all other two-letter monikers on the [ISO list](#) refer to real countries, or at least inhabited places. These are entities such as Russia (dot-ru), China (dot-cn), France(dot-fr) and Afghanistan (dot-af).

Might there be some unrealized financial value in this odd technical legacy? After all, others have made the most of the various two-letter manna that have fallen on them from cyberspace. Tuvalu heads the class with its catchy TLD [dot-tv](#).

Since April 2000, some 450,000 dot-tv domain names have been sold, says Aviva Rosenthal, spokesman for Dot-tv Corporation, which handles registrations on behalf of Tuvalu and periodically sends its leaders a check. Others, including the Cocos Islands (dot-cc), Turkmenistan (dot-tm) and Niue (dot-nu), are attempting to follow Tuvalu's lead.

But Norway, for its part, doesn't want to play.

"As for allowing other entities to buy the TLDs, the Norwegian authorities do not wish to commercialize our domain resources," says [NORID](#), the entity that handles registrations for addresses under dot-no, dot-bv and dot-sj. "The current thinking is that applicants can use dot-no."

Already, NORID has turned down a number of requests by applicants in the Netherlands to register domain names under dot-bv. In Dutch, dot-bv means "Limited Company," generally written as "Ltd." in English.

Alf Hansen, who manages the comatose dot-bv and dot-sj domains, says Norway might one day allow registrations for organizations that exist physically on the islands, either scientific or civilian.

But that could take a while. The 58-square kilometer Bouvet, for one, is unoccupied and likely to stay that way. For its part, Jan Mayen still has little more than a weather station.

Svalbard might be more promising. It has roughly 2,300 people, most working in coal mines on the 62,049 square kilometer island group. Located at 78 degrees north latitude, it forms the northernmost outpost of Norway. But so far, people there have been too busy digging coal to ask about raising the profile of their TLD.

Meanwhile, in Canberra, Australia, Ed Sweeney, the engineer in charge of handling the dot-hm TLD, just ignores phone calls or e-mails inquiring about dot-hm. A few people have shown interest in sub domains under dot-hm. But they appear to have concluded that it's more trouble than it's worth. One of these was Doug Van Pelt, editor of Austin, Texas-based [HM Magazine](#), a bi-monthly covering the Christian rock music genre.

"I seriously thought about choosing the domain name HM for our website, as our magazine title is simply HM and our official business name is HM," he said. "But those two letters alone just didn't define us as well as the title 'HM Magazine.'

"We think most people will search for us using the words HM Magazine, and not simply HM," he said.