

A Case for Predictable Driving (and what this has to do with Alternate Roots)

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When the average person drives, they like to think about anything but driving. When time permits, people prefer to call clients or listen to music. Maybe even hum a little tune. The longest drives can quickly pass in quietness while thinking or totally absorbed in music. The best drives are when you can remember nothing about the road, the driving conditions, or the behaviour of other drivers, but recollect happy thoughts of your loved ones, or meditations in privacy, or the northern lights you saw.

Then, there are days when your stomach is in knots, your wrath nearly uncontrollable. Someone has climbed up your tail at 80 miles an hour. He wants to pass you but there is a line a of twenty cars behind a lane-blocker in front, and you are supposed to get into the slow lane so that he can climb up the bumper of the next car in front of you. Some jerk takes offence at your taking offence and everyone becomes quickly enraged.

This roller coaster of emotions leads to thoughts about the role of rules in life. How obedience to some rules increase the convenience of everyone, even when some do not obey the rules all the time; how rules at some mechanical level of life increase the time available for doing the important things. We trade obedience at some level for freedom at another, which we deem more important.

Suppose you are in a city with different pedestrian habits. Out West pedestrians are sacred cows, and you can't run them over. Eastern pedestrians (who also can't be run over) obey a different set of rules. Back east, everyone jaywalks but the pedestrians acknowledge the rights of drivers by getting out of the way. Everyone plays a kind of dodgeball. Western pedestrians respect the traffic lights and don't jaywalk. On both East Coast and West the real rule is: don't hit the pedestrians. However, one driving culture limits the application of the rule to liability for damages and criminal penalties if you hit a pedestrian, while the other insists on a code of deference to pedestrians in addition to all the legal liabilities. So in some places there is both a code of law, and a social code of politeness, and you have to obey both.

Interestingly, visitors to either the West or East Coast driving cultures can readily tell that people have internalized a set of rules, and that their "home-rules" are close enough that they can figure out how to treat pedestrians in Los Angeles if they come from New York, and vice versa. In either driving culture people are clearly obeying a set of rules that work for them, and you can learn them quickly if you have been taught to drive in North America.

The goal of driving in most places is to get there with the least amount of aggravation, and damage to the car. But, mostly, the goal in places like Norway, Ontario,

California or most western societies for that matter, is to reach the destination without having to think at all.

One of the chief factors in reducing the amount of thought you have to give to anything is whether you are acting in a common framework of rules. This is immediately apparent when you go to South America. For North American (and most north European) drivers, the question that arises when you sit in the back of an Argentinian taxi is whether they have different rules, or whether they have no rules, or a much smaller set of circumstances governed by rules. If they have different rules, they could be learned. But if they have no rules, then driving is a series of instantaneous negotiations based on the value of your car, the value of his, your respective moods, as well as the legal rules of liability. Rule-based behaviour reduces the amount of uncertainty.

The purpose of general impersonal rules is to get ego conflict out of driving. We don't want to waste our psychic resources fuming about traffic. Even in the most rule-observing society here will always be someone who manifestly does something incredibly stupid. Sometimes that person is us. But just as clearly there other societies that would wonder what the matter was with a culture where driving was an impersonal affair subject to strongly internalized rules. The burden we pay for internalized rules is a highly conformed citizenry.

Driving is not merely a set of formal rules; it is also a set of rules that are socially defended and enforced.

The analogy that needs to be made about driving cultures and domain name roots is the degree to which they are *social conventions*. The argument for a unique global root is at its heart a desire for people to share a convention, so that they can spend their time on more important things.

The arguments made by Stuart Lynn, President of ICANN, for the need for a unique global root have a good deal of merit. But, it does not help that he is preaching to a convinced bunch of net-heads. The instincts of a good portion of the audience are to resist the message. In light of this, a different way of seeing the issue is needed. A way that makes the alternative root crowd seem less like a noble company of martyrs and more like a bunch of Argentinian drivers.

One can easily go into the guts of your computer and cause your machine to resolve to alternative roots. It is less difficult to do this than it is to learn how to use a spreadsheet program. That it is so easy to do this, and that so few have chosen to do so needs to be taken into better account by the alternative root crowd. The use of domain names is a social convention. If a new and compelling system came along, like ICQ or some other successor, the DNS could be wiped out within months, as people shifted to the newer system. The domain name phenomenon would go the way of pedal-operated sewing machines, as indeed it probably will within our lifetimes.

In the meantime people want to go where they want, with as little aggravation in getting there as possible. This seems to be the real choice being made by those who support the globally unique root. When people use the DNS, they are unaware that they are making

an arcane technical choice that could be changed overnight by a few large ISPs, or by the choices of millions of computer users. They appreciate that what they are doing as a mindless following of a social convention allows them to navigate to what they want. They do not want to think about the route. They do not want to engage in disputes with other drivers. They do not want to join a cult that knows the secrets behind the regulation of traffic lights, and even their desire to know where photo radar has been installed is strictly economic.

Learning all kinds of things about the phone system is fascinating, but most people use the device without the slightest knowledge of how it works. There is no “Dial Tone Monthly”. Esoteric knowledge is a burden for some people. Their approach is that things should work. In an ideal world, one would not need to know such information. We learn about domain names resolving to IP addresses only because we have to, not because there is a vast intrinsic interest by normal people in this process.

The world of computers is too new, too subject to rapid change, to be as useful as it might be for many people. An enormous amount of learning has been going on in the world to get people adapted to software formats, plug-ins, patches, downloads, viruses, printer cables, upgrades, keyboards, modems, and operating systems. Our social learning about computers is far behind the capability of the computer. And, our desire to learn is reduced by the knowledge that most of what we know will be obsolete within five years. So why should we spend time and effort to learn yet another thing? Should each Internet user be required to have a competent understanding of how to navigate the globally unique root of the DNS?

Even if they did, what do we get when we get there? What is so important to the alternative root crowd that only ICANN’s failure, and the ruin of its reputation, would accomplish their goals? It seems to this observer that the alternative root crowd has assumed the rightness of its position and failed to take the argument to the people who could appreciate it. No one has presented (at least to our knowledge) a coherent well-argued case that the overthrow of the management of the DNS will lead us anywhere that sensible people would want to go, at a price that we would wish to pay.

Because, if the DNS is as much a social convention as driving, this suggests the need both for a conventional authority, and a process whereby that conventional authority is to be made manifest. How are these conventions to be developed? ICANN at least proposes an answer, which is that a process can be devised that more or less satisfies that participants that no rules will be made which absolutely violate their interests. There is no final resolution of some of the issues inside the DNS, nor can there ever be. The alternatives are a treaty-based organization, governance by something more directly emanating from the US government or a new organization founded on the consensus of relevant Internet stakeholders. One would want to see such arguments frankly made, but they have not been.

In the meantime, users of the resources of the Internet want to be bothered as little as possible with the politics of DNS, just as they also make a collective choice not to be aggravated in traffic by collectively enforced rules about driving. Some people may actually favour Argentinian driving. Some may favour less rule-bound behaviour, more personal negotiation through traffic, less impersonality, more traffic accidents, higher insurance rates,

and more road rage as the alternative to a rule-based internalized socially-enforced conformity that requires us to behave like automatons while driving.

Yet still more of us are convinced that rule-bound behaviour, internalized though our consciousness, and socially enforced through driving conventions, backed up by authority, is the way to reduce accidents, reduce insurance costs, and spend less time thinking about traffic. So it is with the DNS. We have a right to choose a social convention and to maintain it through political action. Like good manners, we want the usefulness of a social convention. A social convention is not a supreme good; it suffices that is useful in reducing conflicts and misunderstandings. When the domain name system becomes arbitrary, obsolete, or restrictive of choices that matter to us, we will abandon it, but not before a consensus has been reached that there is a better way to go.