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Celebrity Domain Names: ICANN Arbitration Pitfalls and Pragmatic Advice

P. Landon Moreland and Colby B. Springer[†]

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Celebrity Domain Names and Cybersquatting 385

II. The Uniform Dispute Resolution Policy 386

III. *Julia Roberts*: A Model Celebrity Domain Name Dispute 387

IV. Pitfalls Under the UDRP 389
- A. No Trademark Rights in a Name 389
- B. Legitimate Rights by a Third Party: Fan Sites and Product Sales 390
- C. Lack of Bad Faith: Inaction and Insults 392

V. The Future Application of the UDRP to Celebrity Domain Names 394

VI. Conclusion 395

I. CELEBRITY DOMAIN NAMES AND CYBERSQUATTING

Celebrities are no different than any other business client when it comes to the Internet. An Internet presence is an important tool in marketing the client's services, providing an outlet for client-related merchandise and providing fans with information about their favorite star. Unfortunately, celebrities, like many others in the entertainment industry, have been slow to establish an Internet presence. Many have found that domain names that incorporate their personal or

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professional names have already been registered to unrelated third parties.

Prior to the establishment of ICANN Arbitration,[1] recovery of celebrity domain names was an expensive and potentially lengthy process, frequently involving litigation. Making recovery even more difficult was many celebrities' desire to avoid litigation and the inevitable bad press it created. ICANN Arbitration provides an inexpensive and extremely quick means of recovering a domain name.[2] In addition, celebrities have come to enjoy a very high success rate in arbitration.[3]

However, practitioners should be aware of recent ICANN Arbitration rulings in celebrity cases that present potential pitfalls to successful recovery of a domain name. Although arbitrators are not required to follow precedent set in other arbitration rulings, most rely on those previous decisions.[4] Below is a brief explanation of the requirements for the transfer of a domain name under the ICANN Uniform Dispute Resolution Policy (UDRP) and a discussion of a 'model' celebrity domain name dispute. An analysis of select cases presenting potential pitfalls for practitioners follows. A look ahead to the future of celebrity domain name arbitration concludes this discussion.

II. THE UNIFORM DISPUTE RESOLUTION POLICY

A complainant must establish three *prima facie* elements to warrant transfer or cancellation of a domain name under the UDRP.

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[1] The UDRP was adopted and implemented by ICANN October 24, 1999 and is incorporated by reference into the Registration Agreement of all <.com>, <.net> and <.org> top-level domain names. UNIFORM DOMAIN NAME DISPUTE RESOLUTION POLICY (hereinafter THE POLICY) n.1 and ¶ 1 (October 24, 1999), *at* http://www.icann.org/udrp/udrp-policy-24oct99.htm.

[2] Absent exceptional circumstances, the entire arbitration process should take less than forty days. Once the Complainant submits and serves a claim under the ICANN policy, the Respondent has twenty days to respond. Once a response has been filed and a Panel appointed, a decision is to be delivered to the domain name registrar within fourteen days. Within three days of delivery to the registrar, notice of the decision is also to be provided to the parties. *See, generally,* RULES FOR UNIFORM DOMAIN NAME DISPUTE RESOLUTION POLICY (hereinafter THE RULES) (October 24, 1999), *at* http://www.icann.org/udrp/udrp-rules-24oct99.htm. The cost for a single panelist in a domain name dispute costs, on average, $1500.00. *See, e.g.,* WIPO ARBITRATION AND MEDIATION CENTER: SCHEDULE OF FEES UNDER THE ICANN POLICY (August 15, 2000), *at* http://arbiter.wipo.int/domains/fees/index.html.

[3] *See* STATISTICAL SUMMARY FOR PROCEEDINGS UNDER UNIFORM DOMAIN NAME DISPUTE RESOLUTION POLICY (February 26, 2001) *at* http://www.icann.org/udrp/proceedings-stat.htm (3176 of the 4188 domain names submitted and decided under ICANN arbitration have been transferred to the Complainant).

[4] *See* THE RULES ¶ 15(a).

First, the domain name must be "identical or confusingly similar to a trademark in which the complainant has rights."[5] Second, the current registrant of the domain name must have no "rights or legitimate interests in respect of the domain name."[6] Finally, the complainant must show that the domain name was "registered and is being used in bad faith."[7] An arbitration panel will not transfer or cancel a domain name registration if the complainant fails to show any one of the three elements.[8]

The bad faith element attracts the most attention, as Paragraph 4(b) of the UDRP is dedicated to clarifying what constitutes registration and use in bad faith. Most cases of 'true' cybersquatting involve "circumstances indicating that [the registrant has] acquired the domain primarily for the purpose of selling, renting, or otherwise transferring the domain registration . . . for valuable consideration in excess of . . . documented out-of-pocket costs."[9] Bad faith may also be shown when a domain name is registered "in order to prevent the owner of the trademark or service mark from reflecting the mark in a corresponding domain" or "for the purpose of disrupting the business of a competitor."[10] Finally, attempts to attract, for commercial gain, Internet users to a particular web site "by creating a likelihood of confusion with the complainant's mark as the source, sponsorship, affiliation, or endorsement" also constitute evidence of bad faith use and registration.[11]

III. *JULIA ROBERTS*: A MODEL CELEBRITY DOMAIN NAME DISPUTE

The actions of the respondent in *Julia Fiona Roberts v. Russell Boyd*[12] provide a model example of celebrity domain name cybersquatting. The Respondent, Russell Boyd, registered the domain name <juliaroberts.com>.[13] Boyd placed the domain name up for auction on eBay and received bids in excess of $2,500.00.[14] Boyd had also registered over fifty other domain names incorporating the

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[5] THE POLICY, ¶ 4(a).
[6] *Id.*
[7] *Id.*
[8] *Id.*
[9] *Id.* ¶ 4(b)(i).
[10] *Id.* ¶ 4(b)(ii-iii).
[11] THE POLICY, ¶ 4(b)(iv).
[12] Julia Fiona Roberts v. Russell Boyd, WIPO Case No. D2000-0210 (May 29, 2000).
[13] *Id.*
[14] *Id.*

names of celebrities, including Madeline Stowe and Al Pacino.[15]

As to the three elements of the UDRP, Roberts contended that the disputed domain name was "identical to and confusingly similar with the name 'Julia Roberts' and the common law trademark rights which she asserts in her name pursuant to the Policy,"[16] that Boyd had "no rights or legitimate interest in the domain name" and that it was registered and used in bad faith.[17] While Boyd did not contest the similarity between Roberts' claimed common law trademark rights and the disputed domain name, he did claim a legitimate interest, solely by virtue of his "registration and use of the domain name" and claimed that his registration and use was "in good faith."[18]

The arbitration panel (the Panel) found Roberts to be "a famous motion picture actress" who had appeared in a number of popular films of moderate to great success.[19] Based on Roberts' commercial success, the Panel found that "registration of [Julia Roberts] as a registered trademark or service mark was not necessary and that the name 'Julia Roberts' ha[d] sufficient secondary association with Complainant that common law trademark rights [did] exist under United States trademark law."[20] The Panel concluded that "[t]he second level domain name in <juliaroberts.com> [was] identical to the Complainant's name."[21]

The Panel next examined the issue of legitimate rights or interests in the use of the domain name and found that Boyd had "no relationship with or permission from [Roberts] for the use of her name or mark."[22] The only interest Boyd had in the domain name was an admitted "sincere interest in the actor" and the fact that he found Roberts to be "nifty crazy wacko cool."[23]

In addition to lacking a legitimate interest, the Panel held that Boyd's bad faith was evidenced by his registration of several other

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[15] *Id.*

[16] *Id. See also* THE POLICY, ¶ 4(a)(i).

[17] *Roberts*, WIPO Case No. D2000-0210. *See also* THE POLICY, ¶ 4(a)(ii)-(iii).

[18] *Roberts*, WIPO Case No. D2000-0210. The web site had featured a picture of an individual identified as Sari Locker prior to the dispute and provided information about Julia Roberts only after the complaint was filed. *Id.*

[19] *Id.*

[20] *Id.* "The policy does not require that the Complainant should have rights in a registered trademark or service mark. It is sufficient that the Complainant . . . has rights in common law trademark . . . ." *See also* Jeanette Winterson v. Mark Hogarth, WIPO Case No. D2000-0235 (May 22, 2000).

[21] *Roberts*, WIPO Case No. D2000-0210.

[22] *Id.*

[23] *Id.*

celebrity domain names that prevented Roberts, and celebrities like her, "from using the disputed domain name and demonstrate[d] a pattern of such [disruptive] conduct."[24] Finally, in addition to the multiple domain name registrations, the Panel found that the placement of the domain name up for auction on eBay and receiving bids well in excess of Boyd's out-of-pocket costs conclusively showed that he "registered and used the domain name <juliaroberts> in bad faith."[25] Finding all three elements under the UDRP conclusively satisfied, the Panel transferred the domain name to Roberts.[26]

Roberts is cited as a model case because ICANN Arbitration was created to deal with 'true' cybersquatters, such as Boyd. Practitioners must be cautious when using the UDRP to recover domain names where the registrant of the domain is arguably not a cybersquatter as that term is commonly known. The following cases represent the most common pitfalls that practitioners are likely to encounter when trying to recover a domain name under the UDRP.

IV. PITFALLS UNDER THE UDRP

A. No Trademark Rights in a Name

The first potential pitfall in obtaining a favorable judgment under the UDRP is a celebrity's failure to establish recognized trademark rights in his or her personal or professional name.[27] In *Gordon Sumner p/k/a Sting v. Michael Urvan*,[28] the Respondent, Urvan, freely admitted that his domain name, <sting.com>, was identical to the stage name of Sumner (Sting).[29] But Urvan contended that Sting had no intellectual property rights under the UDRP as 'sting' was a common term and was the subject of twenty United States trademark registrations—none of which belonged to Sumner.[30] Although the case was ultimately decided in favor of Urvan on other grounds, the Panel agreed with Urvan's assertion about the mark 'sting,' finding

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[24] *Id.*

[25] *Id.*

[26] *Id.*

[27] Establishing those intellectual property rights is not only paramount under Paragraph 4(a)(i) of the Policy regarding identical or similar trademarks/domain names, but also Paragraph 2(b) that prohibits the registration of a domain name that will "infringe upon or otherwise violate the rights of any third party." THE POLICY, *supra* note 1, ¶ 2(b).

[28] Sumner p/k/a/ Sting v. Michael Urvan, WIPO, D2000-0596 (July 24, 2000).

[29] *Id.*

[30] *Id.*

that "the word 'sting' is in common usage in the English language, with a number of meanings . . . and therefore, that the Complainant's name STING is not a trademark or service mark within the scope of paragraph 4(a)(i) of the Uniform Policy."[31] As the transfer of a domain name under the UDRP requires satisfaction of *all three* elements of Paragraph 4(a), the domain name was ordered to remain with its current registrant.[32] In contrast, the name 'Julia Roberts' is not in common usage in the English language, except as it refers to the famous actress herself.

B. Legitimate Rights by a Third Party: Fan Sites and Product Sales

Had the Respondent in *Roberts* shown his sincere interest in Julia Roberts by taking the time to establish a fan site, he might still own the domain. In *The Estate of Tupac Shakur v. R.J. Barranco*,[33] the Panel sought to determine whether the domain names <tupac.net> and <tupac.com> were registered and being used by the Respondent, Barranco, in bad faith.[34] Despite an obvious lack of trademark rights, Barranco was, nonetheless, found to have legitimate rights in the domain names because he operated a fan site with information on Tupac Shakur, offered vanity email addresses and hosted advertisements linking to officially licensed Tupac Shakur merchandise.[35]

Even though the Panel found that the common law trademark rights in 'Tupac' and the disputed domain names were "patently identical," "[t]he evidence clearly establishe[d] that the Respondent

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[31] *Id. Contra* Madonna Ciccone, p/k/a Madonna v. Dan Parisi and Madonna.com. WIPO Case No. D2000-0847 (Oct. 12, 2000) (finding service mark rights in the name 'Madonna' via a United States Trademark registration despite the numerous other associations with the term, namely those of the Catholic Church). Few would question the permeation of Sting's name in the music industry raising the question of acquisition of secondary meaning. *See* RESTATEMENT (THIRD) OF UNFAIR COMPETITION, § 13, cmt. e ("A designation . . . may become, as a result of its use by a specific person, uniquely associated with that person's goods, services or business. Such acquired distinctiveness is called 'secondary meaning.'"); *cf. International Kennel Club of Chicago, Inc. v. Mighty Star, Inc.*, 846 F.2d 1079 (7th Cir. 1988) (secondary meaning need only be obtained among a "well-defined group" of the consuming public). Such a discussion is, unfortunately, beyond the scope and publishing restrictions of this case note. The secondary meaning issue and its inconsistent application has been raised by numerous critics of the UDRP. *See infra* notes 65-68 and accompanying text.

[32] *Sumner*, WIPO Case No. D2000-0596.

[33] The Estate of Tupac Shakur v. R.J. Barranco, eResolutions Case Nos. AF-0348a and AF-0348b (October 28, 2000).

[34] *Id.*

[35] *Id.*

does have some [legitimate] rights" in the domain name.[36] Barranco, "for multiple years extended his time, money and effort providing at no charge a web site where he, other fans and the general public may obtain a variety of possibly interesting information on Tupac Shakur his music, poetry and movies."[37] The Panel found it important that the site was a free forum where fans could discuss the former artist and also found it "significant that [Barranco's] sites have clearly indicated an obvious link to the 'official site,' expressly disclaim[ing] any affiliation or representation of that site." Further, Barranco had "taken steps to ensure that any links for the sale of any items relating to Tupac Shakur are only to businesses selling items licensed by the Complainant."[38]

The Panel held that Barranco's fan site was not operating for commercial gain or with the intent to divert customers or tarnish the 'Tupac' mark. Further, the Panel stated that holding otherwise would permit "persons in the position of this Claimant to unjustly enrich themselves by confiscating the work of fans and admirers in establishing a web site supporting their favorite artists without any opportunity for compensation."[39] The Panel stated that the entire dispute was a result of "the neglect and/or inattention of the Claimant," because it failed to register the domain; transfer was thus refused based on the legitimate rights of Barranco.[40]

Another example of legitimate third-party rights in a celebrity domain name is where the celebrity's name is used to rightfully identify his or her creative works legally offered for sale. In *The Sam Francis Estate v. Magidson Fine Art, Inc.*,[41] the Complainant was the estate of a deceased "famous artist, world-renowned for his unique and highly recognizable abstract expressionist style of painting."[42] The Respondent was a "legitimate fine art gallery" in Aspen, Colorado, that exhibited and sold the works of modern and

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[36] *Id.*

[37] *Id.*

[38] *Id.*

[39] *Tupac*, eResolutions Case Nos. AF0348a and AF348b.

[40] Finding legitimate rights in the Respondent, it was impossible to find bad faith in registration or use. Furthermore, while transfer of the domain name under the UDRP was refused, the acts of the Respondent were recognized to possibly be "prohibited by U.S. intellectual property law or common law or statute" whereby the Complainant was entitled to "establish those claims in an appropriate court after full discovery and with the attendant risk that it may be taxed with the Respondent's attorney's fees and costs if it fails." *Id.*

[41] Frederick M. Nicholas, Administrator, The Sam Francis Estate v. Magidson Fine Art, Inc., WIPO Case No. D2000-0673 (Sept. 27, 2000).

[42] *Id.*

contemporary masters—including Sam Francis.[43] The Respondent registered the domain name <samfrancis.com> and offered for sale, at the accompanying web site, "lithographs, etchings and screenprints by Sam Francis."[44]

The Panel found "no evidence that respondent registered and used the Domain Name for the purpose of profiting from Complainant's service mark."[45] There was no evidence to support an allegation of a "pattern of conduct that intentionally prevents others from using their marks as domain names," no proof that the Respondent sought to "prevent the use of the mark by a competitor" and "nothing on the site suggesting an affiliation between Respondent and Mr. Francis' estate."[46] The Panel refused to transfer the domain name, because of the lack of wrongful behavior and the legitimate use of the domain name to sell the works of Sam Francis.[47]

C. *Lack of Bad Faith: Inaction and Insults*

Once affirmative findings of domain and trademark similarity and lack of legitimate rights have been made by a Panel, bad faith use and registration are usually found as well. Two cases of note, however, have shown that even with two-thirds of the UDRP requirements satisfied, lack of bad faith will nevertheless preclude transfer of a domain. Such was the case in *Edward Van Halen v. Deborah Morgan*.[48] Respondent Morgan had registered the domain name <edwardvanhalen.com> and readily admitted that her domain name was identical to Van Halen's trademark in the same name.[49] While Morgan alleged that her site was going to be a fan site and the Panel recognizing that operation of a fan site might create legitimate rights,[50] no legitimate rights were present in this case because the site was not yet operational.[51] The legitimacy requirement was not conclusive, however.

The Panel did not order transfer of the domain name because the

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[43] *Id.*

[44] *Id.* While the sale of Francis' works was permitted, the Complainant had not given authorization for use of the <samfrancis.com> domain name.

[45] *Id.*

[46] *Id.*

[47] *Sam Francis,* WIPO Case No. D2000-0673.

[48] Edward Van Halen v. Deborah Morgan, WIPO Case No. D2000-1313 (Dec. 13, 2000).

[49] *Id.*

[50] *See Tupac, supra,* note 33.

[51] *Van Halen,* WIPO Case No. D2000-1313.

"evidence . . . [was] insufficient to justify a finding of bad faith."[52] Despite the fact that no site was in service at the domain, the Panel noted, "delay in putting up a site is not dispositive."[53] Furthermore, the Panel saw no attempts to sell the domain or cause confusion, stating, "the Panel cannot infer bad faith without other evidence."[54] It follows that mere registration of a celebrity domain name, without additional evidence of bad faith, is not likely to support transfer of a domain name under the UDRP.

A similar result occurred in *Jules I. Kendall v. Donald Mayer re Skipkendall.com*.[55] The domain name in *Kendall* led to a web site entitled, 'Skip Kendall—PGA Golf Pro and Deadbeat(?)—You Be the Judge.' The wife of the domain name's registrant set up the web site to criticize her brother, Skip Kendall, for defaulting on a personal loan despite his monetary success as a professional golfer.[56] Other than the dispute over the loan, there was no apparent attempt to sell commercial goods on the site, cause confusion as to source or sponsorship or other behavior enumerated under Paragraph 4(b) of the UDRP as indicative of bad faith use and registration.

The Panel agreed and refused to transfer the domain, but noted that while "Respondent has the right to freely express opinions and criticisms about Complainant . . . that interest does not extend to 'unbridled defamation' or to the use of his name to generate a larger audience for such defamation."[57] The Panel avoided further discussion of a First Amendment issue by focusing on the bad faith requirement. Finding neither a pattern of conduct, as to mass registration of domain names, nor signs of disruptive behavior or commercial gain through confusion, the Panel concluded that the "Complainant ha[d] not shown other circumstances that would

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[52] *Id.* The Panel clearly stated that the "Respondent claims that she has a desire to use the domain name for a legitimate fan site and, *if she follows through on that intention*, it would not constitute the kind of abusive, bad faith cybersquatting the Policy is designed to prevent." (emphasis added). *Id.*

[53] *Id. See also* Wal-Mart Stores, Inc. v. Walsucks and Walmarket Puerto Rico, WIPO Case No. D2000-0477 (July 20, 2000) (immediate use not required to show good faith as legitimate use may take time).

[54] *Van Halen*, WIPO Case No. D2000-1313.

[55] Jules I Kendall v. Donald Mayer re: Skipkendall.com, WIPO Case No. D2000-0868 (Oct. 26, 2000).

[56] *Id.*

[57] *Id. See also* Pat and Monty Roberts, Inc. v. Bill Keith, WIPO Case No. D2000-0299 (May 8, 2000) ("[T]he right to express one's views is not the same as the right to use another's name to identify one's self as the source of those views.").

warrant relief under the Policy."[58] The Panel did find, however, that the case involved "alleged defamation, not cybersquatting" and that such legal determinations were outside the bounds of the UDRP.[59]

V. THE FUTURE APPLICATION OF THE UDRP TO CELEBRITY DOMAIN NAMES

A potentially critical issue in the future of celebrity domain name cases is the widely held belief that the UDRP is not being properly applied. On April 30, 1999, WIPO reported, in *The Management of Internet Names and Addresses*, that it supports "limitations on the scope of the [UDRP] procedure."[60] The first such limitation "would confine the availability of the procedure to cases of deliberate, bad faith abusive registrations,"[61] *i.e.*, cases of 'true' cybersquatting as mentioned above. The second limitation, and most relevant to the celebrity domain name disputes, would exclude cases regarding "registrations that violate trade names, geographical indications or *personality rights*," which "would not be considered to fall within the definition of abusive registration for the purposes of the administrative procedure."[62] The reasoning behind the limitation is that the law governing "personality rights is less evenly harmonized throughout the world [than trademark rights]"[63] and such disputes "were not intended to be made subject to the proposed dispute resolution procedure."[64]

Just the opposite has occurred. A plethora of disputes involving personal names have been submitted to ICANN Arbitration. Many disputes involving celebrity domain names involve issues not intended to be resolved under the UDRP. In addition, as the above examples demonstrate, serious discrepancies exist in the application of the UDRP to these cases.[65] These discrepancies have been

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[58] *Kendall*, WIPO Case No. D2000-0868..

[59] *Id.*

[60] THE MANAGEMENT OF INTERNET NAMES AND ADDRESSES: INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY ISSUES, FINAL REPORT OF THE WIPO INTERNET DOMAIN NAME PROCESS (April 30, 1999), ¶ 165., *at* http://www.icann.org/minutes/minutes-27may99.htm#99.45. This report was largely ratified and adopted by ICANN.

[61] *Id.* ¶ 166.

[62] *Id.* ¶ 167 (emphasis added).

[63] *Id.*

[64] *Sumner, supra* note 28.

[65] While the vast majority of celebrity domain name cases submitted for resolution under the UDRP are resolved in favor of the Complainant, Panels in *Gordon Sumner* and *Skip Kendall* both recognized the inappropriateness of the Policy in resolving such complicated issues. *See Sumner, supra* note 28; *Kendall, supra* note 55.

recognized by numerous international parties and resulted in the submission of several letters of request to WIPO[66] to convene a second panel to investigate the proper application of the UDRP.[67] One of the key issues of examination would address the use of personal names as domain names and utilizing the UDRP to resolve disputes.[68] The results of this panel of inquiry could have profound effects on the future of the UDRP and especially its application to celebrity domain name disputes.

VI. CONCLUSION

ICANN Arbitration offers celebrities and their lawyers a quick, cost effective and usually successful means to recover domain names registered by third parties that incorporate the celebrity's name. However, the current UDRP rules may be changed to exclude such cases in the future. Therefore, practitioners interested in recovering domain names for their celebrity clients are well advised to take action under the current UDRP, which favors recovery for celebrities, subject to the pitfalls discussed above.

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[66] Letter of Request from the Hon. Richard Alston, Australian Minister for Communications, Information Technology and the Arts to Dr. Kamil Idris, Director General of the World Intellectual Property Organization, *at* http://wipo2.wipo.int/process2/rfc/letter2.html (last visited Apr. 25, 2001). *See also* Letter of Request with Attached Signatories, *at* http://wipo2.wipo.int/process2/rfc/letter1.html (last visited Apr. 25, 2001).

[67] SECOND WIPO INTERNET DOMAIN NAME PROCESS, *at* http://wipo2.wipo.int/process2 (last visited April 25, 2001).

[68] The Panel convened on July 10, 2000; the report should be available by the end of the first half of 2001. *Id.*