DNS Session 1: Fundamentals

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Computers use IP addresses. Why do we need names?

- Easier for people to remember
- Computers may be moved between networks, in which case their IP address will change

Old solution: hosts.txt

- A centrally-maintained file, distributed to all hosts on the Internet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SPARKY</th>
<th>128.4.13.9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UCB-MAILGATE</td>
<td>4.98.133.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FTPHOST</td>
<td>200.10.194.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>... etc</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This feature still exists:
/etc/hosts [Unix]
c:\windows\hosts [Windows]

hosts.txt doesn't scale

- Huge file
- Needs frequent copying to ALL hosts
- Consistency
- Always out-of-date
- Name uniqueness
- Single point of administration

The Domain Name System was born

- DNS is a Distributed Database for holding name to IP address (and other) information
- Distributed:
  - Shares the administration
  - Shares the load
- Robustness and performance through:
  - Replication
  - Caching
- A critical piece of Internet infrastructure

DNS is Hierarchical

Forms a tree structure
DNS is Hierarchical (2)

- Gives globally unique names
- Administered in zones (parts of the tree)
- You can give away ("delegate") control of part of the tree underneath you
- Example:
  - isoc.org on one set of nameservers
  - isocws.isoc.org on a different set
  - t1.isocws.isoc.org on another set

Domain Names are (almost) unlimited

- Max 255 characters total length
- Max 63 characters in each part
  - RFC 1034, RFC 1035
- If a domain name is being used as a host name, you should abide by some restrictions
  - RFC 952 (old)
  - a-z 0-9 and minus (-) only
  - No underscores (_)

Using the DNS

- A Domain Name (like www.tiscali.co.uk) is the KEY to look up information
- The result is one or more RESOURCE RECORDS (RRs)
- There are different RRs for different types of information
- You can ask for the specific type you want, or ask for "any" RRs associated with the domain name

Commonly seen RRs

- A (address): map hostname to IP address
- PTR (pointer): map IP address to name
- MX (mail exchanger): where to deliver mail for user@domain
- CNAME (canonical name): map alternative hostname to real hostname
- TXT (text): any descriptive text
- NS (name server), SOA (start of authority): used for delegation and management of the DNS itself

Simple example

- Query: www.tiscali.co.uk
- Query type: A
- Result:

  www.tiscali.co.uk. IN A 212.74.101.10

In this case just a single RR is found, but in general, multiple RRs may be returned
(IN is the "class" for INTERNET use of the DNS)

Possible results

- Positive (one or more RRs found)
- Negative (definitely no RRs match the query)
- Server fail (cannot find the answer)
How do you use an IP address as the key for a DNS query?

- Convert the IP address to dotted-quad
- Reverse the four parts
- Add ".in-addr.arpa." to the end; special domain reserved for this purpose
  e.g. to find name for 212.74.101.10

10.101.74.212.in-addr.arpa.
⇒ PTR www.tiscali.co.uk.

Known as a 'reverse DNS lookup'
(because we are looking up the name for an IP address, rather than the IP address for a name)

DNS is a Client-Server application

- (Of course - it runs across a network)
- Requests and responses are normally sent in UDP packets, port 53
- Occasionally uses TCP, port 53
  - for very large requests, e.g. zone transfer from master to slave

There are three roles involved in DNS

![Diagram of DNS roles](image)

Three roles in DNS

- **RESOLVER**
  - Takes request from application, formats it into UDP packet, sends to cache
- **CACHING NAMESERVER**
  - Returns the answer if already known
  - Otherwise searches for an authoritative server which has the information
  - Caches the result for future queries
  - Also known as RECURSIVE nameserver
- **AUTHORITATIVE NAMESERVER**
  - Contains the actual information put into the DNS by the domain owner

Three roles in DNS

- The SAME protocol is used for resolver→cache and cache→auth NS communication
- It is possible to configure a single name server as both caching and authoritative
- But it still performs only one role for each incoming query
- Common but NOT RECOMMENDED to configure in this way (see later)
ROLE 1: THE RESOLVER

- A piece of software which formats a DNS request into a UDP packet, sends it to a cache, and decodes the answer
- Usually a shared library (e.g. libresolv.so under Unix) because so many applications need it
- EVERY host needs a resolver - e.g. every Windows workstation has one

How does the resolver find a caching nameserver?

- It has to be explicitly configured (statically, or via DHCP etc)
- Must be configured with the IP ADDRESS of a cache (why not name?)
- Good idea to configure more than one cache, in case the first one fails

How do you choose which cache(s) to configure?

- Must have PERMISSION to use it
  - e.g. cache at your ISP, or your own
- Prefer a nearby cache
  - Minimises round-trip time and packet loss
  - Can reduce traffic on your external link, since often the cache can answer without contacting other servers
- Prefer a reliable cache
  - Perhaps your own?

Resolver can be configured with default domain(s)

- If "foo.bar" fails, then retry query as "foo.bar.mydomain.com"
- Can save typing but adds confusion
- May generate extra unnecessary traffic
- Usually best avoided

Example: Unix resolver configuration

/etc/resolv.conf

```
search tiscali.co.uk
nameserver 212.74.112.66
nameserver 212.74.112.67
```

That's all you need to configure a resolver

Testing DNS

- Just put "www.yahoo.com" in a web browser?
- Why is this not a good test?
Testing DNS with "dig"

➤ "dig" is a program which just makes DNS queries and displays the results
➤ Better than "nslookup", "host" because it shows the raw information in full

```
dig tiscali.co.uk.
   -- defaults to query type "A"

dig tiscali.co.uk. mx
   -- specified query type

dig @212.74.112.66 tiscali.co.uk. mx
   -- send to particular cache (overrides /etc/resolv.conf)
```

```
# dig @81.199.110.100 www.gouv.bj. a
;; hostname: ns1.intnet.bj.76661 IN NS 192.168.1.108
```

Interpreting the results:

➤ Answer section (RRs requested)
   ➤ Each record has a Time To Live (TTL)
   ➤ Says how long the cache will keep it
➤ Authority section
   ➤ Which nameservers are authoritative for this domain
➤ Additional section
   ➤ More RRs (typically IP addresses for the authoritative nameservers)
➤ Total query time
➤ Check which server gave the response!
   ➤ If you make a typing error, the query may go to a default server

The trailing dot

➤ Prevents any default domain being appended
➤ Get into the habit of using it always when testing DNS
   ➤ only on domain names, not IP addresses

Interpreting the results: header

➤ STATUS
   ➤ NOERROR: 0 or more RRs returned
   ➤ NXDOMAIN: non-existent domain
   ➤ SERVFAIL: cache could not locate answer
➤ FLAGS
   ➤ AA: Authoritative answer (not from cache)
   ➤ You can ignore the others
      ➤ QR: Query/Response (1 = Response)
      ➤ RD: Recursion Desired
      ➤ RA: Recursion Available

Practical Exercise

➤ Configure Unix resolver
➤ Issue DNS queries using 'dig'
➤ Use tcpdump to show queries being sent to cache