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Evaluating the impact of design decisions on passive DNS-based domain rankings

Abstract—“Top sites’ rankings of the most popular domains are a core resource for the large-scale measurements that are crucial in Web and Internet research. Recent rankings evolved towards using passive DNS traffic data, but this data’s suitability for measuring website popularity is poorly understood. In this paper, we holistically evaluate how design decisions influence the composition and desired properties of passive DNS-based domain rankings. We isolate the effects of these decisions by designing a ranking from the ground up using aggregated “post-recursor” passive DNS data. We evaluate the impact of corrections for resolver caching and CDNs, and confirm that measures such as service classification, bucketing, or long-term aggregation produce more reliable rankings. Our goal is to give transparent insight into the process of using passive DNS data for domain rankings, as a framework for the research community to understand how to develop future rankings that address their needs.

I. INTRODUCTION

Large-scale Web and Internet measurements play a crucial role in enabling research into how the modern Internet works. Researchers have emphasized that such measurements should be accurate, reproducible, and representative [1–5]. A core element in conducting these measurements according to those expectations concerns the selection of a (representative) sample of websites that form the subject of the study. Most often, researchers use ‘top sites’ rankings of the most popular domains for this purpose, with hundreds of studies relying on these rankings [6–8]. The academic research community has recently raised awareness on the issues surrounding these rankings that threaten their reliability, such as low agreement [6, 9], stability, and transparency [7, 8]. Nevertheless, they remain a valuable and necessary tool that the research community relies on.

Initially, popularity rankings depended on Web traffic collected through toolbars, extensions, or trackers [8]. However, it is challenging to recruit users who are willing to share their traffic data, and to obtain such data in a privacy-preserving way. Owing to these challenges, the Web-based rankings that researchers rely on are steadily disappearing, with Quantcast and Alexa discontinuing their rankings in 2020 and 2022 respectively. Only the Chrome User Experience Report has emerged as an alternative Web-based ranking since then, which depends on Chrome users opting in to URL sharing [6]. To overcome the privacy challenges and subsequent unavailability of Web traffic data, several providers have recently developed new rankings based on DNS resolver traffic, including Cisco [10], Cloudflare [11], and DomainTools [12]. Despite this shift to DNS traffic, we still lack a good understanding of whether these DNS-based rankings approximate website popularity well. Given the significant impact of ranking properties on research

results across all areas of Web and Internet measurement [7], and the need to consider alternatives to the disappearing Web-based rankings, we set out to evaluate the impact of the design decisions made by DNS-based ranking providers in their rankings’ designs, to establish whether DNS-based rankings are appropriate and sufficiently reliable for conducting Web and Internet measurements.

To identify which measures contribute to improving the reliability and suitability of these rankings, we design a custom ranking method for passive DNS traffic data, from the ground up. This enables us to holistically and independently evaluate the influence of design decisions on the composition and desired properties of domain rankings, and isolate these effects, as opposed to comparing existing rankings where the underlying data collection and processing are confounding factors [6–9]. We use a feed of “post-recursor” (“above-resolver” [13]) passive DNS traffic data [14] from SIE Europe [15], which is aggregated from multiple “sensors”, i.e., recursive resolvers. Its main advantages are the increased coverage and diversity across networks and organizations, and better preservation of user privacy, as data is aggregated and no IP-level data is retained. However, there are significant challenges for measuring popularity: the observed per-domain counts represent cache misses at the recursive resolvers, i.e., not all user requests are visible; ranking methods based on user-level data, such as IP-based voting [16], cannot be used; and inherently, DNS traffic mixes websites and top-level browsing context visits with infrastructural domains and background DNS resolutions.

We assess to which extent design decisions in recent rankings, such as ‘bucketing’ ranked entries or long-term averaging, improve the stability of rankings. We use additional data within the feed to evaluate correcting mechanisms, such as accounting for CDNs and service classification, and demonstrate that these are necessary to avoid that certain domain types overly dominate the ranking. The service classification also enables us to cater for the different usage patterns of domain rankings, with the primarily goal of identifying websites – a necessary measure, as only around 30% of observed root domains are classified as websites. Finally, while the simplest solution for ranking domains is to sort them by their raw query counts [17], resolver caching through TTL affects the temporal query patterns of each domain, potentially causing domain popularity to be both over- and under-estimated. We weight DNS traffic by TTL, and while traffic distributions after weighting closely match those observed on the web, the distributions are more skewed and manipulation is amplified, meaning that the design decision to incorporate TTL (or not) must be carefully made.

Overall, our contribution confirms that the design decisions introduced in recent DNS-based rankings are beneficial and make these rankings suitable for Internet and Web measurements. This improved understanding of the fundamentals of building these rankings allows our community to continue working towards rankings that meet the needs of researchers.

II. BACKGROUND

A. Data sources and processing

Rankings of the most popular or “top” domain names or websites use one of three types of data sources. Providers like Alexa, Quantcast, or more recently the Chrome User Experience Report (CrUX) [18] rely on *web traffic* data, gathering it from browser reports or in-page scripts. Providers like Majestic and Common Crawl [19] use the *web link graph* to rank websites that are most often referred to from other websites, similar to how search engines (at their core) rank search results. A third source is *passive DNS traffic*, monitoring DNS traffic at resolvers to derive the most popular domain names. Finally, multiple existing rankings (and therefore sources) can be merged into one aggregated ranking, as is done in Tranco [8].

Given that we will also work with passive DNS data, we look in more detail at the existing publicly available lists and approaches using such data. The *DNSFilter* list from WebShrinker [20] uses traffic to their DNS resolvers. Their list ranks domains on the 30-day sum of a daily count of organizations querying each domain, therefore incorporating both the longevity and reach of domain accesses. The *Radar* list from Cloudflare [11] uses traffic to their 1.1.1.1 DNS resolvers. They use a machine learning model that predicts each domain’s rank based on an undocumented feature set, designed to estimate the “relative size of the user population that accesses a domain” [11]. The *SecRank* [16] list uses traffic from the Chinese 114DNS resolvers. The ranking is based on voting across the domain preferences of individual IP addresses, weighted according to each IP’s domain diversity and query volume. The *Umbrella* list from Cisco uses traffic to their DNS resolvers [10]. Their list ranks domains on “the number of unique client IPs invoking [each] domain, relative to the sum of all requests to all domains”.

A common thread across these DNS-based rankings is that they seek to incorporate the number of distinct entities (users, organizations) querying a domain, often to better approximate genuine human Web traffic. In contrast, our data source – aggregated post-recursor data – does not contain any information on who requests a domain, and we must therefore instead develop our approach using only query volume data. Such data is also used for the *Farsight* list from DomainTools [12], but their methods are not documented, and the list is not publicly available. We transparently explore the challenges brought about by this limitation, and discuss potential solutions. The aggregated feed also contains all observed DNS records beyond only queries for A/AAAA records, enabling us to use these for applying corrections (e.g., CNAME redirects) or for service classification.

B. Related work

Lists of popular domain names have long been used in Internet measurement research (since at least 2005 [21, 22]), but were only thoroughly scrutinized starting in 2018. For three rankings (Alexa, Umbrella, and Majestic), Scheitle et al. [7] described the methods, research usage, characteristics such as stability, and potential impact on Internet measurement research. Le Pochat et al. [8] similarly characterized the three rankings and Quantcast from a security perspective, and showed that all four rankings could be manipulated to insert any domain. Rweyemamu et al. studied aspects such as weekly patterns and domain clusters in detail [23], and refined the manipulation attacks for Alexa and Umbrella [24]. Xu et al. [25] showed how certain open DNS resolvers respond to non-recursive queries in a way that can be abused to manipulate passive DNS-based rankings. Two academic initiatives then sought to design and publish domain rankings that improve upon properties important for research: Tranco [8, 26] and SecRank [16].

Since the appearance of these new lists, further studies have compared top lists and evaluated their accuracy in reflecting popularity. Alby and Jäschke [9] expanded the comparison of top lists to other data sets (e.g., Wikipedia) and search engine results. They find low overlap between data sets, with hosts present or popular in one data set missing from others. They recommend that researchers select a random sample of websites among Common Crawl hosts. Ruth et al. [6] compared top lists to Cloudflare traffic data, concluding that the Chrome User Experience Report [18] most accurately represents the more popular websites, albeit as an unordered set. In general, however, agreement of any list with the ‘ground-truth’ traffic remains relatively low. Recent work has also shown that popular websites differ significantly between countries and languages [9, 27]. Xie and Li [28] measured real-world top lists use, finding that ranked domains experience an increase in traffic, corroborating the broad appeal of domain rankings.

Beyond these proposals and evaluations for public rankings, several DNS-based ranking methods have been proposed but did not materialize to concrete rankings. Proposals include ranking domains on counts of querying DNS resolvers [29], unique querying clients [30], or per-client DNS query counts [31]. Other proposals estimate client query volumes and therefore popularity through active DNS cache probing [32–35]. Finally, the DNS Observatory [13] tracks top objects including domains in passive DNS post-recursor traffic, similar to our data set.

III. HOW TO RANK

A. What ranking properties do we expect?

To create a “top” ranking that best fulfills community needs, we must first understand what we expect from these rankings. Inherently, we want the ranks to reflect how *popular* a given domain is. However, what constitutes popularity in and of itself is not necessarily well-defined. Most (passive DNS-based) rankings define popularity as the number of users or organizations accessing a domain, usually counting at most one access per day. However, this disregards how often and

how regularly a domain is queried – for example, a search engine or news website might be visited very often throughout one day, yet would not have a better rank than a software update domain that is queried only once a day but by as many users. As one example of a more elaborate metric to quantify popularity, the ranking approach of SecRank [16] integrates query volume, query regularity, and IP address count.

Rankings should also exhibit properties that make them more suitable for research usage. Prior work has identified and evaluated rankings across these dimensions [6–8, 16]:

- *Accuracy*: rankings should correctly capture popularity, i.e., a better ranked domain should genuinely be more popular than a worse ranked one.
- *Agreement* or *similarity*: if all rankings correctly capture popularity, they should place domains at the same ranks.
- *Manipulation resistance*: rankings should be designed such that malicious actors cannot easily insert, remove, or move domains.
- *Representativeness*: rankings should correctly reflect distributions and have good coverage across, e.g., site categories, or countries.
- *Reproducibility*: rankings should be easily retrievable and uniquely referenceable such that others can reproduce studies using them.
- *Stability*: rankings should be sufficiently stable over time, while still incorporating natural changes to popularity.
- *Transparency*: rankings should publish details on the methods used to generate the ranking.

B. Design decisions on composition

Next to the desirable properties of top lists, certain design decisions will affect the composition of a ranking. While these do not necessarily affect how well a ranking reflects popularity, they still impact how a ranking can be used and how it should be interpreted. Our evaluation (Section V) is focused on assessing how significantly these design decisions affect a ranking’s composition.

- Domains represent *websites*, i.e., resources that humans tend to view in a top-level browsing context, or *infrastructure*, i.e., resources such as nameservers. Depending on its data source, a ranking may naturally tend to contain more domains of one type: Web traffic and link graph lists will likely almost exclusively contain websites, while DNS-based lists will also include infrastructure domains. This distinction will affect what data can be retrieved from a domain and is therefore important to ensure that a ranking fits a research study’s purpose. For example, an infrastructure domain may not host any Web content, therefore appearing unreachable in a Web measurement (and potentially skewing its results).
- A ranking can list *root* (also called *eTLDs+1* or *pay-level*) domains (e.g., Alexa), *fully qualified domain names* (e.g., Umbrella), *origins* (e.g., CrUX), or even *URLs* (e.g., Hispar [36]). This will affect the analysis detail: e.g., measuring only root domains will ignore subdomain content.
- Each entry can have an individual rank, or entries can be ‘bucketed’, where only a rank bracket is given (e.g., ‘top

10000’), as is done in Radar and CrUX. This is meant to better match the ‘long-tail effect’: human browsing patterns concentrate on a small number of very popular websites [27], while less popular websites (in the long tail) quickly have much less traffic and therefore become more difficult to accurately rank [11]. While most studies ignore individual ranks in existing lists [6], the lack of ranks can still affect the level of detail at which a certain observation can be correlated to a domain’s rank.

- A ranking can be computed using data from a certain period of time. This time frame will affect the ranking’s stability versus agility, as well as its update frequency. DNSFilter and CrUX are averaged across (and updated every) 30 days, Radar across 7 days, and most other lists across 1 day. Tranco is updated every day but averages across 30 days of data.
- Each of these decisions, as well as the traffic volume in a data source, affects the final length of a ranking. Commonly, rankings have been cut off at 1 million entries. The ranking length will affect how many resources a measurement can (dis)cover.

IV. RANKING GENERATION

We use a feed of aggregated post-recursor passive DNS data to generate three rankings: one each for fully qualified domain names (FQDNs), root domains, and domains that likely host websites (i.e., pages visited by regular Internet users while browsing). Figure 1 schematically represents how we process the data feed to ultimately generate our three ranking types. To readers unfamiliar with (passive) DNS measurement, we recommend the tutorial by van der Toorn et al. [37] as a primer.

A. Source data

The input for our ranking is a continuous feed of passive DNS data in the *Passive DNS Common Output Format* [14, 38]. This type of feed is already available from large passive DNS aggregators such as Farsight Security’s DNSDB,¹ SIE Europe [15], CIRCL,² or mnemonic.³ Such a feed aggregates DNS requests from multiple ‘sensors’, i.e., recursive resolvers from organizations or networks that share their data with the passive DNS aggregator. Figure 2 shows how resolvers execute DNS resolution, and where the boundary between pre- and post-recursor traffic lies. We only observe the post-recursor traffic, i.e., the recursive queries to the authoritative nameserver for entries missing from the recursive resolver’s cache.

The passive DNS aggregator maintains its own cache with a count of observations of a tuple of *requested resource* (the domain), *record type* (e.g., A or AAAA), and *record(s)* (the value(s), e.g., the IP address(es)). Each time this tuple is observed at one of the sensors, this count is incremented. Entries in this cache expire either when the cache is full or after a set time, upon which an EXPIRATION message is emitted to the feed. This message contains the tuple of requested resource, record type, and record(s), and a count

¹<https://www.farsightsecurity.com/solutions/dnsdb/>

²<https://www.circl.lu/services/passive-dns/>

³<https://docs.mnemonic.no/api/services/pdns/>

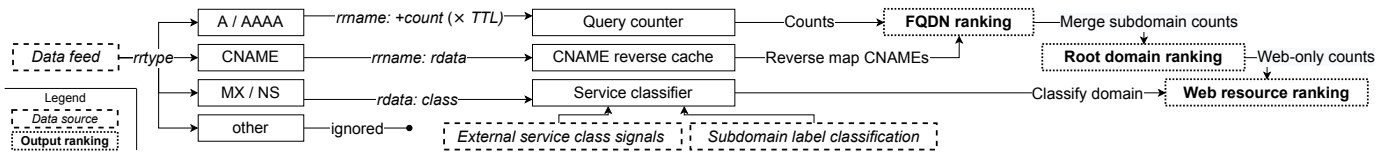


Fig. 1. We process the resource records from the passive DNS data feed to populate the counters and caches, which we use to compute three rankings.

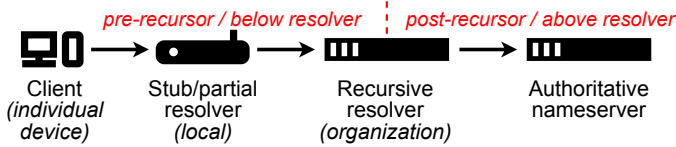


Fig. 2. Parties in a recursive DNS resolution, where we highlight the boundary between pre- and post-recursor traffic. We only observe the latter, i.e., the recursive queries to the authoritative nameserver for entries missing from the recursive resolver’s cache.

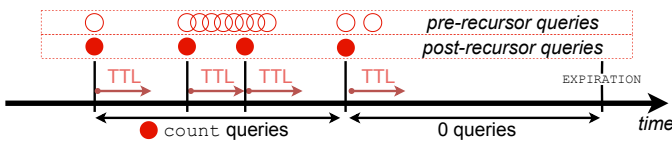


Fig. 3. Pre-/post-recursor DNS traffic have different query patterns, caused by resolver caching and TTL. We only observe the post-recursor query counts.

field for the total number of observations across all sensors. Since the entry is being removed from the cache, this count is then implicitly reset to 0. Figure 3 shows how the `count` field relates to queries pre- and post-recursor; we observe only the latter. In addition, we use the undocumented `rrttl` field in this message for the (authoritative) Time-To-Live (TTL) record value. We do not expect nor use the `sensor_id` field for identifying the individual sensor at which the record was seen, as it could raise privacy issues and is not present in all passive DNS feeds (including the one we use).

B. Processing resource records

1) *Observation counters*: For the final popularity tally, we track the counts of observations per domain (i.e., requested resource) for the A and AAAA record types. We only observe and count the requests above the recursive resolver — they represent resolver cache misses. Observation counts therefore depend on the resolver caching behavior, which is primarily fixed by the TTL value set by the authoritative nameserver and sent along with the resource records. Next to one variant ranking where we ignore TTL, we generate a second variant where we multiply all observation counts by this TTL value, extracted from the passive DNS data itself. Simply put, we expect a domain with twice the TTL value to have half as many visible requests, so we need to multiple its query count by two. In case the TTL is zero, we retain the original count. Because TTL values of more than 1 day (86400 seconds) are commonly truncated by resolvers [39], and as we primarily use 1 day of data to generate rankings, we truncate all TTL values to 1 day as well. Because of the dominance of nameservers

with 2-day TTLs (Section V-C), this truncation is applied for 48% of queries, although this only affects 3.2% of FQDNs.

2) *CNAME reverse cache*: We track the counts of A/AAAA record observations, i.e., query results instead of the queries themselves. Therefore, if a user resolves a domain that uses a CNAME record to map to the A/AAAA records of a second domain, we count an observation for this second domain, not for the domain the user originally visited. In particular, large CDNs would therefore be over-counted (Section V-C), because CDN-hosted domains often point a CNAME record to a CDN (sub)domain that hosts the actual website content [40]. We therefore maintain a cache of all observed mappings in CNAME records, and recursively reverse this mapping for all domains in our final ranking. We then retain the mapped domain if it is observed often enough (CNAME count > 1% of the A/AAAA count) to ignore erroneous CNAME records, and if it is not a subdomain of the original domain, to prioritize root domains.

3) *Service classifier*: Our data feed comes from DNS queries, and therefore contains infrastructural domains such as nameservers, that are not visited by humans through their browsers. However, certain research studies focus on user Web traffic and require website-only rankings, similar to Alexa, CrUX, or Majestic. We therefore need to determine what *service* each domain offers, to then separate domains into service-specific rankings. In our design, we use internal and external *passive* sources to determine the service. Internally, we mark the domains appearing in MX and NS record values as mailservers and nameservers, respectively. We also specifically mark nameservers in the root zone file, as they are not included in the passive DNS feed [41]. We manually develop a service mapping for the most commonly observed subdomain labels, e.g., `www` for a web service, or `ns1` for a nameserver. Externally, we collect websites from three web-focused domain lists (BuiltWith,⁴ CrUX [18], and DomainRank⁵ [42]), and domains in DBpedia [43] (sourced from Wikipedia). To resolve contradictory classifications from multiple sources (e.g., when a NS record mistakenly contains a web domain), we develop a scoring system that accounts for the reliability and the certainty between and within sources, e.g., awarding higher scores for records observed more often. We first classify individual FQDNs; if there is no known class, we recursively search a class of the parent domain. To determine the class of a root domain, we compare its known class (if any) with that of its subdomains, and heuristically select the most likely class based on the scores and query counts of each. If one domain offers

⁴<https://builtwith.com/top-1m>

⁵<https://www.domainrank.io/download.html>

multiple services, we assign it the most common/likely service.

C. Computing the ranking

We generate daily rankings based on that day’s query counts, CNAME reverse cache and service classifier data. To fill these counters and caches, we process a 1-day slice of the data feed. For rankings across larger time periods (e.g., 7 days), we combine these processed 1-day slices by summing counts and merging caches and classifier data. We first compute the base FQDN ranking of fully qualified domain names, mapping each FQDN to its reversed CNAME domain if applicable. For each FQDN, we extract the root domain using the Public Suffix List. We then generate a ‘root’ ranking across the total counts for each root domain’s subdomains. We finally extract a ‘web’ ranking of root domains classified as a website, using only the counts of subdomains classified as a website.

D. Limitations

Our approach is inherently limited by the post-recursor passive DNS traffic representing only cache misses, heavily aggregated across large-scale recursive resolvers. We have no true count of client queries (to the recursive resolver) nor identifiers for individual clients or sensors, and can therefore not incorporate this into our approach; hence our goal of evaluating whether post-recursor traffic can still be useful for modeling domain popularity. The aggregator cache also reduces temporal granularity, as counts are aggregated over at least five hours, which we deem too long to meaningfully integrate in our design, e.g., for client query modeling based on DNS request inter-arrival times [33]. Evolutions and optimizations in DNS resolution, such as QNAME minimization [44, 45] or encrypted queries [46], may affect the reliability or comprehensiveness of our traffic data. Since we observe DNS queries and not (top-level browsing context) web visits, query counts may also be inflated by website redirects [47], and by the inclusion of third-party resources.

In terms of data quality, we have no reason to believe that counts would be inaccurate, but we also rely on record values provided by the domain itself. We sometimes observe inaccuracies that could affect our data processing and subsequent results, e.g., `google.com` incorrectly being set as a CNAME or NS record value. We account for these errors by (heuristically) setting minimum thresholds for our CNAME reverse cache, and by prioritizing data sources based on reliability for our service classifier. We also use the (authoritative) TTL values, which resolvers may not always respect [16, 17] – e.g., Moura et al. found that values under 1 hour were rarely changed, but TTLs over 1 day were more frequently truncated [39, 48]. For ranking manipulation, incorporating TTL could allow an attack to set high TTL values as an amplifier [13, 48]. Attackers could then issue queries if they can get a sensor to query the domain, e.g., through IP spoofing [49]. We already propose truncating high TTL values, and while we do not have access to sensor-level data, an attacker would still need to discover the unknown sensors and trigger a DNS query from as many of them as possible to achieve a (better) rank. Moreover, the deployment at

sensors of proper protections against IP spoofing could prevent attackers from issuing the necessary DNS queries [50, 51].

Finally, the lack of definitive ground truth to evaluate accuracy forms a challenge for our evaluation. Ruth et al. [6] come closest with a comparison of existing rankings to Cloudflare web traffic (covering around 10% of all websites), but given a lack of open data, we cannot replicate this for our rankings. We are also dependent on one specific data source for our evaluation. Our method can be used on all passive DNS data sources, but our concrete results inherently only hold for SIE Europe data, and are therefore biased to its composition of (likely European-based) resolvers.

V. EVALUATION

To evaluate the influence of the design decisions in our ranking method using real-world data, we apply our method to passive DNS data sourced from SIE Europe [15], aggregated from sensors located at European-based commercial, government, and higher education organizations. We evaluate our ranking design by generating the three ranking types (FQDN, root, and web) using the passive DNS feed for 27 June – 4 July, 13–28 July, 24 August – 11 October, 17 October – 8 November, 15 November – 5 December, and 16–30 December 2023 (gaps are due to outages). When we describe a ranking for a given day and time period, we use the data observed on that day and the days before it for the duration of the given time period. To provide a thorough understanding of the properties of our ranking, we analyze the composition of our rankings, and the impact of the different steps of our resource record processing (Section IV-B) on the ranking.

A. Ranking length

The lengths of the 1-day rankings vary over time between 3.3M and 9.5M FQDNs, 1.6M and 6.3M root domains, and 0.6M and 1.9M web domains (Figure 4); an average reduction of 42.7% and 70.1% respectively. This shows that the choices of excluding subdomains and/or prioritizing websites significantly reduces a ranking’s length. In the first half of our measurement, the length of the web ranking always exceeds 1 million websites, but this no longer holds in the second half. Figure 5 shows how raw query volumes dropped from a peak of 1.4 to a low of 0.3 billion queries per day.⁶ If the query volume becomes too low, the ranking no longer achieves the threshold of 1 million websites that is commonly used for other rankings, highlighting the need to observe a sufficient traffic volume to capture a sufficient diversity of domains in the long tail.

One way of augmenting query volumes is to aggregate traffic data over a longer timespan. Figure 6 shows how the lengths increase for 7-day rankings, yielding an even larger set of domains that can be measured. Owing to the commonality of some ranked domains across time (Section V-D), these lengths do not increase seven-fold. Instead, the increase in ranking length is between a factor of 2.7 and 6.0 for FQDN

⁶We have no immediate explanation for this variance in query volume. Possible causes are an organic (temporary) decrease in traffic, the removal or malfunctioning of sensors or the data feed, or bandwidth limitations.

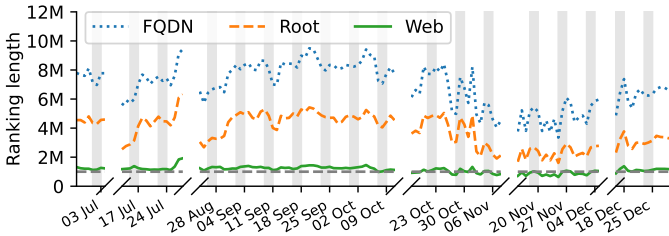


Fig. 4. 1-day FQDN rankings are longer than root and web rankings, at an average reduction of 42.7% and 70.1% respectively. (Weekends are highlighted in gray.)

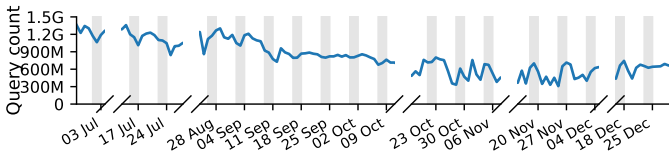


Fig. 5. Observed query counts fluctuate over time, although we do not observe a direct correlation with ranking lengths.

rankings, 2.7 and 7.7⁷ for root rankings, and 2.2 and 4.7 for web rankings. As a result, the 7-day web ranking contains at least 2.5M websites, comfortably meeting the 1M threshold.

Takeaway: It is necessary to observe a sufficiently large traffic volume such that there are enough distinct domains/websites in the ranking. Traffic volume can be increased by aggregating across multiple days, as is done in, e.g., Radar (7 days).

B. Observation count distribution

Unlike for existing rankings, we have access to the raw scores that determine the final domain ranking. We use this to characterize the estimated traffic distribution across the ranking and its dependence on incorporating TTL, and to understand whether our ranking exhibits patterns that have previously been observed in web traffic.

Figure 7 shows the distribution of the observation counts, both unweighted and weighted by TTL over the domain rank, for the ranking of 1 September 2023. Distributions on other days are similar. Overall, the score distributions appear to adhere to a power law distribution, i.e., the rank and count have an inverse relation. This distribution matches previous

⁷This outlier (above 7) corresponds to the trough in query volume, where the data for the previous days contain more domains unseen in the 1-day data.

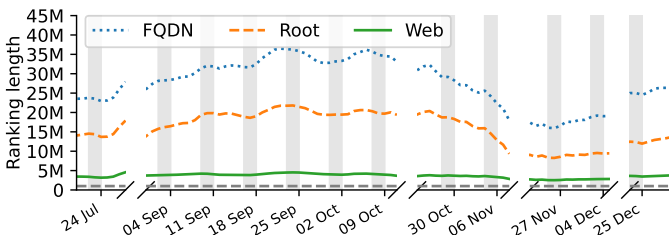


Fig. 6. 7-day rankings, as shown, are much larger than 1-day rankings. Web rankings easily surpass the common 1 million website threshold.

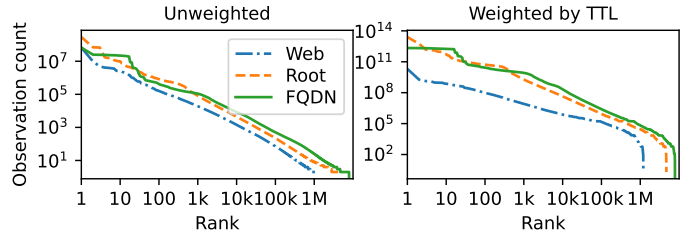


Fig. 7. The rank-size distribution of (un)weighted observation counts appear to adhere to a power law distribution (1 Sep. 2023 rankings).

observations in website and domain popularity distributions [8, 27, 52, 53]. For the FQDN rankings, there is a stagnation and then drop-off in the head (well-ranked domains). We conjecture that it is the effect of resolver caching: the expected traffic increase (in client queries) is dampened (in cache misses) because caches already serve these requests without going to the authoritative nameserver. There may also be remaining effects from the overcounting of nameservers (Section IV-B1). In terms of susceptibility to manipulation, the total unweighted observation counts indicate the query volume required to insert a domain at a given rank. In the TTL-weighted ranking, setting a high TTL amplifies the adversary’s ability to perform such manipulation. There is also a drop-off in the tails of all rankings, likely due to shared low discrete query counts. Another view on this ranking tail comes from the absolute differences in query counts from one rank to another. From a rank of around 1,000 onwards, differences sometimes drop to 0 and are generally very low. This effect has also been previously observed in existing rankings, where it was visible through alphabetically ranked clusters [23]. This seems to confirm prior observations [8] that differences between individual ranks in the tail are not (statistically) significant, suggesting that bucketing is also useful for grouping domains with very similar traffic levels.

A final way to view the traffic distribution is by charting the cumulative traffic proportion along the ranking (Figure 8). For the FQDN and root rankings, unweighted rankings attribute more traffic to the head, while for web rankings, the opposite is true. We also compare the web distribution to the Google Chrome traffic distributions traced from Ruth et al. [27]. Here, the TTL-weighted web ranking closely follows this distribution; the unweighted ranking assigns more importance to the head.

Takeaway: The observed traffic distributions have a significant effect on the resulting rankings, exacerbated by TTL. The choice to weight query counts by TTL affects the granularity at which domain query volumes can be compared, and how the resulting distributions match those observed empirically.

C. Correcting mechanisms

We introduce two correcting mechanisms in our ranking approach: CNAME reversal and service classification. On 1 September 2023, across the FQDN ranking, we mapped 261,486 (3.26%) of all subdomains to another subdomain based on CNAME reversal. 90,084 (34.5%) of them mapped to another subdomain within the same root domain. The remaining subdomains are distributed across 24,613 unique root domains

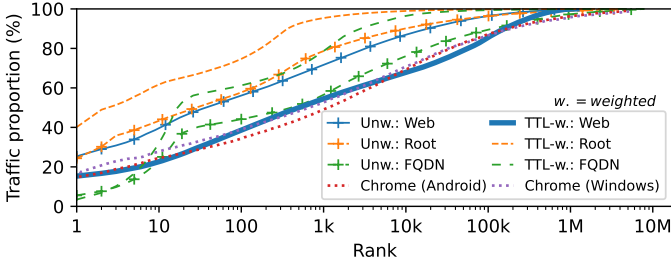


Fig. 8. The TTL-weighted cumulative traffic distribution closely follows the distribution of Google Chrome web traffic [6, Figure 1] (1 Sep. 2023 rankings).

TABLE I
SERVICE CLASS DISTRIBUTION (1 SEP. 2023 FQDN RANKING).

Class	Percentage	Class	Percentage
Unclassified	45.79	IPv4 address	0.89
Website	37.65	CDN	0.70
Nameserver	9.31	Other web service	0.44
Mailserver	3.45	Protocol (FTP, ...)	0.36
Web admin panel	1.07	UUID	0.34

and mapped to one of 95,016 other root domains. Across these other subdomains, major CDNs and managed DNS providers are concentrated at the top (e.g., *cloudflare.net*, *azure.com*), who would be overcounted without the CNAME reversal.

54% of the FQDN ranking on 1 September 2023 is classified as a specific service, of which 69.5% as websites (Table I). The rest cannot reliably be classified using our selection of passive sources, and may require additional signals such as an active crawl. Within the root ranking, 33% of domains can be classified, of which 79.7% as a website to be included in the web ranking. Given that our external sources for websites integrate a notion of popularity (for rankings) or notability (for Wiki sources), any unclassified root domains that would be websites are more likely to be unpopular or uninteresting, next to disposable [54] or algorithmically generated [55] domains. In terms of the distribution of service classes over the ranking, nameservers dominate the ranking head, in particular for the FQDN ranking and when weighting by TTL (Figure 9). The latter is likely due to the frequent use of a 2-day TTL by nameservers (26.7% of FQDNs, 66.9% of queries).

Takeaway: Using correcting mechanisms, such as CNAME reversal or a service classifier, corrects for otherwise overly dominant domains such as CDNs and nameservers.

D. Stability

The stability of a ranking represents a balance between rapidly integrating popularity changes and producing a set of domains reusable over time. We measure the stability of our three ranking types by comparing each daily ranking with the previous day’s one using two metrics: Spearman’s rank correlation, which takes the rank ordering into account, and the Jaccard index, which operates on unordered sets and ignores the ranks. As noted by Ruth et al. [6], these metrics are rather pessimistic; we focus on comparing relative patterns between ranking parameters, and less on absolute results.

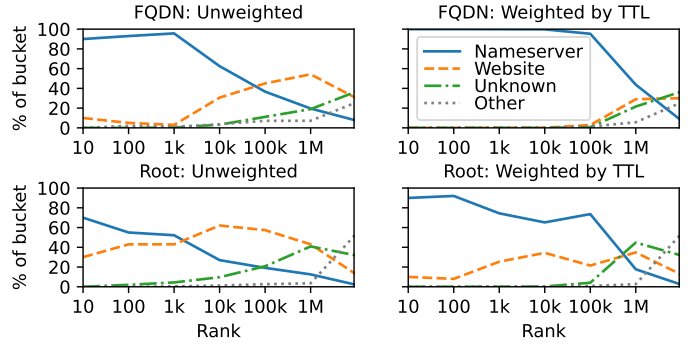


Fig. 9. The distribution of service classes over buckets shows that nameservers dominate the ranking head (1 Sep. 2023 rankings).

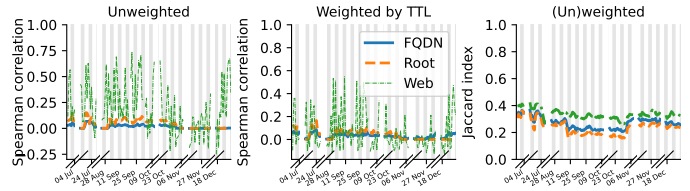


Fig. 10. Between consecutive 1-day rankings, the web ranking is generally the most stable, followed by the FQDN and then root ranking. As the Jaccard index ignores ranks, this metric is equal for the (un)weighted rankings.

Figure 10 shows the patterns that emerge across these stability metrics. The web ranking is generally the most stable, suggesting that web properties exhibit more stable visiting patterns, whereas infrastructural domains may be more volatile (e.g., due to different traffic distribution across servers). Next, the FQDN ranking is more stable than the root ranking, suggesting that our data source sees a similar set of (sub)domains from day to day, but that their combination and re-ranking based on root domains introduces more volatility. Weighting by TTL reduces stability for ranked metrics, suggesting that the unweighted ranking is preferable if stability is desired.

The Spearman rank correlation often exhibits negligible or even negative correlations, suggesting that across the entire ranking (head and long tail), ranks are very unstable over time. This observation supports the preference to use rankings as unordered sets that Ruth et al. [6] also found among researchers. Indeed, the Jaccard index shows a higher stability when ignoring rank order. Between using the individual ranks and fully ignoring them, using buckets of ranks may be a good middle ground. Figure 11 shows the evolution of stability per bucket, computed for web rankings using the Jaccard index, between the domain at the first rank after the previous bucket and the domain at the last rank of the current bucket, e.g., 1,001–10,000. First, the metric tends to a much higher value than for the overall ranking (Figure 10) – note that this ranking may be longer than 1 million domains –, suggesting that buckets at the head are more stable in general. Second, the buckets at the head are more stable, with the top 100 bucket being the most stable. (This effect is also most pronounced for the web rankings.) This suggests that at its head, our rankings contain domains that are repeatedly popular.

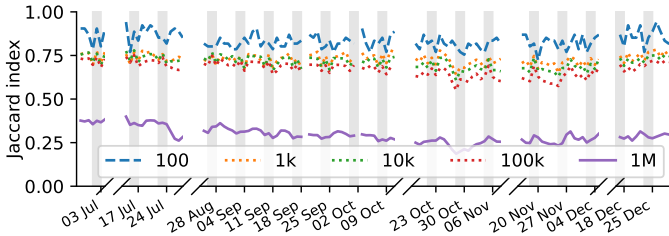


Fig. 11. Between consecutive 1-day web rankings, buckets at the head are more stable.

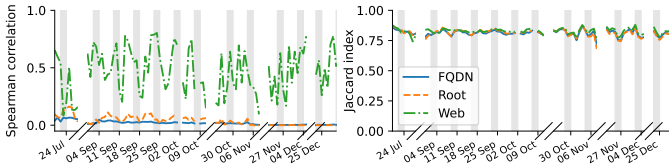


Fig. 12. Between consecutive 7-day unweighted rankings, all rankings become much more stable, in particular on the unordered Jaccard index.

If a more stable ranking is desirable, e.g., for longitudinal studies, the variability can be decreased by aggregating rankings across a longer period of time [8, 26]. Aggregation of data across 7 days vastly increases the stability for unordered metrics (Figure 12, when compared to Figure 10); for ordered metrics, there is also a positive but much less pronounced effect.

Takeaway: Both aggregating across longer data windows and bucketing, as implemented in, e.g., Radar, improve stability. Aggregation achieves this by smoothing over short-term volatility, while bucketing smoothes over the small differences in observed traffic volumes between consecutively ranked domains.

VI. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Our goal was to understand how to leverage “post-recursor” passive DNS data for generating a domain ranking that is suitable for Internet and Web measurements. Based on the design and evaluation of our ranking method, we can draw several conclusions on the challenges and necessary steps that turn such data into a usable ranking.

At its base, passive DNS data is usable for generating a website-oriented ranking, primarily after our service classification step; otherwise, nameservers are dominant. This step also lends itself to further development and refinement: we deliberately chose to work only with passive service class indicators to show that this resource-limited approach is already feasible, but service classification may be improved with active indicators (i.e., web crawls that reveal the presence of useful content over HTTP), given the availability of the necessary resources. Correcting factors are necessary: in addition to service classification, we found that without CNAME reversal, CDNs and managed DNS providers would be overrepresented.

Specifically for DNS-based rankings, TTL can be an important factor in accurately assessing domain popularity, as it affects the temporal querying patterns (Figure 3). While incorporating TTL makes theoretical sense, it appears that this does not necessarily improve all ranking properties. For

example, nameservers dominate TTL-weighted rankings more heavily, and the observation count distribution is more skewed at the tail. High TTL values can be abused as an amplifier in ranking manipulation. Nevertheless, TTL-weighted web rankings follow known web traffic distributions more closely, so appear more representative in this regard. Incorporating TTL must therefore be carefully considered. For example, Xie et al. [16] decided to omit TTL from SecRank as it was difficult to reliably infer resolver caching behavior from TTL. The choice of including or ignoring TTL is significant, and there is very little similarity between unweighted and TTL-weighted rankings (Appendix C), both when incorporating and ignoring ranks, and even at the ranking head. This direct effect further confirms our indirect observations that TTL affects distributions and stability of rankings. More abstractly, this shows how even for the exact same data set, one design decision can result in wildly different outputs, suggesting that reliably comparing all existing rankings and their variation in data sources and methods is even more challenging. For example, Ruth et al. [6] already had to introduce several normalizations and adjustments, such as filtering on Cloudflare-only sites, to allow for ranking comparison.

Two more recent ranking design elements appear to have a positive impact: rank buckets and long-term aggregation. Buckets yield significant improvements to stability, perhaps unsurprisingly, given the low levels of traffic at the long tail of the ranking, where small differences in rank may, therefore, be meaningless (i.e., statistically insignificant). This effect had already been observed at the heyday of the Alexa ranking [8], and continues in Google Chrome traffic to this day [6]. This also serves as confirmation of Cloudflare’s decision to deploy two different models for compiling the head and tail of their Radar ranking [11]. Longer data periods also lead to higher stability, and aggregation over 7 days (like Radar) or even 30 days (like CrUX and Tranco) may therefore be preferable. Also, in this light, while the finding by Ruth et al. that CrUX is more reliable [6] is likely due to Chrome’s widespread visibility on Web traffic, these design decisions also play a part in improving CrUX’s (and other rankings’) accuracy.

In conclusion, passive DNS traffic can be used to generate a representative domain or website popularity ranking. Despite the limitations of post-recursor traffic, such as the lack of IP-level data, the data is sufficiently rich to generate reliable rankings, as it provides the necessary data for producing traffic volumes, correcting mechanisms, and service classes. Through our evaluation, we are also able to confirm the benefits of the design decisions made by recent rankings, specifically the move towards bucketing and longer-term aggregation, although these may not fulfill all use cases, e.g., if more granular ranks are desired. Future directions for evaluating these rankings ideally involve ground-truth data [6], long-term evaluations [26], and an assessment of the impact on research results [7]. Through analyzing these fundamentals of ranking approaches, we can build towards rankings that meet the needs of researchers.

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APPENDIX A ETHICS

Processing DNS query data may come with a privacy risk, as it could be used to identify individual users and the domains that they access [56–59]. We only have access to count data aggregated from post-recursor requests across multiple sensors that mix cache misses originating from many users and institutions. The data does not contain any explicit fields with likely personally identifiable information (PII), such as the client IP address. We already identify domain names (likely) containing IP addresses as a separate class, and would discard them for any publicly available rankings. We further aggregate the raw counts from the passive DNS feed per domain, and for a final public ranking would select a reasonable cutoff (on query count or ranking length) to retain only sufficiently popular domains and avoid publicizing private internal domains. We, therefore, consider that user privacy is preserved.

APPENDIX B REPRODUCIBILITY

To enable reproducing our work, we commit to making the ranking generation code, ranking files, and analysis scripts and results available upon acceptance. For this submission, we share these resources anonymously:

- The ranking generation code is hosted at <https://figshare.com/s/e9ce8398712904fbde38>
- A partial archive (due to storage limits) of ranking files used in the evaluation is hosted at <https://figshare.com/s/fcbc320de721c12f6ecb>
- The analysis code for our evaluation is hosted at <https://figshare.com/s/788fdf4ca807b1e2e763>

APPENDIX C TTL INCORPORATION: SIMILARITY

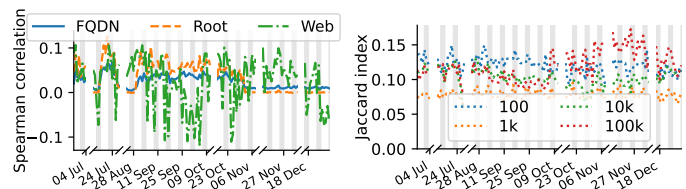


Fig. 13. Unweighted and TTL-weighted rankings are very dissimilar, as measured using the Spearman correlation, and for buckets of the web ranking using the Jaccard index.