

A New HTTP Status Code to Report Legal Obstacles

All the non-boilerplate

This document specifies an additional Hypertext Transfer Protocol (HTTP) status code for use when resource access is denied due to legal demands. This allows server operators to provide greater transparency in circumstances where issues of law or public policy affect their operation. This transparency may be beneficial both to these operators and to end users.

This status code indicates that the server is denying access to the resource in response to a legal demand.

Since such demands typically apply to all operators in a legal jurisdiction, the server in question may or may not be an origin server. The demands typically most directly affect the operations of ISPs and search engines.

Responses using this status code SHOULD include an explanation, in the response body, of the details of the legal demand: which legal authority is making it, and what class of resources it applies to.

The use of the 451 status code implies neither the existence nor non-existence of the resource named in the request. That is to say, it is possible that if the legal demands were removed, a request for the resource still might not succeed.

Security Considerations

The 451 status code is optional; clients cannot rely upon its use. It is possible that certain legal authorities may wish to avoid transparency, and not only demand the restriction of access to certain resources, but also avoid disclosing that the demand was made.

In the browser

- Should be handled just like 404
- Browser provides a default message if none given by server...
- ... or server can provide as much richly-decorated HTML content as they want.

On the server

- I adapted Apache httpd to do 451
 - You can specify a 451 wherever you could put a "Deny"
 - Or implant it in a proxy wherever you could put a "Block"
- The diffs are <200lines
- For other popular frameworks (Django, Java EE, Rails, PHP) it's mostly a no-brainer

Arguments

- Not needed; 403 is good enough
- Should be in 5xx/3xx, not 4xx
- It's politics; not our problem
- Should be a MUST
- Message body should have semantic structure, with a taxonomy of the different kinds of legal obstacles...
- ... or a link to primary sources, which gives a chance for the use of link relations.
- 451 is disrespectful to Bradbury, who claimed the book wasn't about censorship, and generally dissed the Internet.