
JOINT STATEMENT BY FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION ADVOCATES:
FREE FLOW OF INFORMATION SHOULD BE AT CORE OF UN CONFERENCE

The just-ended UN Internet Governance Forum (IGF) that met in Rio de Janeiro Nov. 12-15 considered subjects that appear to be primarily technical and whose implications are difficult for the general public to understand. We stress, however, that any regulation of the Internet on the international level impacts directly on freedom of expression. We are concerned over the thrust of the discussions at the IGF. Most governments taking part in the Forum focused on the current Internet governance model, stressing the need to share power and criticizing the oversight role of the U.S. government.

Numerous panels were indeed held on freedom of expression themes. But we have serious doubts about the influence of such discussions on the negotiations between states and the current Internet governance authorities, in and out of the IGF.

The undersigned non-governmental organizations cannot for now form a judgment on all the subjects discussed at the IGF. Still, we wish to identify the questions raised in Rio de Janeiro that are bound to have consequences for freedom of expression and to propose a few simple principles that should guide the debates on the future of the Internet.

The IGF is an annual event meeting each time in a different country. The next IGF is to meet in New Delhi Dec. 8-11, 2008. The first IGF was held in Athens in November 2006..

INTERNET GOVERNANCE

We hold that freedom of expression should be at the core of the debates on Internet governance. Any system to run the Internet should be examined in light of its effect on the free flow of information.

We are specially concerned by the domination of the Rio debates by states that systematically curb freedom of expression on the Internet. The determination of those states to take the lead in reorganizing Internet governance reinforces our conviction that organizations that defend freedom of expression must play a central role in the discussions.

We recognize that many find it genuinely unacceptable for the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), which manages a global resource, to be under the direct or indirect authority of a single government. The signatories of this joint statement do not necessarily share the same view on the future of ICANN, but they all believe that freedom of expression and the openness of the Internet must be the paramount consideration. We do not consider that the way to address the issue is the creation of an intergovernmental body, necessarily including repressive regimes, to manage the Internet.

OPENNESS

Stress has been placed at the Forum on questions of access and security in cyberspace. We do consider those questions to be vital. But we note that some of the most authoritarian regimes are amongst those states that use such considerations to oppose the principle of openness of the Internet. The stated objective of those states is to increase the numbers of Internet users who operate in a « secure » environment but not necessarily for them to have access to a free and uncensored one. That approach to the Internet is extremely dangerous. We stress that the free flow of information should be a major consideration, not a secondary one, in discussions of the Internet's future. Internet should be an open, non-discriminatory and decentralized network.

COMPANY RESPONSIBILITY

Freedom of expression is a principle that must be respected not just by states but also by private companies. A number of Internet companies operate in repressive countries. Such companies can be critical actors in protecting freedom of expression. We call upon them to

develop credible and accountable human rights principles for their global activities. We invite those companies not already involved in current discussions to that end to join in the process of defining a common human rights-oriented approach that would have a global impact. Companies should take the necessary steps to respect freedom of expression, regardless of where they operate.

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