Contribution to the 2017 Open Consultation of the ITU CWG-Internet
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Summary

The world will be connected, by 2025. But a totalising net of surveillance has annexed the planet, rapidly enfolding society and sociality. The unfreedoms of the internet are not just about exclusion, but the despotism of a tireless net that enslaves us as subjects of a datafied world. There was a time when those who could manipulate media manipulated elections; now algorithms are taking over electoral processes and the media. Welcome to post-truth on the post-human planet. The primary problem before us is that of greed: in digital capitalism, the Internet is becoming a rapacious instrument of capture. We have forfeited the opportunity that the digital revolution brought us to build a technology of memory that can radically change the power structures of society.

The digital phenomenon is invariably cast as post-political; as an autonomous force that is best left alone, untarnished by human intent. But inclusion presupposes the rule of law. As the Internet redefines institutions globally and locally, it dislocates the boundaries of existing jurisprudence. So, who should develop the standards for the global public policy issues raised by the Internet? The absence of a democratic international platform to address public interest in times of algorithmic tyranny reflects a monumental crisis of governance. A private platform floated by the top six digital corporations is all set to formulate best practices on AI technologies. Industry standards do indeed have a role to play.

But an internet that can be individually empowering, collectively enriching and ecologically restorative is possible only through a democratic rule of law that can guarantee the mechanisms of accountability, in global governance. It is time we move in this direction, of forging a global digital compact. We need a robust political process to develop global norms and policies for the Internet, as required by the Tunis agenda.

Introduction

On 15 October 2016 the Council Working Group decided that Open Consultations would be convened on the following issue:

> Considering the importance of Internet to the global digital economy, all stakeholders are invited to submit their comments on the following key aspects:
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> > 1. What are the developmental aspects of the Internet (for example, economic, social, regulatory and technical aspects), especially for developing countries?
> >
> > 2. How can governments and other stakeholders promote the developmental aspects of the Internet?
> >
> > 3. What are the challenges and opportunities?

In response to that consultation I am submitting the statement that I made at the opening of the Internet Governance Forum on 6 December. The video link is at:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QQXnUAvlPHY

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Statement

Respected colleagues and dear friends,

Most of us who come back to the IGF, year after year, share a dream; a dream that the internet - as a cherished innovation, can make possible a society that is free and equal.

With ten IGFs behind us, we need to ask ourselves, how well we have done. Let's take access. Over 40% of the 7.5 billion people on this planet are connected. However, we are told that connectivity rates are slowing down.

But this may not be a cause for worry. The network will get to the last woman, anyway. Never mind if it is rudimentary and of poor quality; never mind if it is zero rated. A global, immersive, invisible, networked computing environment built through the marvels of the cloud, massive data centres and proliferation of smart everythings, will soon be upon us. The world will be connected, by 2025.

My submission, as we begin our deliberations on inclusive and sustainable growth at this IGF is that since 2005, when the Tunis agenda gave us the mandate of the IGF, we have been caught in the trees and woods problem. As we have harped on freedoms online, busying ourselves to bring access to all, a mission creep has overtaken us. A totalising net of surveillance has annexed the planet, rapidly enfolding society and sociality.

The unfreedoms of the internet are not just about exclusion, but the despotism of a tireless net that enslaves us as subjects of a datafied world. There was a time when those who could manipulate media manipulated elections; now algorithms are taking over electoral processes and the media.

Welcome to post-truth on the post-human planet.

The primary problem before us is not a problem of trust as we are told in every other internet report, but that of greed. In digital capitalism, it is [cheaper to give access to people than leave them alone](). And so, as we stand by watching, the Internet is becoming a rapacious instrument of capture. It is the basis of networked individualism, the motor of a consumptive society, where the race for big data coopts us as willing slaves of limitless goodies.

From a predatory internet, the path downhill can only be a society that self-cannibalises.

The second problem is that we have forfeited the opportunity that the digital revolution brought us to build a technology of memory that can radically change the power structures of society. The history of every civilization is about its technology of memory. As social memory and cognition are increasingly centralised through the data bases and algorithms of state and corporate surveillance, we see a crisis of extreme alienation and unprecedented inequality.

A world that is fully networked – as things stand – can neither be sustainable nor inclusive. 2025 is unlikely to be raceless, genderless, classless or casteless.

This brings us to the third problem - the digital phenomenon is invariably cast as post-political; as an autonomous force that is best left alone, untarnished by human intent. But inclusion presupposes the rule of law. As the Internet redefines institutions globally and locally, it dislocates the boundaries of existing jurisprudence. To pass the test of equality and inclusion, the network-data structures scaffolding all institutions need a new philosophy and science of law and justice.

The current paralysis of global internet governance is unsustainable.

As the global network finds its way into reality, augmenting it through embedded code and remote control, there is a huge loss of local autonomy. The Internet's logic is inherently irreverential of territorial jurisdiction.

So, who should develop the standards for these global public policy issues? The absence of a democratic international platform to address public interest in times of algorithmic tyranny reflects a monumental crisis of governance. A private platform floated by the top six digital corporations, named "[Partnership on AI – To Benefit People and Society](#)" is all set to formulate best practices on AI technologies. Industry standards do indeed have a role to play. But an internet that can be individually empowering, collectively enriching and ecologically restorative is possible only through a democratic rule of law that can guarantee the mechanisms of accountability, in global governance.

It is time we move in this direction, of forging a global digital compact.

The dialogic space of IGF is indeed a unique venue for public deliberation. But to complement the IGF, we need a robust political process to develop global norms and policies for the Internet, as required by the Tunis agenda.

The task for civil society is cut out. Unless social movements can come together to reimagine an alternative internet, one that promotes diverse universes, another internet will not be possible.

Our wisdom is getting colonised. It is time for a new politics of internet governance.

At the risk of sounding techno-deterministic, I would like to say to you all, if we can save the internet, we may perhaps be able to save the planet.

Now, let us look to our neighbour and begin a conversation; do they know there is a question here? Do they understand the now-or-never imperative?

Friends, before I say thank you, I would like to lend my voice of support to the [statement](#) issued by my Mexican civil society colleagues during the IGF, about their human rights concerns. The Internet, I believe must be protected as a bastion of democracy. It cannot become an instrument that undermines human rights.