

**An Open Letter to the UN Internet Governance Forum (IGF)
for its 3rd Annual Meeting at Hyderabad, India, from 3rd to 6th December, 2008**

The IGF must ACT NOW against the threat to the public-ness and the egalitarian nature of the Internet

The undersigned wish to express their deep concern that the UN Internet Governance Forum (IGF), created by the World Summit on the Information Society in 2005 as an Internet ‘policy dialogue’ forum, is largely failing to address key public interest and policy issues in global Internet governance – including that of democratic deficit.

Who shapes the Internet, as the Internet shapes our new social context?

The Internet represents the single most important technical advance of our society in a long time, so much so that it defines a new emerging social paradigm. The basic characteristics of the Internet determine the contours of the emerging social order in many important ways. The Internet was conceived as, and still largely is, an extensive communication system which is democratizing, and has little respect for established social hierarchies. Interactions and associations built over this new ‘techno-social’ system have, therefore, held the promise of a more egalitarian society.

The era of innocence of the Internet however appears to be fast approaching its end. Today, the Internet of the future – the very near future – is being shaped insidiously by dominant forces to further their interests. (See the fact-sheet on the following page for some illustrations of this.) Unfortunately, global policy forums have largely failed to articulate, much less act on, crucial Internet policy issues, which concern the democratic possibilities for our societies.

The IGF needs to act now!

As the Internet Governance Forum convenes for its third annual meeting, between 3rd and 6th December, 2008, in Hyderabad, India, it must take immediate steps to anchor and discuss important global public interest and policy issues involved in Internet governance. If it does not act now, it may get seen as a space that only provides an illusion of a public policy dialogue, and, consequently, as being co-opted in furthering the agenda of dominant forces that are shaping the Internet as per their narrow interests. **We therefore strongly urge the IGF to directly address the following key global public interest and policy issues:**

- 1. Increasing corporatisation of the Internet**
- 2. Increasing proprietisation of standards and code that go into building the Internet**

- 3. Increasing points of control being embedded into the Internet in the name of security and intellectual property violations**
- 4. Huge democratic deficit in global Internet governance**

We exhort the IGF to adopt clear directions for engaging with these crucial public policy issues. The IGF should come out with a clear work plan at its forthcoming meeting in Hyderabad to address the four key areas listed above.

The global community – comprising not only people who currently have access to the Internet, but also the un-connected billions who are being impacted by it nevertheless – will judge the meaningfulness and legitimacy of the IGF in terms of what progress it is able to make on these issues.

Alternative Law Forum, Bangalore

Centre for Internet and Society, Bangalore

Delhi Science Forum, New Delhi

Free Software Foundation - India

IT for Change, Bangalore

Knowledge Commons, New Delhi

Information Sheet

How the Public-ness and Egalitarian Nature of the Internet is Threatened – Some Examples

Corporatisation of the Internet

Largely unsuspected by most of its users, the Internet is rapidly changing from being a vast ‘public sphere’, with a fully public ownership and a non-proprietary nature, to a set of corporatised privately-owned networks.

On the one hand, telecom companies are carving out the Internet into privately-owned networks – controlling the nature of transactions over these networks. They seek to differentially charge content providers, while also building wholly private networks offering exclusive content relay services. Developments like video/TV over Internet Protocol and the provision of controlled and selective Internet services over mobiles are contributing to increasing network-operators’ control over the Internet, with a corresponding erosion of its public-ness.

On the other hand, the commons of the Internet is also being overwhelmed and squeezed out by a complete domination of a few privately owned mega-applications such as Google, Facebook, Youtube etc.

Proprietarisation of standards and code that build the Internet

One of the main ways of appropriating the commons of the Internet is through the increasing use of proprietary and closed standards and code in building the Internet system. Such appropriation allows the extortion of illegitimate rent out of the many new forms of commons-based activities that are being made possible through the Internet.

Embedding control points in the Internet

A growing confluence of corporatist and statist interests has led to the embedding of more and more means of control into the Internet in a manner that greatly compromises citizens' rights and freedoms. Whether it is the pressure on Internet Service Providers to examine Internet traffic for 'intellectual property' violations; or imposition of cultural and political controls on the Internet by states within their boundaries; or ITU's work on IP trace-back mechanisms; or the tightening of US control over the global Internet infrastructure in the name of securing the root zone file and the domain name system, these new forms of controlling the Internet are being negotiated among dominant interests away from public scrutiny and wider public interest-based engagements.

Democratic deficit in global Internet governance

The current global Internet governance regime – a new-age privatized governance system professing allegiance mostly to a single country, the US – has proven to be an active instrument of perpetuation of dominant commercial and geo-political interests. Lately, OECD countries have begun some work on developing public policy principles that, due to the inherently global nature of the Internet, can be expected to become globally applicable. It is quite unacceptable that OECD countries shirk from discussing the same public policy issues at global public policy forums like the IGF that they discuss among themselves at OECD meetings. Apparently, developing countries are expected to focus on finding ways to reach connectivity to their people, and not burden themselves with higher-level Internet governance issues!

People's and communities' right to self-determination and participation in governance of issues that impact their lives should underpin global Internet governance.