A Democratic Framework to Interpret
Open Internet Principles:

Putting Open Internet Principles to Work for Democracy

Overview

An open internet – where all citizens can freely express themselves, share and debate ideas, and conduct commerce – is an essential part of a modern, vibrant democracy. Ensuring that the internet remains both open and accessible is necessary to strengthen democratic engagement, enable equal participation in the market economy, and promote social accountability.

The increasing shift of political and social discourse to online platforms has led to a corresponding rise by anti-democratic actors in the use of the internet as a tool that can silence dissent, promote violence, and perpetuate prevailing inequalities, including regarding access and use. The new and rapidly evolving nature of the internet means many citizens are unaware or misinformed of how their fundamental rights such as to speech, assembly, and association apply in a digital world.

The [Internet Rights and Principles Dynamic Coalition](#) (IRPC) of the Internet Governance Forum has developed a solid, sensible set of norms and standards for an open internet to counter such actions. Adherence to a universally applied set of standards and norms for a free and open internet that reflects a commitment to inclusion, participation, and accountability is a vital component of modern democracy. To create a framework for internet openness for democracy advocates to fight for more democratic societies based on the IRPC principles, CIPE, NDI, and CIMA are developing *A Democratic Guide to Applying the Internet Rights and Principles.*

As democratic citizens and reformers navigate changing political environments, we hope this guide will help activists working for democracy in an internet age and connect them in global peer networks to exchange best practices. These guides serve as an advocacy tool that organizations can utilize in pushing governments, the private sector, and civil society to adhere to universal human rights through open internet principles and standards.

The Community

The Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE), the National Democratic Institute (NDI), and the Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA) are starting a joint initiative to apply internet norms and principles essential to democratic governance. Success requires the diverse voices of a wide range of local and multinational organizations, including political and human rights groups, citizen activists, media representatives, civil society organizations, and members of the private sector.

The Principles

The principles embodied in the IRPC are thoughtful and thorough but they are relatively high level, making their direct application in local contexts challenging. With relentless erosion of internet openness around the world, we wanted to find ways to make these norms and standards more applicable to everyday activists fighting for a more open, democratic society in a digital age. As such, we are working to build a framework for the application of these norms, translating them into action-oriented political language for civil society, the media, and the business community.

The bullets under each IRPC principle are our first effort to capture at some of the ways these internet norms are critical to and can be operationalized in the context of a democratic society. This could include impacts on political parties, governments, elections, the media and citizen journalism, and the business community.

(Black=From IRPC Green=Democratic Framework)

1. Universality and Equality

All humans are born free and equal in dignity and rights, which must be respected, protected and fulfilled in the online environment.

What does this mean in practice?
- The Internet provides citizens around the world with greater freedom of expression, opportunities for civil society, business, media, and political participation.
- The equality of all citizens is a fundamental principle of democracy, this right of citizens extends to the internet space and must be respected and protected.

2. Rights and Social Justice

The Internet is a space for the promotion, protection and fulfillment of human rights and the advancement of social justice. Everyone has the duty to respect the human rights of all others in the online environment.

- The Internet provides a space for individuals to exercise their democratic rights and advocate for the rights of others.
- In order for all citizens to exercise their democratic rights online, everyone must respect this space.
- The ability of individuals and groups to advocate for issues and concerns is impossible without unfettered access to the internet.

3. Accessibility

Everyone has an equal right to access and use a secure and open Internet

- There is a responsibility to identify and address existing inequalities in access, particularly among marginalized populations.
- Language minorities are often locked out of a major-language internet.
- Full engagement from people with disabilities requires the internet to be coded for accessibility
- Women often face the impact of a closed internet in a different way than men, and gender inequalities can prevent physical access to internet-connected devices
- Online participation that doesn't look like the population - particularly when the internet serves as a conduit for official information - reduces the legitimacy of a democracy.

4. Expression and Association

Everyone has the right to seek, receive, and impart information freely on the Internet without censorship or other interference. Everyone also has the right to associate freely through and on the Internet for social, political, cultural or other purposes.

- Using multiple actors or channels to deny citizens access to, or interrupt, legitimate political discourse undermines democratic culture and practice. Examples of disruptions to democratic dialogue include:
  - Flooding comment spaces
  - Using AI and "bots" for automated attacks
  - Paying groups like the "50-cent army" to troll and harass online
- People have the right to debate any subject online without government interference or illegal surveillance.
- Shutting down or throttling access to the Internet, or parts of the Internet, for whole populations or segments of the public, should not be permitted on any grounds, including

public order or national security grounds. This means that the internet should not be shut down/throttled/censored during elections or other political events (e.g. protests).
- Internet intermediaries must be transparent about any traffic or information management practices they employ, and relevant information on such practices should be made available in a form that is accessible to all stakeholders.
- Governments should not request ISPs, websites, or social media administrators remove content without legal justification. There should be heightened scrutiny for the removal of content that involves political expression.
- Technical Internet standards should not be developed or employed in such a way as to facilitate the censoring of content or speech by either an individual or a platform.

5. Privacy and Data Protection

Everyone has the right to privacy online. This includes freedom from surveillance, the right to use encryption, and the right to online anonymity. Everyone also has the right to data protection, including control over personal data collection, retention, processing, disposal and disclosure.

- Privacy and data protection shall also include protection against hacking, data interception, and identify theft
- Publically published data sets should adhere to legal standards and guidelines for protections of personally identifiable information and copywritten material.
- Internet intermediaries should ensure adoption of policies and practices that protect against illegal requests for personal data by state or non-state entities
- Businesses that collect personal data from consumers should ensure confidentiality and privacy of those data.
- Individuals have the right to be protected from the illegal release of personally identifiable information (aka "doxing")

6. Life, Liberty and Security

The rights to life, liberty, and security must be respected, protected and fulfilled online. These rights must not be infringed upon, or used to infringe other rights, in the online environment.

- In order for Individual and social integrity
- Doxing
- Distributed Denial Of Democracy
- Trolling
- Gender-based harassment

7. Diversity

Cultural and linguistic diversity on the Internet must be promoted, and technical and policy innovation should be encouraged to facilitate plurality of expression.

- Internet standards should be created so that they promote linguistic diversity online. Language should not be a barrier to using the Internet.
- Official government information (legislations, policies, etc) published online should be in all of the country's working languages.

8. Network Equality

Everyone shall have universal and open access to the Internet's content, free from discriminatory prioritisation, filtering or traffic control on commercial, political or other grounds.

- To promote competitiveness and innovation, net neutrality should be respected. Access to all content, regardless of the source/service provider or destination, should enable users to have freedom of choice
- No sites should be prioritized over others in terms of speed

9. Standards and Regulation

The Internet's architecture, communication systems, and document and data formats shall be based on open standards that ensure complete interoperability, inclusion and equal opportunity for all.

- Common standards/formats with no access to barriers ensure users, content hosts, and service providers to freely exchange information. Free flow of data across borders and traffic should be guaranteed without undue retention. Data fragmentation and localization should also be discouraged.
- Government produced information published online should available in open and structured formats that allow citizens to analyze and reuse the information. This also facilitates the ability of intermediaries to disseminate the information to citizens with limited or no internet access.
- Standards should not be used as a way to censor content or to surveil.

10. Governance

Human rights and social justice must form the legal and normative foundations upon which the Internet operates and is governed. This shall happen in a transparent and multilateral manner, based on principles of openness, inclusive participation and accountability.

- Stakeholders must sufficiently represent a diverse cross-sector of actors, including governments, civil society groups, private sector, think tanks, academia, and media.
- Governance of the internet must be gender inclusive.