Why global Internet governance must matter to social justice activists

Seán Ó Siochrú, Sally Burch, Bruce Girard, Michael Gurstein, Richard Hill

What does the way the Internet is run have to do with development or social justice? Isn't it just for technical specialists, making sure everything works properly? Well no, actually.

The problem is that the Internet and how we use it is reshaping a fundamental dimension of human existence – communication: the space in which people communicate; the ways, traditions and cultures of interaction; how we form our affinities and construct our identities through the eyes of others; and increasingly too how we run the economy.

Internet governance, i.e. how we develop and implement the standards, rules and decision-making processes that shape the evolution of the Internet, is fundamental to how and whether that space encourages or discourages creativity, innovation, sharing, equality, privacy, freedom of expression; and whether everyone, no matter who or where they are, can access the space and its tools in a fair and equitable manner. In short, Internet governance determines in whose interests ultimately this new and evolving communication space will operate.

International Internet governance is not yet set in stone. Indeed it is in turmoil.[1] How that turmoil is resolved over the next few years will shape the Internet, and much of human communication, for decades to come.

The explosive spread of the Internet, partly over an existing telecommunication infrastructure, allowed it to slip through or sweep aside existing governance institutions – even the smallest Internet-based initiative is, in a sense, born global. It is governed so far by a plethora of largely ad hoc entities, more or less interacting with each other, often largely undocumented. Headlines shout about governments trying to "capture" the Internet and strangle it with red tape; or (less so) background strings being pulled by global corporations and a few powerful countries.

Within the debate itself there is wide agreement that "multi-stakeholder" participation in governance is vital, but none about just what that means. Under benign-sounding phrases, a fierce struggle is underway. At the core of the struggle from a social justice perspective, is the extent to which Internet governance will, into the future, be democratic and genuinely inclusive, designed to create a communication space to promote the public interest and social justice, and to address the ever-widening divide between a privileged elite and the rest of humanity.

Or whether the decision-making processes adopted will favour an even more commercially-driven space, carved and shaped in the interests of a few global corporations and a few neo-liberal western governments.[2]

Social justice activists, meanwhile, including media activists, sit mostly on the sidelines, bemused by arcane and impenetrable terminology, uncertain how to enter such a debate, and, most important, unconvinced that the issues merit the major effort required to intervene. After all, as long as access to the Internet continues to expand; email and the Web remain apparently open; social media can be deployed in ever more creative ways; and more and more innovative services are "free" – why should activists be concerned?

Surveillance and the right to privacy

Wholesale internet surveillance by governments, some mainly nationally, others on a global scale, exposed most spectacularly by the Snowden revelations, is the most obvious cause for concern. Social justice activists are rightly horrified in principle, not just at the blatant trampling of human rights, especially the right to privacy, but in practice at the thought of every move, every email,

every campaign, every struggle, being open to scrutiny; at the idea that everyday communication is simply no longer in any way secure, and lacks the basic protections we took for granted about the postal or telephone system.

But few have linked this monstrous system of surveillance to internet governance per se. The culprit is usually identified even by most progressive groups as over-zealous national "security" agencies unable to resist the temptation of technical tools that allow them access to more information than they ever dreamed of. But in fact this denial of privacy is deeply ingrained in the current internet governance system, both technically and in its historical underpinnings.

Twenty or thirty years ago, the engineers who laid the groundwork for today's Internet were just trying to share scientific information within a relatively closed network of what were at the time powerful computers. They were not sharing photos on Facebook, doing their banking, organising demonstrations or planning their holidays. Privacy was not a concern because only a few hundred thousand were connected.

The communication protocols they developed did not foresee the massification of the Internet, did not take into account the interest of government security agencies to monitor our online activity, and did not imagine that companies like Google and Facebook would analyse the content of each and every email we send or "like" we click on in order to display targeted advertising. And they never imagined that online profiles developed by private sector companies to target advertising would be made available, with or without warrants, to government security agencies.

Whether the Internet favours privacy and facilitates freedom of expression over surveillance and censorship is largely a matter of the technical standards that are agreed to, part of governance. But many of the important actors prefer technical standards that compromise your privacy. Google, Facebook and others want to be able to scan your communication and deliver targeted advertising. Others want to scan it for even more invasive reasons. Technical standards that could ensure secure communication haven't been implemented simply because the current Internet governance structures have not made it a priority – so these structures do matter.

If the current situation is bad, the future could get a lot worse. The same intrusive technologies are capable of a lot more. In June 2014 Facebook was shown to have manipulated information in the news feeds of some 700,000 users in an experiment that concluded that it could alter their emotional state.[3] What would happen if Facebook decided to alter users' news feeds to affect the results of national elections, for example?

There are abundant examples of how traditional and relatively-regulated media tycoons (think Murdoch) have affected election results often with last minute scare-mongering banner headlines. What is the power of an unregulated Facebook in an election campaign, or at a crucial point in a government decision, armed with massive data about much of the electorate and control over the algorithms determining what they see on their news feeds?

The cost of a free lunch

Apart from privacy, a second set of social justice issues arises from the use of the plethora of "free" services from corporations such as Google, Twitter and Facebook, and from the business model behind this. Of course the services are not free. Users provide valuable data in exchange for them, used to target lucrative advertising at them. In fact, the data are far more valuable than the services, as evidenced by the huge corporate profits generated. Apart from the fact that people are not paid for the volumes of information they unwittingly provide,[4] what is the issue here and how is internet governance implicated?

To start with, there is the matter of choice. Increasingly, Internet saturated societies have no real choice but to use for instance Twitter, Facebook and Google. Once these reach a critical mass of users, like Microsoft's Windows operating system before it, it becomes virtually impossible to offer an alternative. The "network" gives rise to a natural monopoly that poses insurmountable barriers to others, and offers huge opportunities to generate monopoly profits, profits which they use to extend their control ever wider. Yet Internet governance is characterized by a denial of the

existence of natural monopolies. The dominant mantra is "governments should stay out and let competition take its course", competition that in fact does not, and cannot exist.

But again, the question must be posed clearly: Where precisely is the social justice concern around such monopolies? Certainly excessive profits are not in the public interest. Monopoly control of the digital infrastructure over which the Internet is carried leads to higher tariffs which tends to exclude lower income users – an issue in itself. But there are deeper concerns about this model of corporate monopoly of the Internet platforms, secured through the delivery of apparently free services.

The commercialisation of every corner of the communication sphere

Such deeper concerns centre on the core Internet business model and the ethos it projects onto users, gradually internalising its tenets deeply within the public psyche. For not only does it rely on free donations of information from an ever expanding set of users, these users must also be consumers, and the more users focus on consumption, the greater the profits they deliver to their corporate owners. The more users can be transformed into carefully targeted consumers or corporate advertisers, the bigger the bonanza. This in turn subtly, and sometimes not so subtly, begins to shape the nature of the entire emerging communication sphere. A considerable academic literature is emerging about this.

Take Facebook as an example. The net effect of projecting "carefully controlled impressions of the self"[5] may be to reinforce existing hierarchies and further strengthen closed communities, rather than to open out to new ideas and wider horizons. Identities may be prioritised around consumption rather than community-building for instance through expressing preferences in music, films, books or television programmes.[6] Free self-expression can generate an illusion of controlling one's life, whereas in reality it is about controlling one's image within a defined range of (pre)set pieces.

Personalised advertising and search engine filtering could further tend to reinforce existing prejudices and identity. "Our past interests will determine what we are exposed to in the future, leaving less room for the unexpected encounters that spark creativity, innovation, and the democratic exchange of ideas."[7] As some people confine most of their internet experience to one or a few social networking sites, they become "walled gardens", each separated from the rest of the Internet and containing highly controlled and filtered information[8] – leaving them exposed to the kind of Facebook manipulation mention in the experiment above.

Smart-phones and some tablets may also offer less than full Internet access, tethered to proprietary services and content ultimately leading to a "sterile" Internet.[9] Further concerns raise the arbitrary manner in which some social media corporations control and even censure content – for instance a small corporate legal team decides what is suitable for circulation on YouTube and Google.[10]

Thus alongside the Internet's, and especially social media's, potential for innovative communication and cooperation are compelling dynamics that shape, filter, censure, restrict and control the use of the Internet. The business model might place potentially powerful tools in people's hands at no cost, but it also drives much of the manipulation of and restrictions on this public space. The mining and analysis of personal information, the creation of a "filter bubble" and localisation of advertising are carried out precisely to maximise the value of user profiles to advertisers; the emphasis on self-identities based on consumption all derive from the need to rapidly and easily expand the base of users; the "walled gardens" are about keeping users penned in as ideal advertiser targets; and the tethering of smart-phones and other communication devices to certain sources and content are about creating a captive market. Even the (unaccountable) censuring of certain sites and content by social media companies is ultimately related to commercial decisions, rather than responding to democratically agreed or participative procedures.

There are a few honourable exceptions to this model – for instance Wikipedia and free and open source services and platforms – that pursue a commons based model and actively and

deliberately pursue the public interest. Can we devise governance structures that can encourage these? Absolutely, we can. But this is not in the interests of those who dominate at present.

What is at stake here in the long term is hugely important – it is about much more than preferences or the "dumbing down" and manipulation of content. It is about the communication sphere within which people, especially young people, increasingly gain their basic understanding of society and themselves; it is about the parameters of what we can aspire to for ourselves and for society, and the limits of what we can individually and collectively achieve.

It is about a barrage of implicit messages that exhort people to consume, that repeatedly tell us that consumption is the sole route to happiness, that leaves open few avenues of resistance and even fewer for people collectively to conceive of prioritising a more just and creative existence for ourselves. Of course, other media have over the ages been, and are, the subject of similar forces of commercialisation. The Internet-mediated sphere of communication, however, is shaping up to be the most powerful and all enveloping of all.

Inequalities

The original promise of the Internet was quite different. It was a space that would level out inequalities – those of location, of status, of opportunity. Yet even in the wider picture of the Internet, the opposite seems to be occurring across a wide range of areas. It is not an accident that the accelerating global inequalities, and inequalities within individual countries, have directly coincided with the advent of the Internet and the digitization of so much activity in the commercial world including the rise of totally digital products and production.[11]

Far from equalising opportunities with the locational dispersion of resources and the means for effective participation, the Internet is shifting the advantage: wealth and the means for livelihoods are moving from less favoured physical and social locations to more favoured ones. Thus access to a fast connection or a slow one, or even no connection at all, is very much locationally distributed and with it the opportunity to participate in or take advantage of that economic and other activity migrating to an Internet platform. Ever accelerating requirements for bandwidth leave those who are locationally disadvantaged – those who live in rural and remote areas, those who live in poorer and less favoured neighbourhoods, those who live in poorly serviced regions of the world – increasingly marginalized.

Similarly existing inequalities of wealth, education, linguistic and gender privileging are reproduced and amplified in the Internet sphere where technical, cognitive, linguistic, cultural and other barriers have been allowed to grow, determining who has access to Internet-based resources and who doesn't. The favouring of certain languages, certain gender based cultural styles and practices, certain types of modes of communication effectively act to bar vast numbers from being anything other than passive consumers of digital products and communications when these are even technically available.

The concentration of the ownership of Internet resources – the infrastructure, the software, the services – in relatively few hands and locations is accelerated by the network effect where those who have (and are most effectively networked) get more, and those who have less (and have less means for effective network access and use) get less. And of course with wealth goes power and the means to use this power to design ever more elaborate strategies to avoid paying a fair share of taxes while monopolizing digital activities (again using the network effect) to concentrate digital commercial activity in a few hands and a few favoured national locations.

Influencing Internet governance: A way forward

Current debate on the future of the Internet and how it is governed can be hugely enriched by more social justice activists bringing their knowledge and experience to it. In fact their active contribution is probably crucial to a successful outcome, one that puts the public interest to the fore. The current constellation of forces is skewed by the huge resources available to global corporations

and a few governments, and a handful of organisations with a stake in the status quo,[12] to ensure that the outcome will continue to favour their interests. Their influence among the ranks of civil society is disturbing. Some NGOs are little more than front organisations for corporate interests; others are influenced, knowingly or not, by major donations and other forms of dependence on private funding.

The idea that all stakeholders – multi-stakeholderism – can participate in governance is a central concept in the debate. The idea is attractive to corporate interests since in principle it elevates the voice of corporations to the level of all others – specifically governments. In practice, more importantly, it puts them firmly in the driving seat thanks to their unlimited resources and the backing of a few powerful governments.

For part of civil society, including members of the Just Net Coalition, [http://justnetcoalition.org/] the key demand is that multi-stakeholderism must be democratic, transparent and accountable. A principle that stops simply at the participation of all stakeholders just hands the power to those with the deepest pockets and the biggest megaphones. The voices of poorer parts of the world, of disadvantaged communities and those not connected at all, and of the wider public interest, get drowned out – yet it is these that have most at stake and who must be heard. The legitimacy of governments to represent their people – flawed and all as some of them are – must also be given due recognition.

The additional weight of social justice activists and organisations, joining with those already in the debate, could be decisive in enabling a clearer, focused discussion on where the Internet should and must go. The Just Net Coalition brings together a number of such voices and welcomes more from those active in social justice and development issues.

For more information, visit the web site of the Just Net Coalition. [http://www.justnetcoalition.org/]
See also http://www.waccglobal.org/news/net-freedom

Notes
1. http://gurstein.wordpress.com/2014/07/17/the-information-society-is-in-crisis-and-what-to-do-about-it/
2. http://www.itforchange.net/IT-for-Change-at-IAMCR-2014
3. http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/jun/29/facebook-users-emotions-news-feeds
4. Fuchs, Christian (2011) 'A Contribution to the Critique of the Political Economy of Google' in Fast Capitalism, Volume 8 (1), http://www.uta.edu/huma/agger/fastcapitalism/8_1/fuchs8_1.html
5. Fenton, Natalie (2012:127). "The Internet and Radical Politics". Chapter 6 of: Curran, James, Natelie Fenton, Des Freedman (2012) *Misunderstanding the Internet.* Routledge: London and New York.
6. Marwick Alice (2005) *Selling Your Self: Online Identity in the Age of Commodified Internet*. Washington : University of Washington Press.
http://www.academia.edu/421101/Selling_Your_Self_Online_Identity_In_the_Age_of_a_Commodified_Internet
7. Pariser, Eli (2011) *The Filter Bubble: What the internet is Hiding from you*. Penguin Press: New York.
8. Berners-Lee, Tim (2010) "Long Live the Web: A Call for Continued Open Standards and Neutrality". *Scientific American*, December. http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/long-live-the-web/
9. Zittrain, Jonathan (2008) *The Future of the Internet and how to Stop it.* Caravan Books.
http://futureoftheinternet.org/files/2013/06/ZittrainTheFutureoftheInternet.pdf
 Accessed 14 May 2012.
10. Freedman, Des (2012) "Web 2.0 and the Death of the Blockbuster Economy". Chapter 3 in Curran *et al* (2012).
11. Schiller, Dan (2014), *Digital Depression: Information Technology and Economic Crisis*, University of Illinois Press.
12. The largest of these is ICANN, the US-based organisation responsible for coordinating domain names and numbers. It projects 2015 revenue of USD159 million
https://www.icann.org/en/system/files/files/adopted-opplan-budget-fy15-16sep14-en.pdf

The authors are members of the Just Net Coalition, a global network of civil society actors committed to an open, free, just and equitable Internet. The coalition's founding principles and objectives are contained in the Delhi Declaration http://justnetcoalition.org/delhi-declaration.