Annual conference of
International Association for Media and Communication Research
Durban, 19th July, 2012

SPECIAL SESSION ON INTERNET GOVERNANCE:
NEGOTIATING PROFIT & POLITICS WITH INTERNET FREEDOM

Parminder Jeet Singh
IT for Change
parminder@itforchange.net

I have been asked to speak on 'Decentralising the Internet – Developing Country Perspectives'. Speaking about 'decentralizing the Internet', the first issue that comes up is to examine where is power located on the Internet, or rather how does the Internet relocate power in our societies. The increasing concern experienced by the institution of the state vis a vis the new communication realm, which appears to be much more slippery than anything it has dealt with before, is clear and obvious. The corresponding defensive actions of the state, and civil society's struggle against them, largely play out at the national level. There certainly are some strong reverberations of these struggles on the global scene, most clearly captured in the shrill alarm of 'UN out to take control of the Internet' that goes out every now and then. The latest arena of these struggles in the forthcoming important meetings of the International Telecommunication Union or the ITU. The fears vis a vis what may happen at the ITU, or even generally, at the UN, are not at all unreal. While I am tempted to, I wont even say that they are exaggerated. However, they are certainly unbalanced and one-sided. And behind this one-sided-ness lies a tale. It is this tale which, I understand, has inspired the title of our session – 'Negotiating Profit and Politics through Internet Freedom'.

This tale is about the strongest powers on the Internet who are busy in this formative time of the Internet, and the information society, to entrench themselves, and to device newer and newer means of extortion and accumulation. While they do this, they need a good 'political cover', especially in a world which, as today, is so well provided by informational and communicative, and perhaps also collaborative, possibilities, that can so easily galvanize adverse political action. I will speak about this important issue of the 'political cover' a little later.

Internet was created as an end to end platform joining just anyone and everyone with a basic digital access device, on equitable terms. However, what was a network of millions of networks is increasingly more and more dominated by just a few mega-digital applications. Think, Google, Facebook, Twitter, Apple and Amazon, and you have kind of covered a good part of the Internet. There are young people for whom Facebook is *the* Internet. Many telecos offer Facebook free, without the rest of the Internet, which is a clear violation of the end-to-end principle, also called 'net neutrality'. 'Net neutrality' is today being violated in so many different ways, for entrenching greater advantage for the biggest players on the Internet and reducing competitiveness. We are well on the way to what may be called as the 'shopping mall paradigm' from what was a 'public street paradigm' for the Internet.

Meanwhile, unbelievable consolidation and vertical integration in the Internet space continues unchecked. And the major Internet companies are increasingly law unto themselves. They of course do take subtle cues from the US authorities to behave, a bit also from the EU, but for the rest of the world, it is a straight-forward 'take it or leave it' proposition. Google nowadays freely mixes commercial logic into their search algorithms which no one can know of or regulate in public interest. Facebook decides what to do with your personal data. If you dont like all this, *dis-connect*

from the world. Similarly, as in old times, one could always escape the tyranny of kingdoms by going and living in the jungles. I think all this – of how these Internet biggies behave – is today a familiar story for all of us from newspapers and journals.

Together, these few monopoly companies are shaping the social architecture not only of our communicative and informational systems, but more generally, also of global social, economic, political and cultural flows. But to be able to so, these companies have to escape all possibilities of public interest regulation of their global operations. For this, they have the solid political backing of the US, which today represents a greater concentration of political-economic-military-cultural power than perhaps has ever been with one entity in the entire human history. While the US in any case has commanding influence, if not control, over the big US based Internet monopolies, the mutual relationship between these two greatest political and economic powers on the Internet is being cemented through legislations like Cyber Intelligence Sharing and Protection Act or CIPSA, whereby close ongoing cooperation between these corporate entities and the US government is now being blessed with legislative protections.

Therefore, if today there is 'a central control room' for the global Internet, it is in the US, with executives of these Internet monopolies and US government agents sitting in it, working together, 'watching' and seeking to control the world. They command the political economy of the Internet, and through it, as per their best hopes, of the emergent social order. There is no way that the ITU can ever come even close to having the power that is currently exercised through this global 'control room'.

 Plurilateral bodies like the EU, Council of Europe and OECD sometimes do make some public interest noises, and at times some, only some, of their concerns get accommodated. But mostly it is a unipolar digital imperialism, which not only has geo- political basis, and this is an important point to consider, it also has a very *significant* global 'class' basis, representing the political interests and alliance of the richer classes across the world.

If all such far-reaching structural changes are taking place in our society today, on and due to the Internet, with deep social, economic and cultural implication for our societies, one may wonder why is it that we do not hear any coherent global civil society voice about them. Why do we only passingly hear of these issues, incoherent and unformed, in newspaper columns. There certainly is a global civil society in the Internet governance space that we all know so well as the primary agent that regularly rings the UN and ITU alarm-bells! What sweet drug dumbs this global civil society's social-economic-cultural sensations!

This brings me to a quick discussion on what I had referred to as the 'political cover' for the activities of dominant forces on the Internet. For easy recognition, we can label this cover as 'Internet freedom', which is its chosen rallying cry. This cover is substantially built over actual political consolidation of richer classes across the world, for whom, to put it summarily, US's political stewardship is preferred to nation based political dispensations at home. The stated problem with the latter generally is corruption and unaccountability but the real one mostly is their re-distributional tendencies in face of deep economic disparities. Underlying this phenomenon often is a struggle in many countries between old political elites and new economic elites, with the new economic elites often joining up into a global middle class, accepting, if somewhat grudgingly, US's political stewardship of the world. Symbolically, this is most clearly evidenced in the manner that the global Internet governance civil society soft-paddles the issue of US's unilateral control over the basic Internet infrastructure. (The code word here is ICANN.)

 Democracy and sovereignty seem to this 'new political alliance' as old fashioned modernist ideas, with Social Darwin-ist spirit of neoliberalism taking over. *The capable will inherit the world.*

Manuel Castells rather ominously predicted how the 'network' would connect valuable to valuable casting off the less valuable, straddling and bypassing geographies. *The new global middle class is the truest embodiment of this theoretical insight*. Its power is most strongly expressed though global capital (which is now globally mobile and politically out of control as never before), its political seat is the US establishment, although still in an uneasy and forming relationship, and its apology bearer is an emergent new kind of global civil society, at present most well formed in the Internet governance space.

This new political alliance of the powerful from across the globe uses the intense communicative and informational context of the Internet to its advantage rather than allow it to become a counter force. I do not have the time to go into how this is achieved, but I think that, to the media scholars assembled here, it must be increasingly obvious. What is relatively new in the present context, however, is the manner in which a specific kind of global civil society is built, supported and kept alive to provide a political cover, or a smoke screen, for the many deeply problematic power shifts that are taking place on and through the Internet, with the exceptional intensity characteristic of paradigmatic social-transformational times as we are witness to today.

I must end on a positive, forward looking note. When the phenomenon of the Internet stuck us, in the closing years of the last century, there was an initial attempt to develop a civil society agenda around communication rights and the Internet. I here refer to the CRIS or Communication Rights in the Information Society campaign. Some of the panelists here today were actively involved with it. Sometime over the last decade, intertwined with some structural changes to the involved civil society, this agenda got jettisoned in favour of a single point civil society agenda of mutistakeholderism in Internet governance. While initially posited to fight statist forces trying to cast the Internet in their image, multistakeholderism quickly became simply a means to enable global digital capital to build the political power that was required to resist possible opposition to its triumphant march of global extortion.

In the circumstances, I exhort the communication and media scholars and activists who have assembled for this conference to revisit and systematically explore an agenda of communications rights vis a vis the Internet. They need to claim the legitimate civil society space in the global Internet governance arena from corporate and imperialism apologists. As an immediate practical measure, may I suggest that the next meeting of the *International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR)* perhaps decides to just focus on this one issue of Internet governance. I leave you with these thoughts and I would indeed miss what I am sure will be very interesting and insightful discussions at this workshop, and generally at the conference. Thank you.