

Making a transformational shift

From Internet to an Equinet¹

Internet was born as a revolutionary new platform for social interactions that promised leveling down of hierarchies of various kinds – social, economic, cultural and political. Whereas much has been achieved on this count, such an egalitarian potential of the Internet cannot be taken for granted. It needs to be pro-actively nurtured and promoted. The Internet should become an 'Equinet' and not a 'privilege-net' that further entrenches social equalities, as some already fear may increasingly be the trend. One of the most prominent contemporary social theorists, Manuel Castells, makes the following telling remark about the network age.

The most critical distinction in this organizational logic (of a network) is not stability, but inclusion or exclusion. Networks change relentlessly: they move along, form and re-form, in endless variation. Those who remain inside have the opportunity to share and, over time, to increase their chances. Those who drop out, or become switched off, will see their chances vanish.

Unequal access to the Internet, unequal digital skills, unequal protections on the Internet, a possibly skewed or non-open technical architecture, various kinds of constraints to free flow of information and knowledge, and inadequate cultural and social diversity can all become factors that belie the egalitarian potential of the Internet.

As the Internet opens up immense social, economic, cultural and political opportunities, it is important to ensure that these are equally available to all. Fulfillment of minimum needs of everyone with regard to the use and impact of the Internet must always be guaranteed. Beyond it, equality of opportunity must be ensured even if equality of outcomes cannot be achieved at all times. The Internet, as an '*Equinet*', should be seen as a 'level playing field'. While some players in any game may be better than the others, and accomplish more, the nature of the playing field and its rules must be such as treats every player equally. They should make for neither any special privilege nor disadvantage to anyone. This is the primary challenge of how the Internet must be governed in public interest. And this is the basic spirit of the proposal for moving towards an *Equinet*.

There are many initiatives today that focus largely on civil and political rights on the Internet. However, the World Summit on the Information Society stressed the indivisibility of rights in the information society. People's economic and social struggles and aspirations cannot be treated secondary to their civil and political claims – they go hand in hand. This is especially true for developing countries like India. It is therefore important to frame Internet principles that are equally informed by economic and social rights as by civil and political rights. The proposition of an *Equinet* is an effort in this direction.

The over-arching concept of *Equinet* can be seen in terms of eight 'Internet principles'; Net

¹ Elaboration of a possible framework for developing Principles for Internet Governance for India suggested by IT for Change (www.ITforChange.net) building on the H'ble Minister Kapil Sibal's speech at Baku IGF . (Document developed in March 2013.)

Presence, Net Equality, Net Expression, Net Knowledge, Net Protection, Net Diversity, Net Distribution and Net Participation.

Net Presence

Everyone has a right to access the Internet and to be able to fully participate in all social activities on the Internet. Everyone shall be provided with all the necessary capacity and skills to have an adequate presence on the Internet so as to be able to achieve her/his full potential. Therefore, not only access to the Internet, but such a full-fledged, effective and empowered presence on the Internet (or Net Presence) is everyone's right, which must be ensured.

Net Equality

The fundamental techno-architectural principle of the Internet is that the network is completely unmindful with regard to whatever moves over it, in the form of digital bits². In social terms, this principle transforms into the Internet treating all social actors, content, applications, appliances, sub-networks etc equally, without any discrimination whatsoever on economic, social or political basis. Further, the network should employ only open standards so that everyone can participate and innovate equally, and there are no exclusions or lock-ins caused due to proprietary standards. Neutrality and equality should be ensured not only at the technical level but also in overall operations on the socio-technical network so that it remains a vibrant space both for open collaboration and fully competitive markets. Collaborative practices on the Internet should be suitably promoted. Anti-competitive and monopolistic practices on the network have to be addressed adequately in order to ensure that unfair barriers do not get constructed restricting entry of new players – economic, social, cultural as well as political ones.

Net Expression

Internet must be promoted as the bastion of free expression and participatory democracy. It is through freedom and equality of expression that people can seek and get political equality, which is basic to democracy. In this regard, the Internet must be seen as the new media that will underpin modern democracies, and thus be treated as a space where everyone's right to communicate and free expression is not only protected, but is ensured pro-actively.

Net Knowledge

Knowledge is the principal resource and means of civilizational growth, as also its equitable distribution is key to social equality. Internet was first developed as a network to exchange knowledge, which function still remains primary although the 'marketplace' nature of the Internet often gets more prominence. The Internet must be promoted as a space for free flow and exchange of ideas, information and knowledge. A space, to quote the Declaration of Principles of the World summit on the Information Society, "where everyone can create, access, utilize and share information and knowledge". The role of the Internet in sharing and co-constructing knowledge should be given central importance while protecting intellectual property rights to an adequate level of individual and social returns. It is required to pursue and promote Internet as an instrument for 'deepening of the public domain'³.

Net Protection

In order to be able to use the Internet effectively, adequate Net Protection must be provided to all. Such protection will cover issues like privacy and data safety, to protection from other kinds of more direct harms. States should forgo offensive strategies on the Internet, declaring it a zone of peace and mutual cooperation. They must also collaborate in controlling and bringing to justice

² Also called the principle of 'net neutrality', often considered the basic architectural principle of the Internet.

³ From the 'Development Agenda' at World Intellectual Property Organization

non-state actors who employ the Internet to inflict various kinds of harm, in a cross-border manner. Special protective measures must be ensured for the more vulnerable, like children.

Net Diversity

It must be understood and accepted that there are diverse kinds of people and groups, and any 'one' kind of Internet content, applications, etc, cannot fulfill everyone's needs and aspirations equally. While markets by themselves may create a certain amount of diversity responding to the diversity of consumers of Internet-based services, such a diversity may not be adequate to account for the real world cultural and social diversity. For one, market responds proportionate to the aggregate paying capacity of different kinds of 'consumers'. Secondly, the almost limitless positive economies of scale on the Internet are so huge that there is an overwhelming economic incentive towards homogenization. Specific steps, including but not limited to encouraging diverse and local market players, will need to be taken to ensure and promote Net Diversity. Elements of positive discriminations may need to be included in any comprehensive strategy to ensure cultural and social diversity on the Internet.

Net Distribution

The Internet and its ecosystem has to be preserved as an open, peer-to-peer and anti- hierarchical system, not only in technical terms but also in social, economic, political and cultural terms. It must be ensured that social, economic, political and cultural power remains well-distributed and well-diffused over the Internet, with most of it being towards the peripheries. This must be ensured globally, nationally and sub-nationally. Such a socio-technical architecture of distributed/ diffused loci of various kinds of powers alone will ensure equitable empowerment of all people and groups. For this, the inherent and growing tendency of centralizations and aggrandizement of various kinds of powers over the Internet must be suitably addressed through appropriate public polices and programs.

Net Participation

The Internet will be equally beneficial to all only if all participate equally in governing it. This is a basic democratic principle. None has superior rights to take decision for other people, groups and countries. All people, groups and countries should be equitably represented in forums involved with governance of the Internet. Governance of the Internet must be democratic, participative and multistakeholder, with complete transparency and accountability.