Internet Governance for Libraries

A Guide to the Policies and Processes behind the Internet and their Impact
Part 4: Internet Governance and Social Issues

The Internet has been at the heart of what is described as the fourth industrial revolution. Information and communication technologies have radically changed not only how we deal with the world and make sense of it, but also how we interact with each other, and how we look at ourselves and understand our own nature, existence, and responsibilities.

For the purpose of this guide, we look at two important areas in which the internet has raised significant political and social questions: creation, sharing and access to content, and multilingualism.

Online Content

Debates about how (and whether) online content should be regulated are a major part of broader internet governance discussions. This is not a surprise – the internet is increasingly central to the way we express ourselves, communicate, and access information and entertainment. It involves difficult judgements censorship, human rights, public order and morality.

For example, there is a general agreement that content that incites violence or depicts child sexual abuse should be blocked. Yet efforts to control also extend to broader political, religious or security issues, where there is much less consensus about what is acceptable or not. What may be free speech in one culture is counted as blasphemy or dangerous in another.

A further complication comes from the fact that the internet has made it much easier to create and share content with the world. Blogs, social media and websites have blurred the difference between user and creator. It can also be difficult to identify the person behind a given piece of content.

Efforts have therefore increasingly focused on carriers. Governments in some countries look to filter communications both across and within their borders. There are also ever more prominent efforts by social media platforms and search engines to define rules and create tools which identify and block 'unacceptable' online.

However, the process through which this control is exercised is highly controversial, and there are serious questions about the rights of users. For example, the automatic filtering (and blocking) of communication through the internet stands in contrast to the physical world, implying fewer rights online than offline. Furthermore, the efficiency of such filters, and the lack of incentive on platforms to defend legitimate speech, can lead to excessive restrictions on communication.

An additional concern comes from differences in approaches taken by governments. These can fragment the internet, a process known as the balkanisation of the Internet. This not only leads to users in one country having more possibilities than others, but reduces possibilities

to connect and communicate globally. At an extreme, individual countries may try to export their own rules globally, imposing local judgements about what is permissible or not on other countries.

Many nations already engage in content control. While countries like Saudi Arabia and China are perhaps among the most famous, many European countries for example are also very active in the context of efforts to fight terrorist content or for other public safety reasons. Other controls are linked, for example, to copyright enforcement, or to the protection of privacy.

In extreme cases, some countries even have recourse to complete internet shutdowns as a means of achieving policy goals. These acts are on the rise worldwide, with 188 recorded shutdowns in 2018. While such steps may serve to disrupt communications between governments' primary targets, they also cause major collateral damage, and so are considered to be a highly disproportionate approach.

There is an awareness of the costs of the non-alignment of the rules, both in terms of the unity of the internet, and the effectiveness of government action. Some organisations have proposed guidelines for matters affecting public security, with G7 leaders for example agreeing to take action on terrorist content or content inciting violence. The European Commission and the UN Security Council have also highlighted the need to act to protect online safety.

However, such high-level statements offer relatively little guidance for implementation at the national level, and so action at the national (or EU) level remains inconsistent. In the meanwhile, the pressure on major platforms and others to take action immediately grows, with little regard for users' rights.

An interesting recent international development is an effort to devolve the power to decide which content to access or not to the user. This idea, promoted by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) among others, aims to side-step state-controlled filtering or regulation. The obvious advantage of this solution is the freedom of choice given to the individual and the limit on a possible fragmentation of the internet. The disadvantage is that it would not stand in the way of those wanting to view extreme content.

Multilingualism

One of the promises of the internet was to support cultural diversity by allowing more people to have a voice. However, despite its global reach, it has arguably tended to reinforce the dominance of English. Statistics show that about 50% of web content is in English whereas 75% of the world's population does not speak English (see p189 of Kurbalija, Jovan (2016) An Introduction to Internet Governance).

This is a significant issue. In order for the internet to maximise its attractiveness for potential new users, and to realise its potential as a space for creativity and learning, it will be important to promote local language content.

There are both technical and societal issues at work.

From a technical angle, exclusive use of Latin script has posed a challenge, especially for the creation of domain names (such as ifla.org or google.com). This has meant that people using non-Latin scripts have been forced to adapt or convert words into Latin text, despite this making URLs more difficult for local customers to understand or use.

To resolve this problem, there are active efforts to develop standards which will allow for the use of other alphabets, scripts and characters. The Unicode Consortium together with ICANN and the IETF work in the field of developing standards for the Internet.

They took an important step toward multilingualism by introducing IDN TLDs. IDN TLD is an internationalized top-level domain that uses characters other than A-Z from the English alphabet (also known as non-ASCII characters). IDN TLDs allow for global top level domain names to be written in different scripts – for example .닷컴 is the equivalent of .COM in Korean and .संगठन is the equivalent of .ORG in Hindi.

IDNs standards make the Internet more inclusive because it makes it simpler for people to access and register domain names in their own scripts. This in turn makes the internet more understandable, and more relevant to local communities.

From a societal angle, there is a need for policy efforts to promote multilingualism. These will be important in order to avoid the creation of an even greater gap between those who speak English and those who do not. As highlighted above, such efforts can help ensure that everyone finds material of interest to them online, and so see an advantage in connecting and expressing themselves. There is, in effect, a potential virtuous circle, with local content bringing more people online, who in turn produce more local content, and make the internet as a whole more inclusive.

UNESCO has been active in providing support to multilingualism efforts since its 2001 Universal Declaration of Cultural Diversity. Another important supporter is also the European Union, which has been active in promoting multilingualism in the light of its own long-standing commitment to the principle.