Freedom Online Coalition response to the UNESCO Comprehensive Study on Internet Related Issues

The Freedom Online Coalition supports the work of UNESCO to conduct a comprehensive and consultative multistakeholder study of Internet related issues. The Internet landscape is constantly changing and technologies are rapidly evolving. While this creates incredible opportunities it also gives rise to new challenges. Discussions on Internet issues are ongoing in several forums and include many different stakeholders, and UNESCO is an important part of that conversation. The Study is timely and relevant, as the international community continues to utilize Internet as a driver for more social, economic and political inclusion and development. The Study will address key elements of the current debate concerning the role of the Internet as a platform for global development, and it will discuss aspects of the continuing discussion of Internet governance. The Study should also uphold the principles outlined below.

As members of the Freedom Online Coalition, we are committed to protecting and promoting certain principles, such as:

- The respect of human rights and fundamental freedoms as proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, including the right to freedom of opinion and expression and the right to privacy as it is set out in both article 12 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in article 17 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights;
- That human rights that people have offline enjoy the same protection online;
- The fundamental importance of non-discriminatory access to and accessibility of the Internet for exercising the freedom to seek, receive and impart information;
- The importance of strengthening the multistakeholder model of Internet governance and increasing participation in multistakeholder processes, such as the Internet Governance Forum.

We believe that:

- The Internet has always been underpinned by policies that promote the free flow of information and protect human rights and foster innovation, creativity, and economic growth;
- The global and interoperable nature of the Internet, governed by multistakeholder processes that are open to governments, international organizations, the private sector and civil society, including academic and technical communities, is a driving force in accelerating progress towards global development;
- Digital literacy should be supported in order to empower Internet users to make informed decisions, promote their access to information and economic opportunities, and protect their human rights and fundamental freedoms, with
particular attention being paid to the challenges faced by persons and groups in a vulnerable position or who are subject to discrimination.

We recall our obligation to adopt and encourage policies and practices, nationally and internationally, that promote the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms online, in particular freedom of expression, including the freedom to seek, receive and impart information, the right to privacy, as set out in the article 17 in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the freedom of peaceful assembly and association. We particularly want to emphasize the adoption of the milestone resolutions 20/8 in the Human Rights Council in 2012 and 68/167 in the General Assembly in 2013, specifically in regard to the principle that the same rights that people enjoy offline should also apply online. This was followed by a resolution (26/13) in 2014 calling upon States to address the digital divide and to promote digital literacy and access to information on the Internet.

**Options and UNESCO’s role**

Since the beginning of the last decade, UNESCO has had an important role in structuring the discourse, clarifying key concepts and taking forward a human rights-based, open, accessible agenda of development rooted in a multistakeholder approach. We consider that UNESCO’s role is as relevant today, being the UN organization with the mandate to promote “the free flow of ideas by words and image”, and its specific focus on freedom of expression on the Internet.

As members of the Freedom Online Coalition we believe that:

UNESCO has a unique role in the UN family to promote and enable an open and inclusive Internet and facilitate the protection of the same rights to freedom of expression online as exist offline, as well as to draw linkages between Internet openness, human rights and the building of strong democracies.

UNESCO can promote discussion, harmonization and understanding of the key elements of the Internet debate and bring about shared understanding in the multistakeholder space as well as contribute to building capacity for important issues – from legislation to media and information literacy.

UNESCO’s concept of Internet Universality (IU) anchors the discussion within the organization to human and societal development, not to technology per se. It aims at advancing the realization of fundamental human rights and freedoms. We fully support the four principles of the concept: an Internet that is Human Rights-based, Open, Accessible, and governed through a Multistakeholder approach. The IU concept and its ROAM principles can function as an umbrella under which UNESCO’s current activities in this field are gathered in an intersectorial manner. It can also help UNESCO forge a clearer role in the broader discussions on Internet related issues.
As members of the Freedom Online Coalition, we believe that UNESCO has a role in:

- Stimulating global debate and sharing best practices on how Internet and online communication technologies can be used to guarantee and reinforce human rights and fundamental freedoms, and increase participation in democratic processes;
- Giving policy advice on a global level as well as concrete support to governments that are in the process of developing Internet related legislation and regulation, noting the vast opportunity that exists for research, innovation, development and economic growth, particularly for developing countries;
- Providing guidance for governments to build a media environment that supports freedom of expression through UNESCO's Media Development Indicators and Internet Indicators;
- Working with Media and Information Literacy to create synergies between existing initiatives in a holistic manner at a national, regional and global level;
- Strengthening the multistakeholder model of Internet governance and deepening collaboration with global and national multistakeholder communities;
- Continuing to promote and raise awareness, within the framework of the Post-2015 Development Agenda process, of the importance of freedom of expression and media development for a sustainable democratic society;
- Providing input to the ten-year review of the World Summit on the Information Society, by the UN General Assembly in 2015.