



Internet Governance

UNESCO Position Statement¹

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Preamble

The Internet is a major opportunity to improve free flow of information and ideas throughout the world. Internet governance mechanisms should be based on the principle of “openness”, encompassing interoperability, freedom of expression in Knowledge Societies and measures to resist any attempt to censor content. There should be no changes in Internet governance mechanisms that impede the free flow of information and ideas on the Internet. The effect of these mechanisms should be to enable greater use of the Internet by citizens with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

A) Background

1. At the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in Geneva in December 2003, Governments requested the UN Secretary-General to set up a Working Group on Internet Governance, to investigate and make proposals for action, as appropriate, on the governance of the Internet by 2005. The request for the creation of this working group resulted from the controversial discussion on Internet Governance during the WSIS preparatory phase, where a number of countries called for a stronger role for intergovernmental structures in this field, whereas others advocated the appropriateness of the strong influence of the private sector.
2. The history of the development of the Internet, which was self-governing for approximately 30 years, is highly relevant to the future debate. The result of the minimalist government intervention was an inherently private sector run infrastructure based on consensus. UNESCO appreciates that this is one of the key success factors of the Internet. The other prominent success factor is the openness of the medium with its function of enabling the free flow of information that makes it an inherently democratic and empowering force.

B) The meaning of “Internet Governance”

3. UNESCO observes that the term “Internet Governance” has not yet been clearly defined. For some, it describes the narrow issue of the management of domain names and infrastructure that are presently administered by the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), a private non-profit corporation under Californian Law. The prevailing tendency in the current debate, however, is to attribute to this term a much broader meaning comprising not only technical, but also ethical, societal and legal issues. Moreover, the term “Internet Governance” is misleading as it is laden with presumptions about governing approaches which for some may imply governmental involvement.
4. UNESCO supports the use of language in this debate that seeks to clarify, not entrench presumptions, advocating that discussants should qualify their positions by identifying what form of Internet Governance they are debating. In analyzing the range of “Internet Governance” issues, UNESCO considers it appropriate to break these down into categories or subsets and find the appropriate language to qualify them.

5. UNESCO advocates a precise and robust analysis of the perceived problems with the current mechanisms for Internet Governance before moving to “solutions”. Any measures to address these problems must examine the different types of Internet Governance.

C) Issues at stake

6. UNESCO observes that during the recent debate the range of issues has broadened significantly beyond technical matters to include societal, ethical and legal aspects. Many of the issues raised in this debate are considered by UNESCO to be of crucial importance to the future use of the Internet, particularly those impacting on the free flow of information, freedom of expression and recognition of cultural diversity (including multilingualism), on the Internet.

7. For UNESCO, an important issue is the interdependency between the smooth functioning, and openness, of the Internet, and economic stability. There is also the need to ensure that any Internet governance mechanism is technically and administratively competent to manage across all spheres. UNESCO regards as essential appropriate checks and balances to safeguard this principle and to ensure that management is not only technically competent, but transparent and non-partisan.

8. UNESCO emphasizes the fundamental importance of safeguarding the openness of the Internet as its historical characteristic and strength. This is increasingly referred to as an essential element of the functionality, infrastructure and impact of the Internet. Central to this principle is the need to resist “capture” or control that takes advantage of the Internet management mechanisms or structures or that results from excessive government or commercial intervention.

D) UNESCO’s mandate and principles and their link to Internet Governance

9. Historically, and at the Geneva Summit, the term “Internet Governance” was interpreted very narrowly, referring predominantly to issues of domain name management. Since then, many of the discussions over Internet Governance have broadened beyond technical and administrative issues to those that fall into UNESCO’s fields of competence.

10. Key elements of UNESCO’s Constitution, such as its mandate to promote “the free flow of ideas by word and image” and to “maintain, increase and spread knowledge” are linked to this broader policy debate on Internet Governance. This debate is also linked to the principles integral to UNESCO’s concept of “Knowledge Societies” (freedom of expression, universal access to information, cultural and linguistic diversity and equal access to education) that were echoed in the "Recommendation concerning the Promotion and Use of Multilingualism and Universal Access to Cyberspace", adopted in October 2003 by UNESCO's Member States.

E) UNESCO’s role in the debate over Internet Governance

11. UNESCO intends to play a threefold role in the debate:

- a) UNESCO will contribute to the debate on issues within its fields of competence, particularly the broader “cyberspace” policy issues (legal, societal and ethical), insisting on robust analysis, advocating precise language and a depoliticized debate.

- b) With its record of successfully promoting collaboration among governments and civil society, UNESCO is ready to participate in discussions (such as via the Working Group on Internet Governance) and to assist those tasked with the review of Internet Governance to develop solutions that fit the diagnosis and are long-lasting in that they reflect a wider consensus on the issues.
- c) UNESCO will continue to safeguard key values like freedom of expression, cultural diversity and openness. It will advocate that existing mechanisms such as ICANN, or any modification of these mechanisms, must reflect the following principles:
- The inherent openness of the Internet infrastructure must be preserved and should be conducive to the free flow of ideas and knowledge through word and image;
 - Modifications must not result in the global Internet Governance system becoming subjected to governmental control, nor should they facilitate or permit censorship;
 - There must be a precise correlation between new mechanisms and the problems they seek to address;
 - Technical innovation must continue to be encouraged;
 - Modifications to ICANN or new mechanisms should not inhibit interoperability, cause instability, nor should they slow down the continued technical development of the Internet; and
 - Any global Internet management system or mechanism must be technically competent, transparent and non-partisan.

Whichever mechanism manages the current responsibilities of ICANN, the result should be one that enables greater use of the Internet, and thereby greater participation in the modern information world, by an increasing number of citizens from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.