

Speech

The future of the Internet: freedom in a framework

From: [Department for Culture, Media & Sport](#) and [The Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP](#)
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Minister for Digital Matt Hancock addresses the Internet Governance Forum



It's a great pleasure to be at the UK Internet Governance Forum – my first as Digital Minister – and a crucial event in the life of the Internet's governance.

It's a great honour to speak here because I feel my life, like so many of yours, has been bound up with the development of the net.

I still remember my first online communication, to a friend who lived about a mile away, when a dial-up literally meant dialling his number. The phone bill wasn't pretty.

I remember being astonished by how he got a new number so he could dial up something called an Internet Service Provider, and that the number of minutes he spent on the phone line didn't affect his bill. It was amazing. I wonder what ever happened to those Internet Service Providers. Anyway, the best thing was the rest of his family were delighted as the new line meant they could start making phone calls again.

I remember like yesterday Clive James's series on TV called the "information super highway" where he devoted a whole series to laughing about the idea that - sometime in the future - we could write to each other and reply immediately over a phone line, or find information from a library on the other side of the world. Amazing. I hope someone followed up on that.

And then I remember the time Steve Jobs said that the entire history of the world – more information, better organised, and more freely available than ever before – was about to become available in everyone's phone. I thought they'd really nailed data compression. Wrong. They'd invented the smartphone.

Now of course the Internet is a central part of the lives of most people on the planet – at the core of human relationships, business, education, trade, entertainment: humanity is connected like never before and the impact is everywhere.

Small wonder, then, that I'm excited to be here at the Internet Governance Forum. It matters to me, it matters to you, and it matters to most people on the planet.

Our connected world underpins our prosperity too, with millions of jobs and billions of value directly linked to the Internet. Connectivity is no luxury but a must – and I've got a whole other speech on broadband if you want to hear it.

But today I want to share with you my thoughts, born of my experiences in tech both as a citizen, in business, and as a Minister.

I want to address governance very directly, because I believe that governance matters.

But before I do that, I want to address how I believe we should think about the way the Internet is run.

There is an argument, which has deep roots, that the Internet is both ungovernable, and oughtn't be governed.

I want to discuss this argument very directly.

My starting point is that the Internet is a great force for freedom. It is an invention of humanity, for all humanity, and radically democratising, liberating, and enervating in its operation. The Internet transcends borders and brings people together like never before.

This is a huge and progressive change.

Yet it brings with it challenges, as it disrupts established ways of doing things. As a tiny example, remember the crises of email rage a decade ago, as people learned how to write, and respond to emails, in a way that needed to be different to their approach to phone calls or letters.

Email was progress, but that progress needed cultural change to harness its power for the good, and stop the progress – email – leading to reversion to animalistic behaviour as email rage unintentionally stoked tensions.

Twitter democratises people's voices, but has increased online abuse too. I'm pleased to see the policy changes they announced earlier this week around hateful conduct and muting functions.

Tinder, Uber, Amazon: they all improve people's lives overall but need careful handling.

And the thing about these sorts of trade-offs is that they are not new.

Finding a way to organise ourselves, without higher authority, to maximise the opportunities and mitigate the costs is no new challenge.

In fact, it's been around for as long as man has lived in communities.

We don't have to invent a theory from new, but can draw on political philosophy. The context is new. The technology is new, the scale is new, and practicalities different. But the principles aren't. The principles go back to Athens.

I think the way we address it can be summed up as follows:

The Internet should be free, not lawless.

Open not laissez-faire.

Liberal, not libertarian.

Freedom is a framework.

Burke said that liberty "is not solitary, unconnected, individual, selfish liberty, as if every man was to regulate the whole of his conduct by his own will". Instead he said liberty is "social freedom". "Secured by the equality of restraint." In which "no one man, and no body of men, and no number of men, can find means to trespass on the liberty of any person."

Taking that fine principle and applying it to today's problem means protecting liberty on the internet with reliable protections against theft, and harassment, and child pornography, and incitement and terrorism.

The Internet is a phenomenally powerful agent of commercial and social progress. That is to be applauded and cherished. But it is also a medium for fraudsters, thieves, extremists, terrorists, and those who want to hurt children.

That's not new. The world – online and off – is an agent of commercial and social progress. But it is a medium for fraudsters, thieves, extremists, terrorists, and those who want to hurt children too.

Put it this way: we highly value freedom on the Internet. We want the Internet to be free, open and global. We reject the vision of a censored and limited Internet, controlled by national governments.

And we are also clear that this free, open Internet is not a licence to abuse freedom, to cause harm. In the off-line world, we have longstanding boundaries on free speech, to stop people using it to incite racial hatred or violence, for example, or libelling others without consequence.

I want to make an important point today about self-confidence in our values. The fact that we as a society have put these boundaries on acceptable free speech has not undermined our status or credibility as a society that values free speech. No-one can credibly say that because we stop people standing up and spreading racial hatred means that we are on the side of repressive regimes and not free speech.

We have been mature enough to accept this in off-line speech. As the Internet matures so we need to accept these principles online too.

A free and open Internet does not mean an Internet without boundaries or rules. And agreeing as society what those rules should be does not weaken our commitment to freedom.

As Tim Berners-Lee has argued, let us have an approach of open standards within a commonly agreed rules-based framework.

My vision – our high goal – is of an Internet that is a catalyst for creativity not for harm, based on these principles of a rules based framework.

We believe in an Internet open, trusted, and secure that serves freedom and the economic and social development freedom brings, and protects human rights of privacy, access to knowledge, and freedom of expression - open to debate and challenge, with no political ownership where the logic of an argument can be tested and found wanting.

We want Britain to play her part in leading that debate.

So how do we make that happen in practice?

By its nature: global and fast-moving, legislation that is national and slow-moving will never be the perfect tool for Internet governance.

So industry and the public have important roles.

Social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and others all have abuse-reporting services.

UK ISPs act on notifications of potentially illegal content – and this self-regulation is incredibly important.

Members of the public are now able to report online material that promotes terrorism or extremism to the Counter Terrorism Internet Referral Unit, via GOV.UK.

All sensible businesses take steps to protect themselves from cyber crime.

Our new, non-statutory National Cyber Security Centre ensures that government plays its part.

Search engines, platforms and ISPs play their part in removing harmful material. Later this afternoon, my colleague Joanna Shields will tell you what we are doing to promote child Internet safety at home and abroad. We are having success with partnerships in tackling some of the toughest challenges in this area.

It is vitally important that all those who cherish our free Internet play their part in taking responsibility to address these issues.

In short, we need to develop a set of norms that guide appropriate behaviour towards the Internet in free societies.

A wide gap has opened up between our adoption of technology and our ability to create frameworks and norms for that technology.

The governance of the Internet is just one area where practice has run way ahead of society's ability to think through the consequences and set rules to ensure the impact of the technology is most positive and least harmful.

There are many others, from the fact that our children do most of their socialising online, to the growing realisation that the market is often a poor judge of the true value of technology, unable to capture massive externalities both positive and negative.

If we do not find a way to build norms for new technology, starting with retrofitting it to the technology that has already become pervasive, then the gap will continue to grow.

And when this gap grows, it's harder to bring the public with us.

More substantively, some of the technology does actually need to be regulated - it will more beneficial and less harmful when it is operating in a thought-out framework.

But the speed of innovation is now much faster than the speed at which society can create norms.

And given the innovation is global, we cannot slow its pace and must therefore gear ourselves up to handle the pace.

So norms are important. But this non-statutory action alone is not enough.

The Internet should be characterised by freedom, not lawlessness.

The legislative framework matters.

Our starting point is that the law of the land applies equally, offline and online: what matters is the substance, not the medium.

So we are for example equalising our copyright laws in the UK so they are equivalent on and off line. Laws to protect intellectual property are just as important on and off line, as intellectual property is still property, no matter how it's propagated.

And in other areas too, like in requiring age verification of adult materials to protect children, we are legislating.

But in many others, like removing terrorist or child abuse material, we operate on the basis of non-statutory co-operation.

And that brings me to global Internet governance.

No one international institutional has oversight or control of the Internet. We have instead a decentralised system, where international Internet matters are addressed by a variety of organisations, including the United Nations and its Commission on Science and Technology for development and UNESCO, and the Council of Europe, addressing the importance of freedom of expression, cybercrime, privacy, and human

rights.

We have to ensure that governments, civil society, business, the technical community, academics, and Internet users all have a voice in these global Internet governance mechanisms. That is the only way to make them inclusive, transparent, accountable, and fit to serve the best interests of the Internet using public around the world.

Following ten years of dramatic Internet expansion, the UN General Assembly last December recognised the value of a multi-stakeholder model of governance.

The General Assembly endorsed the success of the Internet Governance Forum – the global IGF. This was important.

The IGF is the key meeting point of Internet standards-making bodies, and does a very good job, championing the merits of participation and reporting multi-stakeholder work directly to the UN Secretary General.

The fact that the UK Government – along with many others: other governments, Nominet, civil society organisations, and business – contributes financially to the IGF is a testament to the value of its work.

The key question is not whether there are boundaries, but how those boundaries are made. If they are made by governments unaccountable to their own people, and nationally, then the boundaries will have much less legitimacy than if they are clearly made by society thinking and acting together. And if they can be agreed internationally, then it has still more legitimacy.

This is the logic of the model of multi-stakeholder governance.

The name was clearly designed by a committee, and doesn't make the heart sing. But the underlying concept should. Because what it says is this - we do not entrust the rules of the Internet to any one country or part of society. Rather, because we value its freedom and openness so much, we entrust it only to a parliament of society, in which we all have a voice.

Yet the IGF cannot stand still. It needs to move forward with a greater focus on what it can contribute to sustainable economic growth and increased social wellbeing.

At a national and regional level, multi-stakeholder events like this one today – and those in other countries that have replicated the UK model – are extremely useful for the sharing of best practice and ideas for technical solutions and policy responses.

I am especially interested in ideas for strengthening the resilience and security of local networks and in practical solutions for setting up Internet exchange points, which can have a significant impact on reducing costs and stimulating local content.

And on the question of IP addresses – the index of the net – now that the US government has stepped away from its sole oversight role, and the transition to a global multi-stakeholder group is now underway – the rigorous scrutiny of the system must endure.

The current raft of reviews into accountability, transparency, diversity, and inclusivity are absolutely necessary - because the digital economy simply cannot work without an efficient, fully functioning domain name system.

I know some of you here are actively involved, and I am grateful for what you are doing.

The global nature of the system is reflected in the 170-strong membership of the Governmental Advisory Committee. That breadth needs to be fully integrated with all levels of policy development and oversight, because that is the framework that has been proven to deliver a secure and resilient system.

This framework, in global governance, national rules, civil society, norms of behaviour and social responsibility, is critical to protecting the freedom of the Internet.

Freedom is not automatic, but fragile, and not just wished for but supported.

So let us pledge anew to the task of ensuring that this great innovator, this bringer of change, this invention that is changing the world and all of us in it, let us pledge again to work to ensure its freedom, that we may build on the opportunities it presents, for all mankind.

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