

## Openness

It is generally felt that the Internet has greatly contributed to the spread of free flow of information and freedom of expression. Communication through the Internet means that every day, millions of people exchange information and thus become members of the information society, enriching by their participation the very content of the Internet. This is the first time in history that so many people have had the opportunity to have such direct communication and expression so quickly and so affordably as Internet users have today.

While many perceive the Internet as a tool fostering new form of free speech and a revival of democracy, others find the amount and the type of speech on the Internet to be offensive or frightening. For some, the Internet has generated feelings of apprehension and even fear of new popular empowerment, leading to calls for a curb on freedom of expression.

As one of the main themes at the inaugural Internet Governance Forum (IGF) in Athens and included on the agenda for this year's IGF in Rio de Janeiro, the issue of "openness" has already generated considerable discussion. Much of this discussion has focussed on free flow of information and freedom of information on the one hand and access to information and knowledge on the other. Additionally, much of the discussion in Athens around this theme was devoted to finding the right balance between freedom of expression and responsible use of this freedom, and between access to knowledge and protecting copyright. Several participants underlined that for developing countries issues such as better access to the Internet and access to knowledge were more of a priority.

These and other issues are expected to be addressed in Rio de Janeiro, in particular, the role of governments to protect the right to freedom of expression on the Internet and the protection of privacy and its relation to freedom of expression. Among the other areas likely to stimulate dialogue are the relationship between national regulations on freedom of expression and the border-free Internet; the issue of open source software, proprietary software and open standards; and the relationship between private enterprise, human rights, and compliance with national law. Moreover, the theme of openness provides an opportunity to address cases of Internet censorship through legislation in international law, which upholds the rights to privacy and free expression and thus the right to communicate anonymously without fear of reprisal or stigma.

While many stakeholders in the IGF process have highlighted the importance of openness as one of the key founding principles and characteristics of the Internet, the open nature of the Internet has been viewed as part of its uniqueness and its importance as a tool to advance human development. Facilitating access to knowledge and empowering people with information is a critical objective of an inclusive information society and necessary for continued economic and social development.

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