

Deutsche Welle Global Media Forum 2018
sef: Roundtable talk

Internet Freedom and Net Neutrality at Stake. How to defend digital rights?

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In 2017, the US Federal Communications Commission (FCC) voted to roll back net neutrality. This shows that open networks and non-discrimination against applications or content are at stake, also in democratic states. In many countries, internet freedom is also endangered by governments. But there is a ray of hope. In Europe the “Save the Internet” campaign organised a powerful movement to protect net neutrality. In African countries, citizens are exploring alternative means of civil action to challenge government and corporate restrictions. In Nigeria, the National Assembly recently passed an innovative Digital Rights and Freedom Bill.

How can civil society mobilise to defend digital rights? What do activists’ experiences from Europe and Africa have in common? How can internet freedom and net neutrality be preserved around the globe? sef: tackled these questions in a session at the Deutsche Welle Global Media Forum on 13 June 2018. The discussion was chaired by Ute Lange from izkommunikation in Bonn.

Global debate needed

‘Gbenga Sesan, Executive Director of the Nigerian Paradigm Initiative, and Thomas Lohninger, Executive Director of epicenter.works in Austria, shared their experiences. They agreed that digital rights are fundamental rights that belong to every-



DW Global Media Forum 2018: ‘Gbenga Sesan

body. Net neutrality is being fought over by competing interests from business and politics. “But it seems like no one is speaking in the interest of the user,” Sesan criticised. Global politics have become unpredictable while trends for stronger surveillance justified by national security are increasingly accepted. However, there needs to be

a conversation about the survival of public space. Restrictions may look unsuspecting on the surface. But governments will be able to use them in favour of their interests, Sesan said. Although restrictions may differ from country to country “discussions about net neutrality and internet freedom need to be global,” Lohninger emphasised.

Fighting for internet freedom in Nigeria

Both activists gave an insight into the campaigns they led. For ‘Gbenga Sesan, his campaign for a Digital Rights and Freedom Bill began with the Twitter discussions around #bringbackourgirls which called for the return of 267 girls who had been abducted by Boko Haram in 2013. In the debate, Sesan was accused of adopting the wording



DW Global Media Forum 2018: Thomas Lohninger

of terrorists against his government. “But I am a citizen, I should be allowed to speak up,” he reasoned. Following this, he and his colleagues from the Paradigm Initiative put together an “Internet freedom declaration of Nigeria”. But how to make this paper effective? He and his team started lobbying for their interests and tried to find sponsoring Members of Parliament for a bill on digital rights. After a strenuous two-year process, the Digital Rights and Freedom Bill was passed by the National Assembly. It is currently due to be signed by the Nigerian President.

Saving the internet in Europe

The Campaign “Save the Internet” took place around the same time in Europe. In September 2013, the Commission of the European Union proposed new legislation on net neutrality. Lohninger and his colleagues had been calling for measures to protect internet freedom for years. So they decided to try and turn the decision of the European Parliament before the next European elections. This was not an easy task. But, as Lohninger pointed out, digital rights policies touch both societal and business interests. Therefore, “Save the Internet” could approach socialist and social-democratic MEPs with the argument that net neutrality is necessary for equality. And they could approach neo-liberal and conservative MEPs arguing that net neutrality facilitates innovation and a competitive digital economy in Europe.

While the campaign was successful, the internet is far from being saved for good. “In Europe, there are politicians who are afraid of an open internet. They want to move the internet back towards a classical TV show with a clear separation of the sender and the receiver of information,” Lohninger illustrated. On 5 July, the European Parliament will vote on legislation for all websites with user-generated content to establish upload filters. “This would open the flood ways for the mutilation of free speech,” Lohninger warned.

Access to the internet is a basic need

What is important for advocacy to be successful? For Lohninger, advocacy is all about getting people’s attention and connecting with their interest. With Save the Internet, they tried to link up with particular communities. For example, a lot of librarians and start-ups joined the campaign. “In the end, the preservation of net neutrality is important to everyone. Not only to people who make money with the internet or who have a website or a blog,” Lohninger said.

‘Gbenga Sesan agreed: “Most people have no idea how much net neutrality and internet freedom mean to their lives,” he stated. To him, using the internet has become a basic need: “In school, I was fine if I didn’t eat breakfast or lunch as long as I had dinner. But if I didn’t have access to the internet, that was a huge problem for me!” Access to the internet has become the heart of social participation: People are excluded from public debate if they cannot afford internet access.

Sending faxes to make voices heard

In practice, “Save the Internet” tried to build tools that allow people to raise their voices. One success story of the campaign: through a button on the campaign’s website, every supporter could send a fax to Members of the European Parliament. Finding a huge pile of paper in the office every morning made an impact. “The MEPs could physically feel that people took an interest in the legislative process,” Lohninger explained.



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One participant from India shared his experiences in campaigning against Facebook’s Free Basic service. The service has been implemented in a number of countries. It provides free internet access – through Facebook. The campaign in India teamed up e.g. with stand-up comedians to reach the broad public. They also used emails: 15.000 were sent within three hours after the launch to politicians. Of course, classical networking played a role as well. “You have to meet MPs, ministers, legislators. Anyone you can get a hold of,” the participant explained. In the end, they managed

to make their campaign with zero money. “When people offered us money, we turned them down,” he explained. No one in the campaign wanted to be suspected of taking sides with business interests. In the meantime, the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) has banned all services providing free access to only a limited set of sites.

Do politicians understand the internet?

Another participant from Russia shared his views: “Our government is trying to block internet freedom on a large scale. But I don’t think they will be successful,” he was convinced. One example were the current efforts to block the messenger service Telegram. “Officials are on telegram as well. They do not even understand the things they try to block,” he said.

Lohninger gave an explanation to this phenomenon as well: “All governments want to use the benefits of the internet. In countries like Russia, governments even try to own the good parts of the internet.” But the internet does not work this way. To him, voluntary measures and content moderation on social media channels are new ways of prohibition. Sesan suggested to keep an eye on public opinion: “It is good to have a certain sense of paranoia in society,” he explained. To him and everyone else in the room, the way forward is clear: “There is no other choice than internet freedom.”

Further information

Visit the website of the Global Media Forum 2018
<http://dw-global-media-forum.com>.

Imprint

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