

My cyberspace bill of rights

Jeff Jarvis

As Google has shown in its confrontation with China, we don't need government in cyberspace - we need freedom

Mon 29 Mar 2010 15.00 BST

In my Media Guardian column this Monday, I suggest that we need a bill of rights in cyberspace as a set of amendments to John Perry Barlow's 1996 Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace. Note that I do not suggest the establishment a constitution of the internet; I think that would violate the tenets Barlow so eloquently, if grandiosely, sets forth. We don't need government in cyberspace; we need freedom.

This bill of rights attempts to establish the fundamental freedoms of our internet that must be protected against abridgment by governments, companies, institutions, criminals, subverters or mobs. I suggest in my column that in its confrontation with China, Google is acting as the ambassador for the internet to the old world under its own (rediscovered) principles. So we would be wise to establish our principles. I ask the column's readers to come to this post to suggest and discuss articles.

Here are mine:

A bill of rights in cyberspace

I. We have the right to connect. This is a preamble and precondition to the American first amendment: before we can speak, we must be able to connect. Hillary Clinton defines the freedom to connect as "the idea that governments should not prevent people from connecting to the internet, to websites, or to each other". It is this principle that also informs discussion of net neutrality.

II. We have the right to speak. No one may abridge our freedom of speech. We acknowledge the limitations on freedom of speech but they must be defined as narrowly as possible, lest we find ourselves operating under a lowest common denominator of offence. Freedom is our default.

III. We have the right to speak in our languages. The English language's domination of the internet has faded as more languages and alphabets have joined the net, which is to be celebrated. But Ethan Zuckerman also cautions that in our polyglot internet, we will want to build bridges across languages. We will want to speak in our own languages but also speak with others'.

IV. We have the right to assemble. In the American Bill of Rights, the right to assemble is listed separately from the right to speak. The internet enables us to organise without organisations and collaborate and that now threatens repressive regimes as much as speech.

V. We have the right to act. These first articles are a thread: We connect to speak and speak to assemble and assemble to act and that is how we can and will change the world, not just putting forth grievances but creating the means to fix them. That is what threatens the institutions that would stop us.

VI. We have the right to control our data. You should have access to data about you. And what's yours is yours. We want the internet to operate on a principle of portability, so your information and creations cannot be held prisoner by a service or government and so you retain control. But keep in mind that when control is given to one, it is taken from another; in those details lurk devils. This principle thus speaks to copyright and its laws, which set the definitions and limits of control or creation. This principle also raises questions about whether the wisdom of the crowd belongs to the crowd

VII. We have the right to our own identity. This is not as simple as a name. Our identity online is made up of our names, addresses, speech, creations, actions, connections. Note also that in repressive regimes, maintaining anonymity - hiding one's identity - is a necessity; thus anonymity, with all its faults and baggage and trolls, must also be protected online to protect the dissenter and the whistleblower. Note finally that these two articles - controlling our data and our identities - make up the right to privacy, which is really a matter of control.

VIII. What is public is a public good. The internet is public; indeed, it is a public place (rather than a medium). In the rush to protect privacy, we must beware the dangers of restricting the definition of public. What's public is owned by the public. Making the public private or secret serves the corrupt and tyrannical.

IX. The internet shall be built and operated openly. The internet must continue to be built and operated to open standards. It must not be taken over or controlled by any company or government. It must not be taxed. It is the internet's openness that gives it its freedom. It is this freedom that defines the internet.

We made a choice...

... and we want to tell you about it. Our journalism now reaches record numbers around the world and more than a million people have supported our reporting. We continue to face financial challenges but, unlike many news organisations, we haven't put up a paywall. We want our journalism to remain accessible to all, regardless of where they live or what they can afford.

This is The Guardian's model for open, independent journalism: free for those who can't afford it, supported by those who can. Readers' support powers our work, safeguarding our essential editorial independence. This means the responsibility of protecting independent journalism is shared, enabling us all to feel empowered and engaged about real change in the world. Your support gives Guardian journalists the time, space and freedom to report with tenacity and rigour, to shed light where others won't. It emboldens us to challenge authority and question the status quo. And by keeping all of our journalism free and open to all, we can foster inclusivity, diversity, make space for debate, inspire conversation - so more people have access to accurate information with integrity at its heart.

Guardian journalism is rooted in facts with a progressive perspective on the world. We are editorially independent, meaning we set our own agenda. Our journalism is free from commercial bias and not influenced by billionaire owners, politicians or shareholders. No one steers our opinion. At a time when there are so few sources of information you can really trust, this is vital

as it enables us to give a voice to those less heard, challenge the powerful and hold them to account. Your support means we can keep investigating and exploring the critical issues of our time.

Our model allows people to support us in a way that works for them. Every time a reader like you makes a contribution to The Guardian, no matter how big or small, it goes directly into funding our journalism. But we need to build on this support for the years ahead. **Support The Guardian from as little as \$1 - and it only takes a minute. Thank you.**

Support The Guardian



**Free for those who can't afford it
Supported by those who can**

Topics

- Google
- liberty central
- China
- Internet
- Censorship
- Surveillance
- Privacy
- Asia Pacific
- comment