

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE UNITED NATIONS

1 July 2024

Secretary-General António Guterres and Envoy on Technology Amandeep Singh Gill,

Since its inception more than fifty years ago, the Internet's technical architecture has evolved and been collaboratively maintained through multistakeholder processes. While it was born in government laboratories, the Internet became a network of networks that kept expanding and required continuous work. Much of that was coordinated in the [Internet Engineering Task Force](#) (IETF), an open, consensus-based, bottom-up, voluntary and global standards body.

More than thirty five years ago, the World Wide Web was born in the laboratories of CERN. It, too, quickly evolved into a global public tool, maintained and developed by a collaboration of like-minded engineers and other stakeholders at the [World Wide Web Consortium](#) (W3C). It, too, is an open, bottom-up, consensus-driven, voluntary and global standards body.

The success of the both IETF's and W3C's work can be measured by where the Internet is today and what it has achieved: global communication has flourished, bringing education, entertainment, information, connectivity and commerce to most of the world's population. The Internet has been a catalyst for advancing development. These communities and the way they have structured themselves have paid off.

We recognize that governments take seriously their responsibility to protect their citizens. So, as harms associated with the Internet and the Web become more apparent, there is a desire on the part of governments to act through regulation and legislation. Technical architecture can enable and influence how the Internet is used, but on its own it cannot address abuse, misinformation, inequality, or many other issues. There is nevertheless a potential danger in regulation and legislation, if it undermines the fundamentally empowering nature of the Internet.

The Internet is an unusual technology because it is fundamentally distributed. It is built up from all of the participating networks. Each network participates for its own reasons according to its own needs and priorities. And this means, necessarily, that there is no center of control on the Internet. This feature is an essential property of the Internet, and not an accident. Yet over the past few years we have noticed a willingness to address issues on the Internet and Web by attempting to insert a hierarchical model of governance over technical matters. Such proposals concern us because they represent an erosion of the basic architecture.

In particular, some proposals for the [Global Digital Compact](#) (GDC) can be read to mandate more centralized governance. If the final document contains such language, we believe it will be detrimental to not only the Internet and the Web, but also to the world's economies and societies.

Furthermore, we note that the GDC is being developed in a multilateral process between states, with very limited application of the open, inclusive and consensus-driven methods by which the Internet and Web have been developed to date. Beyond some high-level consultations, non-government stakeholders (including Internet technical standards bodies and the broader technical community) have had only weak ways to participate in the GDC process. We are concerned that the document will be largely a creation only of governments, disconnected from the Internet and the Web as people all over the world currently experience them.

Therefore, we ask that member states, the Secretary-General and the Tech Envoy seek to ensure that proposals for digital governance remain consistent with the enormously successful multistakeholder Internet governance

practice that has brought us the Internet of today. Government engagement in digital and Internet governance is needed to deal with many abuses of this global system but it is our common responsibility to uphold the bottom-up, collaborative and inclusive model of Internet governance that has served the world for the past half century.

Signed,

All signatures are in a personal capacity; affiliations are informational only.

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IRSG: [Internet Research Steering Group](#)

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ISOC BoT: [Internet Society](#) Board of Trustees

W3C: [World Wide Web Consortium](#)

W3C TAG: [World Wide Web Consortium Technical Architecture Group](#)

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