

Clear and Present Danger: Attempts to Change Internet Governance and Implications for Press Freedom

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On June 26, CIMA hosted the event “Clear and Present Danger: Attempts to Change Internet Governance and Implications for Press Freedom” at the National Endowment for Democracy. The discussion featured Emma Llansó of the Center for Democracy and Technology, Emin Milli of the University of London, Katitza Rodriguez of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, and Rebecca MacKinnon of the New America Foundation. It was moderated by Susan Morgan of the Global Network Initiative.

The panelists discussed the Internet Governance Forum in Azerbaijan and The World Conference on International Telecommunications in Dubai scheduled for November and December of this year. Much of the conversation focused on the impact these meetings will have on the current Internet governance model and the stakes for journalists and free press advocates.

Llansó spoke about the surprising amount of coverage Internet governance has received in the last few months, and she attributed this to the upcoming meetings. Arguing that Internet governance is a broader issue than merely assigning domain names, she defined it as the development and implementation of policies that affect the Internet’s functionality, evolution, and use at any layer of the network. This includes a range of activities, from assigning domain names and Internet protocol (IP) addresses, to developing technical protocols, regulating infrastructure, and crafting policies for online content. She also discussed the multi-stakeholder model of governance that fosters openness, transparency, and consensus. While the implementation of the multi-stakeholder model is not perfect and needs to improve to fully utilize its inclusiveness, Llansó said she hopes that the upcoming meetings will further that goal.

Milli told the story of Khadija Ismaylova, an Azerbaijani journalist whom he calls the bravest reporter in Azerbaijan for her investigative reporting on the business deals of the president’s family. The government attempted to blackmail Ismaylova with purportedly compromising videos, but she refused to succumb to the pressure and has continued reporting for the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project and Radio Liberty. Milli said Azerbaijan faces many complex issues because while the government says it is a free and democratic nation, its actions often indicate

otherwise. For example, Milli himself was jailed in the country for more than a year for exercising his right to free expression through blogging. Milli believes holding high profile events—such as Eurovision and the IGF—in Azerbaijan helps draw international attention to anti-democratic behavior.

Rodriguez reflected on the importance of finding a venue to discuss Internet governance where all stakeholders can be heard. She stressed the importance of inclusiveness in stakeholder meetings and noted that a large part of the world feels left out of the Internet governance discussion, which is often dominated by Western perspectives and by Western participants. While some participants in the process want to make the Internet more restrictive through fees and censorship, Rodriguez cautioned, restrictive legislation should be prevented as much as possible.



MacKinnon listed the many times the ITU has tried to gain a wider jurisdiction over Internet governance, including a bid to control the process in 1996. That bid actually prompted the creation of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), which is still responsible for the coordination of IP addresses. She discussed the dominance of Western technology companies in stakeholder meetings, which do not reflect the diversity of the world's Internet users. Many developing countries, she said, don't even realize they have a right to participate in the governance discussion. She

said that if the multi-stakeholder model is to survive, much work needs to be done to involve all aspects of global civil society. She also cautioned against viewing Internet governance through the lens of East versus West, arguing instead for a collaborative, inclusive approach.

Following remarks from the panelists, the audience asked interesting questions, ranging from implementation challenges to the necessity for any regulation of the Internet at all.

The Center for International Media Assistance is an initiative of the National Endowment for Democracy that works to strengthen the support, raise the visibility, and improve the effectiveness of media assistance programs by providing information, building networks, conducting research, and highlighting the indispensable role independent media play in the creation and development of sustainable democracies around the world. An important aspect of CIMA's work is to research ways to attract additional U.S. private sector interest in and support for international media development.

CIMA convenes working groups, discussions, and panels on a variety of topics in the field of media development and assistance. The center also issues reports and recommendations based on working group discussions and other investigations. These reports aim to provide policymakers, as well as donors and practitioners, with ideas for bolstering the effectiveness of media assistance. For more information on CIMA, please visit <http://cima.ned.org>.