Heinrich Boell Foundation

TOWARDS A "CHARTER OF HUMAN RIGHTS FOR SUSTAINABLE KNOWLEDGE SOCIETIES"

Initiative "Charter on Sustainable Knowledge Societies"[1]

At the center of this Charter of Civil Rights for Sustainable Knowledge Societies is the principle of sustainability as it applies to knowledge and information. A perspective on knowledge and information as sustainable goods has not yet been properly acknowledged in contributions to the WSIS process. The environments which now increasingly influence our private, working and public lives are electronic ones, where we move independently of space and time limitations: these environments complement and in some cases take the place of natural environments and material goods. Therefore, like natural environments and material goods, these electronic environments must also be organized according to the principles of sustainability.

Sustainablity of knowledge and information means firstly containing the currently dominating trend towards commodification, which is aimed at short-range use and at creating an artificial scarcity of knowledge, although, as a good, it is essentially free; the agents of commodification are not primarily interested in the long-range securing of individual and social development or for freedom in the use of knowledge and information.

Knowledge societies organized according to the principles of sustainability also seek answers to the challenge of social justice and equality of opportunity in using knowledge and

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[1] This Charter was drafted by the "Initiative Sustainable Knowledge Societies" at the instigation of the Heinrich-Boell-Foundation, Germany (www.boell.de) . The Charter is work in progress. Members of this Initiative are: Tobias Baur, Humanistische Union, Gabriele Beger, Association for Information Science and Practice, Olga Drossou, Heinrich-Boell-Foundation, Dr. Volker Grassmuck, Initiative for the Advancement of Media Cultures, Berlin/D, Dr. Jeanette Hofmann, Social Science Research Center Berlin, Prof. Hans J. Kleinsteuber, University of Hamburg, Prof. Rainer Kuhlen, University of Konstanz, Chair of the Committee for Communiation of German UNESCO, Prof. Claus Leggewie, Center for Media and Interactivity University of Giessen, Prof. Bernd Lutterbeck, Technical University of Berlin, Andy Müller-Maghun, Chaos Computer Club, Director ICANN, Annette Mühlberg, Vereinte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft Ver.di, Dr. Andreas Poltermann, Heinrich-Böll-Foundation, Prof. Franz J. Radermacher, Research Institute for Applied Knowledge Processing (FAW), Rena Tangens and padeluun, Art d'Ameublement, FoeBuD, Big Brother Awards Germany

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information, and advocate the preservation and promotion of cultural and media diversity as a condition for individual and democratic development and the promotion of peace.

The Initiative for a Charter on Sustainable Knowledge Societies proposes the following areas and objectives of knowledge and information societies to be dealt with at the WSIS under the primacy of sustainability:

1. **Free access to knowledge.** The central objective of a society organized to the principles of sustainability is to secure free access to knowledge and information in the present and for future generations. "Free access" does not necessarily mean "cost-free access"; but access to knowledge must be possible for everyone, at any time, from any location, without discrimination, and at fair conditions. Only free access to knowledge and information makes it possible to participate democratically in public affairs. The best way to promote creativity in science, business and culture is to create free access and conditions of use for knowledge. Likewise it is only freedom of knowledge and information which will give future generations an opportunity to appreciate knowledge of the past and to benefit from it.

2. **Knowledge as a public good owned by all (the Commons). We wish to** register the fact that knowledge is the heritage and property of all of humanity, and is thus free. Commercially exploited knowledge is merely an exception to this rule. Knowledge therefore may not be put at the exclusive disposal of private users, because it represents the reservoir from which new knowledge is created.

3. **Openness of technical standards and open organization forms.** Open technical standards and open forms of technical and software production are the guarantees of free development with respect to infrastructures, information services and self-determined communication forms. This applies equally to network technology, computer architectures and software applications. Proprietary solutions lead to the undesirable formation of monopolies and prevent the creation of alternative and new infrastructures and applications. When governments hold monopolies on infrastructure and when private-sector players have proprietary monopolies on technology, information and communication technologies are in danger of being so dominated by this monopolized control of infrastructure and power to set standards that the freedoms of many people will be suffer as a result.

4. **Securing privacy in the use of knowledge and information.** The way that we deploy knowledge resources, what we take in, and what we communicate to other people belong in the personal sphere of each individual person and must not be used for others' purposes without his/her consent or his /her knowledge. No one should be forced to release his/her personal data. The guiding principle for treating personal data should be minimization. Privacy and anonymity must be protected, especially as regards surveillance and the use of personal data in business and government organizations.

5. **Cultural and linguistic diversity.** Culture is realized in an ensemble of human artifacts as well as in behavior patterns, life forms and linguistic expressions.

The development of global knowledge societies must not be allowed to lead to a homogenization of cultures under the guise of marketability. Instead the creative potentials of the current information and communication technologies must be used to preserve and promote the diversity of culture and languages as a precondition for individual and social development of the present and future generations.

6. **Securing media diversity and public opinion.** The concrete threat that only a few media actors will determine content and public opinion by using digital technologies must be countered. Instead it must be emphasized that media diversity and the availability of non-commercial media information are important for the preservation of an enlightened public. New ways of exploiting the potential of digital media must be developed under public control, for instance, through public-service bodies and open, direct, civil-society forms of media organization with the free participation of all citizens.

7. **The long-term conservation of knowledge.** As a result of the fleeting nature of electronic information, suitable procedures must be developed and corresponding organizational measures taken to secure the long-term availability of electronically stored knowledge. Long-term archiving is one of the tasks incumbent on knowledge societies organized according to sustainable principles.

8. **Bridging the digital divide.** The digital divide is a universal challenge and concerns both knowledge gaps in developed countries and the unequal distribution of knowledge among countries. Access to knowledge, to technical infrastructures, and to means of open communication are crucial prerequisites for overcoming digital divides. Overcoming unequal distribution and unequal access opportunities to information therefore must be recognized as a political objective of high priority. Essential to overcoming the digital divide are the creation of appropriate infrastructures (as regards both technology and information and communication services), the formation of information competency, respect for the freedoms of opinion and the press and the overcoming of social, ethnic and gender discrimination.

9. **Freedom of information as a civil right to political activity and transparent administration.** Every person must have access without discrimination to files, documents and registries of public administrations, unless there are fundamental public interests or legitimate private interests in opposition to such. The right to public information must be guaranteed using the current potential of the media. The wider distribution of the knowledge basis made possible by technological development in information and communication enables and demands informed citizens who are allowed to participate actively in political planning and decision processes.

10. **Securing freedom of information in work environment.** The Internet is changing the work environment, creating new forms of organization and cooperation, and thus new types of relation between employers and employees, or between newly independent businesspeople and representatives of their interest, as the case may be. Those accomplishments and basic rights that have been put into law and international agreements thus far in the work environment, such as protection from electronic surveillance, must also retain their validity, or if not, then be adapted to electronically networked work environments.

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