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UN FORUM SERIES – How do technology companies integrate freedom of expression and privacy rights?

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This post was contributed by Allon Bar, research coordinator with the [Ranking Digital Rights project](#).

People around the world increasingly rely on the products and services of companies from the information communication and technology (ICT) sector for many aspects of their lives: from education and business, to politics and religion. These ICT sector companies have a responsibility not only to respect the human rights of workers and communities where they operate, but also the human rights of people who use their technologies.

Clearly, ICT users' rights to freedom of expression and privacy are a central aspect of the ICT sector's responsibility to respect human rights.

How do some of the world's most powerful ICT sector companies stack up when it comes to concrete policies and practices to respect individuals' human rights? For the first time we have an answer. On November 3rd, [Ranking Digital Rights](#) launched its inaugural [Corporate Accountability Index](#), taking stock of technology companies' disclosed commitments, policies and practices affecting their users' right to freedom of expression and privacy.

The 2015 Index assesses [16](#) globally operating telecommunications and Internet companies on 31 indicators informed by the UN Guiding Principles, the Global Network Initiative's principles on freedom of expression and privacy, emerging international data protection standards, and two years of consultation with stakeholders across the world.

One of the [key findings](#) of the Index is that, across the board, disclosure by ranked companies on privacy & freedom of expression issues is inadequate. The best performing company in our Index scored 65 out of a 100, highlighting the fact that individuals are left in the dark about companies' policies and practices affecting their rights.

For example, companies often give a fuzzy picture of what data they collect about their users, and what they do with that data. Also, companies' implementation of access to remedy, the third pillar of the UN's "protect, respect and remedy" framework, is often poor or lacking.

The indicators used in the Index represent a set of standards against which companies are measured, thus giving companies an instrument to understand how their own policies measure up, and to identify areas where they can and should make progress. Our analysis accompanying the Index also offers [concrete recommendations](#) for how companies can improve. At the same time, the Index empowers consumers, investors and governments to make decision on how they wish to engage with companies based on what they disclose.

One challenge for any ranking is to ensure that the data is used by civil society, academic researchers, responsible investors and companies themselves, and that the methodology has a a long-term impact on industry best practice. Resources permitting, we hope to update the Index on an annual basis, and ideally expand the number and type of companies.

We are engaging with companies, civil stakeholders and others to enable the dialogue necessary for rights to be better respected. Several organizations have come forward with ideas for advocacy campaigns based on our findings, or to conduct regional or nationally-focused research projects using our approach. Research and consulting firms that work with companies have also begun to explore how they might use our indicators to help companies address their challenges related to freedom of expression and privacy rights of users.

We welcome others to do the same. Our data and methodology are freely available through the website, rankingdigitalrights.org, under an open attribution license. The broader the uptake of clear standards for corporate policy and practice on these issues, the better we can help companies worldwide understand how to better respect their users' rights.

Ranking Digital Rights has organized various [launch events in November and December](#) including [two gatherings](#) at the 4th Annual United Nations Forum on Business and Human Rights in Geneva next week. We look forward to learning from the many other great initiatives that help push corporate respect for human rights in the right direction.

Allon Bar



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