

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2016

Economic, social and cultural rights and the internet



Association for Progressive Communications (APC) and International Development Research Centre (IDRC)

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Visualising human rights at ICANN

Niels ten Oever ARTICLE 19, Cross Community Working Party on ICANN's Corporate and Social Responsibility to Respect Human Rights (CCWP-HR)

The Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) is a non-profit organisation incorporated in California, established in 1998. It is responsible for the stable and secure operation of the Internet. Its work revolves around the management, operation and technical maintenance of the databases concerning both Internet "names" and "numbers".

In non-Internet speak, ICANN functions as the telephone book of the Internet by connecting domain names to their respective Internet protocol (IP) addresses. For example, when you type a URL into your browser, like https://www.article19.org, that is not actually the address of the web server. The domain name system (DNS) allows the translation between the URL and the actual IP address. This is done because people are much better at remembering words than numbers like IP addresses, which look like this: 85.118.235.222.

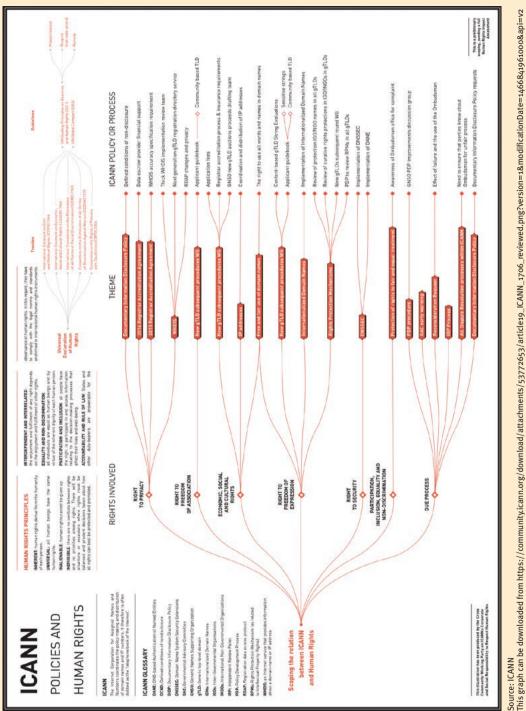
ICANN's work coordinating the policy making and distribution of domain names and IP numbers has a direct impact on human rights. There are many examples of ICANN's work impacting on human rights. Think, for instance, about the allocation of generic top level domains (gTLD). Who gets to have the gTLD .amazon? Is it the Brazilian government, through whose territory streams the Amazon River, or is it the Seattle-based company? Or the .gay gTLD? And what about the privacy issues related to the WHOIS database, the ICANN database that keeps records of who registers which domain name and can be queried by anyone?

It is clear that ICANN has an impact on human rights through many of its processes and policies. But considering the complicated nature of ICANN, it is often difficult to see where and how these impacts play out. Because of this, the Cross Community Working Party on Human Rights (CCWP-HR) – founded and chaired by ARTICLE 19 – decided to map ICANN and present its findings in this data visualisation.

The initial scoping led to the identification of various ICANN policies or processes that might have a human rights impact. These were further analysed to identify various overarching themes, and from these themes seven rights directly involved in the ICANN work were distilled.

The purpose of the infographic is to make visible how ICANN impacts human rights, both for the ICANN community and the broader public.

One of the main issues hindering new voices – especially civil society voices – from being heard at technical bodies like ICANN is the amount of jargon, technical know-how and understanding needed to participate in the different procedures. With this visualisation we hoped to make ICANN more accessible and understandable for all those interested in the relation between its work and human rights.



Economic, social and cultural rights and the internet

The 45 country reports gathered here illustrate the link between the internet and economic, social and cultural rights (ESCRs). Some of the topics will be familiar to information and communications technology for development (ICT4D) activists: the right to health, education and culture; the socioeconomic empowerment of women using the internet; the inclusion of rural and indigenous communities in the information society; and the use of ICT to combat the marginalisation of local languages. Others deal with relatively new areas of exploration, such as using 3D printing technology to preserve cultural heritage, creating participatory community networks to capture an "inventory of things" that enables socioeconomic rights, crowdfunding rights, or the negative impact of algorithms on calculating social benefits. Workers' rights receive some attention, as does the use of the internet during natural disasters.

Ten thematic reports frame the country reports. These deal both with overarching concerns when it comes to ESCRs and the internet – such as institutional frameworks and policy considerations – as well as more specific issues that impact on our rights: the legal justification for online education resources, the plight of migrant domestic workers, the use of digital databases to protect traditional knowledge from biopiracy, digital archiving, and the impact of multilateral trade deals on the international human rights framework.

The reports highlight the institutional and country-level possibilities and challenges that civil society faces in using the internet to enable ESCRs. They also suggest that in a number of instances, individuals, groups and communities are using the internet to enact their socioeconomic and cultural rights in the face of disinterest, inaction or censure by the state.

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