

Draft statement for consideration from the Reclaim the Net conference

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**Draft statement for consideration from the Reclaim the Net conference organised by the
Dei Lenk (Left Party) of Luxembourg with the participation of members or supporters of
Parti de Gauche (France), Die Linke (Germany) and Left Unity (Britain). 28th/29th June 2013
at a Conference supported by the European Left Group in the European Parliament.**

Introductory note

This statement was discussed by the main contributors to the conference and is being distributed more widely for further discussion. It is the beginning of the discussion and already at the conference there were some points raised by contributors and accepted by the drafters that will be incorporated later. These additions were a) a third section needed on how the left and the movement can best use the Internet in our intervention b) more on how the Internet is used in its 'bread and circuses' function to distract and divert people e.g. porn, games, gambling c) an organisational consideration on how the left should continue this discussion at least on a European basis d) how to use state or European wide political or legal mechanisms to limit or control power of the Internet companies e) develop further this idea of the left championing the idea of defending common goods vital to everyday life such as education, health, water, energy, transport and place the Internet within that as a right to the best communication. [1]

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Reclaim the Net

We recognise two key areas of discussion in order to develop a left political stance on the Internet:

1) Participation: the social aspect is key

The Internet, version 2.0, in its idealised presentation, is the modern way of participating in social, cultural or political life. Great hopes are invoked for its potential to encourage democracy, to provide transparency and to allow powerful communication. Today anyone who stands out against interactive participation through the web is seen to be obsolete or else an opponent of citizen's

democracy. If we look beyond the buzz created by the Internet as a democratic area we discover a reality that should be seen in a more balanced way.

What cannot be ignored is that the Internet has the power to boost involvement. If the net is accessible then using it to communicate directly, independently and in real time is possible with each user also becoming a potential correspondent. The Internet allows us to have an overall view of things and re-dimensions notions of distance.

It is therefore important to put forward and defend these key propositions regarding the use of the net.

The neutrality of the Internet must be maintained. The state must open itself up to these new democratic mechanisms by accepting transparency, participation in the democratic process as well as ensuring much greater public resources are allocated to support this. However the fact is that this means of communication is not available to everybody. From the beginning of the Internet we know that there is a clear statistical difference, a segregation, between those who have access and those that do not. When we talk about access we mean all the obstacles related to it. The key question is the quality of access, which depends on broadband speed, the specification of the home computer, people's numeracy levels and technical knowledge. Therefore practical knowledge is as important as the technical quality of web access.

If we look at these factors we can see that an emancipatory policy of developing numeracy is closely linked to other political policy areas and is part of the struggle for social equality. Consequently we find that the people at a disadvantage are those who for financial reasons cannot acquire good quality computers and obtain fast broadband and/or are much older with lower educational qualifications. Often people in rural areas are at a disadvantage compared to those living in cities. Generally there are gender and ethnic differences in terms of access and use of the infrastructure. In global terms the advanced countries of the West and North are generally more equipped to use the web. We need to oppose these inequalities and act against them:

Media and ICT teaching in schools needs to be much better as well as lifelong training in this area. Free access to the internet provided by local councils must be provided. Obstacles to access need to be removed - multilingual teaching, effective pedagogy and free access must be guaranteed in publicly provided courses. In addition to this segregation there is another, second division between people using the Internet. How does one use the Internet? We can identify on the one hand an 'active and effective' use and on the other hand its use as a purely entertainment platform. Research shows that this divide follows class lines. How one uses the Internet depends on your income, your job, your educational background, your gender and your family. More and more people are using the Internet but it is alarming what the majority are using it for. There is a tendency for the Internet to reflect the divisions between social groups that already exist in society. The risk is that even if the instruments for participating online are established a significant proportion of the population will not participate, nullifying somewhat the legitimacy of this democratic struggle.

Setting up the means for participating in the Internet must aim to guarantee the involvement of all. Alternatives to online participation must be created (or maintained). Projects involving all must be carried through with clear targets - in order to encourage minority groups and remove obstacles to access. It is dangerous to only see potential being based on the Internet. A left policy on the web has to highlight and fight against the unequal use of the web. Left parties need to bring those excluded people into the debate about the Internet. All those points about equality in general must be part and parcel of left parties' policy on the web - whether we are talking about immigration (right of web access for asylum seekers), the struggle against sexism or the fight against the influence of political lobbyists and so on. We need to support those whose voice is not heard when we discuss

internet use, particularly by arguing for training for all (not just at a basic level to use games or entertainment).

2. The public interest, the state or the market?

Generally members of Dei Lenk have taken up the struggle against the dominant companies that increasingly commercialise the public space of the Internet. This involves ideological campaigns and legal challenges that include: Facebook and co in terms of data privacy and protection; the digitalisation and commercial exploitation of public resources (e.g. Google Books, Google Art-Project); the the management of knowledge (Open Access to the state and science as opposed to science as a commodity) and finally the sharing of personal data and the constraints of commercial control of our access and participation on the net (Youtube and Facebook).

A public interest confronts both the interests of the state and private enterprise. Left parties can organise around defence of the public interest leading to clear demands and objectives in relation to the state, pushing the latter to take a position against the commercialisation and privatisation of the Internet while explaining the importance of building this new movement around these issues.

Apart from the multitude of small projects and blogs there are many well-known examples of this principle of public interest e.g. Wikipedia, Open Source software like Word Press or free programming languages or operating systems such as Linux and many others. At the same time there are also alternative ideas around distribution and copyright (Copyleft, CreativeCommons).

From the state there are digital projects like Europeana or the BNL digital archive in Luxembourg which provides information and advice such as 'culture.lu'. There are several initiatives taken by the state or local councils that encourage access and involvement in the Internet as a public service for citizens. Obviously the flipside of the state influence is the surveillance and monitoring of the web.

Privatisation is considered a key principle by the dominant commercial interests on the web, beginning with Bill Gates (with the scale of his global brand) who, at a given moment, decided to declare a source code within the public domain as being his private property. Apple culture is no alternative since the user has very little influence over his/her own computer or device. The infrastructure of the Internet is mainly in private hands: Google and Amazons' servers store most of the Internet's data and would like to have exclusive control of it. The recent scandals (Prism exposed by Snowden) also show that these companies pass over this data to the secret services or police or exercise a blind self-censorship. It is known for example that Amazon's servers block Wikileaks.

The influence of the private companies is remarkable - they place their specialists in strategic areas of the state and civil society, they keep close control over considerable technical knowledge, they protect themselves legally, they lobby assiduously and create fait-accomplis on a daily basis. Debates such as that on the passing on of data illustrate clearly how these companies are developing policies outside the control of anyone in order to achieve private goals but also to take over and share out among themselves the potential of the Internet.

We can only understand the Internet and develop a political line if we start from this triple reality of the state, the market and the public interest (or people). Current discussion turns around the interaction and dialogue between these three social forces.

In conclusion here are some headings for this discussion:

Observation, privacy, whistleblowing, Deep Packet Inspection Filesharing, Piracy, Access to cultural goods/knowledge, Google Books Neutrality of the net, privatisation of the infrastructure.

P.S.

* <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/>

Footnotes

[1] A full report on the proceedings of the conference is available on ESSF (article 29462), "[Luxembourg conference on the Left's engagement with the Internet](#)."