

Ranking Digital Rights Q&A for Companies

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(For general information about project partners, funders, advisors, project timeline, workshops, stakeholder consultations, etc., see: <http://rankingdigitalrights.org>. The material below does not duplicate most of the information on the project website.)

Q: Exactly how will you evaluate my company?

A: This project is now in a research and development phase. In 2013 we are not seeking to rank or score any companies; we are conducting research to determine what criteria are most appropriate and important given the project's [mission](#). (See our Work Plan and timeline here: <http://rankingdigitalrights.org/project-documents/work-plan/>)

By the end of 2014, we will produce a ranking or index evaluating companies' policies and practices related to free expression and privacy. The exact methodology we develop and apply and the exact form in which the results will be organized and published remains to be decided. Those decisions will be shaped by what we learn in this current phase focused on case study research and consultations with companies (see <http://rankingdigitalrights.org/project-documents/case-study-research/>).

Q: You mean that companies get to influence the creation of the methodology that will ultimately evaluate them?

A: Yes, in addition to other stakeholders including investors, the human rights community, technologists, and academic researchers from around the world. As part of our commitment to stakeholder engagement and maximum transparency and openness about the project, we believe the best practice is to make public our research and development process as early as possible. We also believe it is vital for the project's effectiveness and credibility to engage companies throughout the methodology development.

The more feedback we get from companies, the more we will be able to ensure that our methodology is fair, meaningful and practical. We developed a [draft criteria](#) for research purposes and hope companies will talk to our researchers about how and whether those criteria are the right ones, given the ultimate [mission](#) of the RDR project. Conversations with companies will enable us to develop a solid and credible methodology, and will help us understand various stakeholders' viewpoints on the most helpful way to organize and publish the comparative results. Once we have developed the full draft methodology we will again seek company input and feedback before finalizing and applying it.

To what extent the final methodology is based on publicly available information or independently obtained data, and to what extent it relies on company participation in surveys, has also yet to be decided. The exact shape of the final methodology depends on what we learn through our case study research and company consultations.

Q: Why is this project necessary given that the Global Network Initiative already exists?

A: Given the central role companies play in both the infrastructure of the Internet and the interactions between governments, consumers and the Internet, the [Global Network Initiative](#) (GNI) emerged in 2008 as an important means to helping the Internet evolve in a manner compatible with the protection of freedom of expression and privacy. GNI – through a multi-stakeholder and collaborative approach, principles and implementation guidelines, and an independent, credible and rigorous assurance process – has become an internationally recognized standard for what companies can and should to do to protect human rights in the face of government efforts to curtail the rights to freedom of expression and privacy through censorship and surveillance.

A significant challenge with respect to freedom of expression and privacy online, however, is that to date only six ICT sector companies have shown a willingness and the leadership to join GNI. GNI aims to bring in more companies from across the ICT sector and almost certainly will succeed in that effort as companies recognize the value and as other stakeholders continue to push companies to stand up to the challenge of better protecting their users' internationally recognized human rights.

In the meantime, it is important for the public to have a greater understanding of what companies across the ICT industry and across the world – not just today's handful of GNI participants – are doing to protect their users' rights to freedom of expression and privacy. Meeting the challenges globally in this area will take an ecosystem of organizations and initiatives, and it is going to take a willingness to use a variety of approaches. This is where RDR, among other projects, comes in.

Q: What is the relationship between GNI and RDR?

A: RDR's project lead Rebecca MacKinnon helped launch GNI and is a member of GNI's Board of Directors until her term expires in early 2014. RDR's draft criteria draw heavily upon the GNI principles and implementation guidelines, among other inputs as outlined in the [introduction](#) to the draft criteria document. Several members of RDR's [advisory council](#) are either GNI members or were involved with GNI in the past. We believe that GNI and RDR have complementary roles to play in

advancing respect for human rights in the ICT sector. However there is no formal relationship between the two.

RDR differs from GNI in two major respects:

- RDR will evaluate and compare companies regardless of whether they choose to be evaluated or compared.
- RDR will enable comparison between a large number of major companies in the ICT sector for stakeholders and decision makers to use.

A global ranking such as the one we hope to develop through RDR would offer a well-researched, systematic comparison at regular intervals of the policies and practices of the world's largest ICT companies. It will enable users globally to understand threats to their rights to free expression and privacy and understand which companies are doing what, if anything, to help protect their rights in this area. It will help inform companies of best industry practices as well as areas of strength and weakness inside their own company. It will help investors make more informed choices. The comparative information should also better inform civil society, academia and policymakers on the nature of threats to freedom of expression and privacy and how different companies are responding to those threats.

The GNI is a Multi-stakeholder initiative (MSI). MSIs and ratings or rankings play different roles and serve different purposes. In other sectors and on other issues like environment, labor rights, access to medicines, extractives revenue transparency, etc., it is common to see corporate ratings and rankings coexist with, and complement, MSIs.

Q: What are examples of ranking type initiatives in other industries?

A: Take for example the Access to Medicines Index. Funded by the Gates Foundation, it highlights how pharmaceutical companies are doing on specific criteria related to access to medicine. It complements MSIs like the Medicines Transparency Alliance that are working towards the same ends. MSIs dedicated to stopping slave labor in industries like cocoa and cotton are complemented by rankings that help consumers avoid brands that have not done enough to keep slave labor out of their supply chains. Transparency International has produced several reports comparing the extent to which multinational corporations report publicly on measures to prevent corruption, including corporate transparency about government payments by the oil and gas sector. Such reports have helped to prove the value of MSIs such as the Extractives Industry Transparency Initiative (EITI). A number of examples of other rankings, ratings and indexes are linked on the project's "[resources](#)" page.

In conducting research prior to launching this project, we consulted with socially responsible investors, corporate social responsibility (CSR) professionals, business and human rights experts, human rights advocates, academics, and others with broad perspective on the field of business and human rights beyond the ICT sector. We learned from them that existing ratings, rankings and disclosure guidelines in the CSR field on privacy and freedom of expression are virtually nonexistent. RDR can help to fill that void.

Q: What if RDR is delayed or stalls due to lack of funding or other reasons?

A: We believe other initiatives – academic and investor driven – both contemplated and underway will rank companies in the ICT sector whether RDR continues or not.

The Sustainability Accounting Standards Board is currently developing standards that will include free expression and privacy. Société Générale recently teamed up with Sustainalytics to produce a report comparing a selection of ICT sector and media companies on free expression and privacy related criteria. Other organizations that provide data to SRIs are considering how to include free expression and privacy in their mix of offerings. The Dow Jones Sustainability Index now includes privacy in its criteria. The demand for the type of research and methodology development that the RDR has begun to do is growing and will only increase.

Q: There are several other projects tracking or ranking or indexing different aspects of Internet freedom and privacy. Are you communicating with them?

A: We have listed some of these projects on our “[resources](#)” page and will continue to update the list. Since late 2012 we have made continuous efforts to stay in regular contact with projects that already produce, or are working to produce, regular data sets that may complement or possibly overlap with the types of data that RDR is likely to produce. We are committed to coordinate with all the different players in this space in order to maximize compatibilities and synergies between the different projects.