



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Alison Yost, alison@opentechinstitute.org, +1-202-596-3345

**Ranking Digital Rights Spotlights Corporate Practices
Around Privacy, Freedom of Expression**

*New 'Corporate Accountability Index' finds many of the world's most powerful
Internet and telecommunications companies fail to disclose
key information about practices affecting users' rights*

NEW YORK CITY – Many of the world's most powerful Internet and telecommunications companies are not doing enough to respect basic user rights, according to new research released today. Even the companies that ranked highest are missing the mark in some ways, and improvements are needed across the board to demonstrate a greater commitment to users' freedom of expression and privacy.

In their first annual Corporate Accountability Index, [Ranking Digital Rights](#) analyzed a representative group of 16 companies that collectively hold the power to shape the digital lives of billions of people across the globe. Leading global ESG research and ratings provider, Sustainalytics, co-developed the methodology.

Eight publicly listed Internet companies and eight publicly listed telecommunications companies were selected based on factors including geographic reach and diversity, user base, company size, and market share. These companies were assessed on 31 indicators across three categories – commitment, freedom of expression, and privacy – drawn heavily from international human rights frameworks, as well as emerging and established global principles for privacy and freedom of expression.

The research revealed a deep need for improvement:

- Only six companies scored at least 50 percent of the total possible points;
- The overall highest score was only 65 percent;
- Nearly half the companies in the Index scored less than 25 percent, showing a serious deficit of respect for users' freedom of expression and privacy.

Overall, Google ranked highest among Internet companies, while the U.K.-based Vodafone ranked highest among telecommunications companies, despite significant deficiencies.

“When we put the rankings in perspective, it’s clear there are no winners,” said Rebecca MacKinnon, director of Ranking Digital Rights. “Our hope is that the Index will lead to greater corporate transparency, which can empower users to make more informed decisions about how they use technology.”

The Corporate Accountability Index allows users, investors, activists, and policymakers to compare how – and whether – Internet and telecommunications companies are making tangible efforts to respect digital rights. Among the key findings:

- **Disclosure about collection, use, sharing, and retention of user information is poor.** Even companies that make efforts to publish such information still fail to communicate clearly with users about what is collected about them, with whom it is shared, under what circumstances, and how long the information is kept.
- **Disclosure about private and self-regulatory processes is minimal and ambiguous at best, and often non-existent.** Few companies disclose data about private third-party requests to remove or restrict content or to share user information – even when those requests come under circumstances such as a court order or subpoena.
- **In some instances, current laws and regulations make it more difficult for companies to respect freedom of expression and privacy.** All of the ranked companies face *some* legal or regulatory requirements that hinder their performance on certain indicators.

There was however, some good news.

- **Each of the companies in the Index is doing *something* well.** All of the companies assessed have at least some practices and/or policies in place that help to protect freedom of expression or privacy.
- **“Transparency reporting” is becoming a standard practice.** Nine of the 16 ranked companies publish some information about requests they receive from governments or private parties to share user information, and/or to remove or block content, deactivate accounts, or deny access to service.
- **Seven of the companies (nearly half) have backed up commitments to freedom of expression and privacy by disclosing a number of concrete measures to implement those commitments.** Such measures include employee training and whistleblowing mechanisms, internal oversight and accountability processes, and human rights impact assessments.

In addition to the findings, the Index also provides practical recommendations for steps that Internet and telecommunications companies – as well as other companies throughout the sector – can take to improve.

“The Ranking Digital Rights Corporate Accountability Index can serve as a valuable tool for engaging with companies on digital rights and freedom of expression issues,” said Sustainalytics’ CEO Michael Jantzi. “We believe this important resource can help companies to further identify, understand and manage human rights risks, and we applaud Ranking Digital Rights for raising awareness of these critical issues.”

The Index methodology, co-developed with Sustainalytics, draws from the experience of responsible investors and experts in the field of business and human rights. The Index results can be used by activists, investors, and policymakers around the world to ask tough questions about whether – and how well – companies’ *stated policies* are actually being carried out. While Ranking Digital Rights does not track the implementation of policies, the Index offers a roadmap for other researchers to carry out in-depth investigations, local testing, and monitoring to verify companies’ statements, and track how policies and practices affect users.

For more details, data, and analysis see: rankingdigitalrights.org.

ABOUT RANKING DIGITAL RIGHTS

Ranking Digital Rights is a non-profit research initiative housed at New America’s Open Technology Institute in Washington D.C., working with an international network of partners to promote greater respect for freedom of expression and privacy by focusing on the policies and practices of companies in the information communications technology (ICT) sector.

ABOUT SUSTAINALYTICS

Headquartered in Amsterdam, Sustainalytics is an independent ESG and corporate governance research, ratings, and analysis firm supporting investors around the world with the development and implementation of responsible investment strategies. With 13 offices globally, Sustainalytics partners with institutional investors who integrate environmental, social and governance information and assessments into their investment processes. Today, the firm has 230 staff members, including more than 120 analysts with varied multidisciplinary expertise across more than 40 sectors. For the past three years, Sustainalytics has been named the best independent responsible investment research firm in Extel’s IRRI survey of institutional investors. For more information, visit www.sustainalytics.com.

###