

‘What data and internet rules India makes will shape the internet’s future’

Professor Dame Wendy Hall of the Web Science Institute, University of Southampton, is amongst the foremost voices in the world of the internet and computer science. During a recent visit to Bengaluru, she spoke to *DH's Pranshu Rathee*, reflecting on the future of the internet.

You have said that there are different models of the internet around the world that are trying to assert themselves. Could you elaborate on what those are?

Yes, some of the research on this is truly ground-breaking. The fragmentation of the internet or ‘splinternet’ is both a geopolitical and a technical issue from the point of view of data governance. The internet, on which the world wide web (WWW) was built, was originally made open and free and that’s what helped it take off. Until about 2004 or so, people thought of the web as something you use to download documents from the internet. They didn’t realise what it was going to become and how the big companies were going to emerge to dominate it.

These big companies emerged, largely in Silicon Valley in the US, and everything is now market-led. These companies store a lot of data on us, even more than governments, and so have

been called ‘data states,’ as they have been compared with nation-states in that sense.

In America, these tech companies lobby the US government to get the rules, laws and regulations required to help their shareholders make money. They also resist paying taxes in other countries. In Europe, where there aren’t as many such big companies, with data protection regulations such as General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), they are attempting to implement the data protection approach to the governance of data and the internet. While this approach is visionary and laudable in its stated aims, it is also very bureaucratic. You need a team of lawyers to help understand the GDPR, and this makes it difficult for start-ups and small and medium enterprises. As a result, they tend to become risk-averse, and that stifles innovation. The other example is China which, from the very get-go of when the web emerged there in the late 1990s, has taken an authoritarian approach in controlling speech and expression on the internet.

This is problematic in democracies, where freedom of speech is important. But restrictions to force people to behave themselves on the internet is something that’s being looked at since the internet has become quite toxic. Problems like cy-

The Tuesday Interview

with
Dame Wendy Hall,
Web pioneer



ber-bullying, internet trolling, cyber fraud, fake news and so on need to be fixed.

You have also got Russia, playing a sort of spoiler hacking game against everybody. But who do we look to to fix it? Governments? Social media companies? Or ourselves? We need to think about these questions.

Where do you think India fits in this picture of different models?

In 2019, we reached the 50/50 point, where 50% of the planet has acquired access to the internet in different ways and different jurisdictions. But this also means that the other 50% needs to get

onto the internet. And that 50% will be largely in rural China, rural India and Africa. And when you look at the population numbers, the way that these countries govern the internet will determine its future.

For example, China may change quite radically post the Coronavirus, because people tried to alert the Chinese authorities to what was happening in Wuhan and that was taken down. This epidemic, which could be a pandemic, might not have happened if people had been allowed to raise the alarm. I think the Chinese government will reflect on this. But China will also have a big influ-

ence on Africa as the latter looks to it for access to the internet. But besides China, Africa also looks to India for guidance. The Indian government’s attitude on data governance and what citizens can and cannot do on the internet is important. There’s a very interesting debate happening in India and other parts of the world on the same sorts of issues – on how much our governments should control access to the internet to protect citizens.

In the UK, the previous government looked to the social media companies to figure this out, but I don’t think that’s practical or feasible. I don’t want social media companies to be the internet police or censor. On the other hand, I don’t want the government doing this, either. So, we have to find a third way, which is something where the governments work with the social media companies and also consult people to help set up intermediaries who manage this in a way that is good for everybody.

Citizens must have a voice in this, and I know that that debate is playing out here in India. How that debate turns out in India will determine the future of the internet because of the sheer scale of India and because of its influence on Africa.

India has had a lot of internet shutdowns. What are your thoughts on the phenomenon of internet shutdowns?

I think governments play a dangerous game when they start to shut down the internet. They do this for political reasons and as political weapons, but often at great risk to their economies and general wellbeing. One of the first countries to shut down the internet was Egypt in the middle of the ‘Arab Spring’, and as you know, it didn’t help very much. They only did it for 24 hours because they immediately realized that it would cost them.

Russia is trying to make the Russian internet go through routers in Russia so that they can easily stop access to the outside world if they want to. And if, say, we would try to shut down the internet in the UK, it could potentially cut off access to everything because the nodes are everywhere. That’s the power of the internet.

With internet shutdowns, because of the interconnectedness of it all, everyone is affected. It impacts businesses, banks, innovation, and the population as everyone depends on the internet. But how does one stop that? In a democracy, you could potentially vote that government out. But in authoritarian states, it’s impossible to stop them if that’s what they decide to do.