

An ideal in crisis: Critiquing the global politics of internet freedom rankings¹

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Abstract:

This paper examines the politics of internet freedom rankings which play a central role in shaping the competing mythologies of internet freedom, a notion that now faces a conceptual crisis. Some current frameworks for assessing and measuring internet freedom are predicated too strictly on the dichotomy of democracy/non-democracy, while others rely on media freedom indicators to assess the far more complex issues of access, infrastructure and governance. These rankings have also become powerful “global pattern-setters” for how internet freedom is understood and tools of political or diplomatic influence. We critically assess the landscapes, target audiences, indicators and analytical capacity of internet freedom rankings, as well as their linguistic and visual framings. We propose a typology of rankings based on the work they do: measuring/comparing; framing/presenting; and encouraging action. We also propose initial ideas for assessing the interface between the internet and human rights in a more regime-agnostic way and sketch out what the presentation of such an alternative framework could or should look like. We thus lay the conceptual groundwork for developing a framework with both analytical capacity and complexity to critically evaluate internet governance regulations and practices across political systems and regime types.

Keywords: Internet freedom; International rankings; Freedom House; Framing; Data visualisation

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