An online Magna Carta: Berners-Lee calls for bill of rights for web

Exclusive: web's inventor warns neutrality under sustained attack from governments and corporations

Jemima Kiss
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The inventor of the world wide web believes an online "Magna Carta" is needed to protect and enshrine the independence of the medium he created and the rights of its users worldwide.

Sir Tim Berners-Lee told the Guardian the web had come under increasing attack from governments and corporate influence and that new rules were needed to protect the "open, neutral" system.

Speaking exactly 25 years after he wrote the first draft of the first proposal for what would become the world wide web, the computer scientist said: "We need a global constitution – a bill of rights."

Berners-Lee's Magna Carta plan is to be taken up as part of an initiative called "the web we want", which calls on people to generate a digital bill of rights in each country – a statement of principles he hopes will be supported by public institutions, government officials and corporations.

"Unless we have an open, neutral internet we can rely on without worrying about what's happening at the back door, we can't have open government, good democracy, good healthcare, connected communities and diversity of culture. It's not naive to think we can have that, but it is naive to think we can just sit back and get it."

Berners-Lee has been an outspoken critic of the American and British spy agencies' surveillance of citizens following the revelations by National Security Agency whistleblower Edward Snowden. In the light of what has emerged, he said, people were looking for an overhaul of how the security services were managed.

His views also echo across the technology industry, where there is particular anger about the efforts by the NSA and Britain's GCHQ to undermine encryption and security tools – something many cybersecurity experts say has been counterproductive and undermined everyone's security.

Principles of privacy, free speech and responsible anonymity would be explored in the Magna Carta scheme. "These issues have crept up on us," Berners-Lee said. "Our rights are being infringed more and more on every side, and the danger is that we get used to it. So I want to use the 25th anniversary for us all to do that, to take the web back into our own hands and define the web we want for the next 25 years."

The web constitution proposal should also examine the impact of copyright laws and the cultural-societal issues around the ethics of technology.

While regional regulation and cultural sensitivities would vary, Berners-Lee said he believed a shared document of principle could provide an international standard for the values of the open web.

He is optimistic that the "web we want" campaign can be mainstream, despite the apparent lack of awareness of public interest in the Snowden story.

"I wouldn't say people in the UK are apathetic – I would say that they have greater trust in their government than other countries. They have the attitude that we voted for them, so let them get on and do it.

"But we need our lawyers and our politicians to understand programming, to understand what can be done with a computer. We also need to revisit a lot of legal structure, copyright law – the laws that put people in jail which have been largely set up to protect the movie producers … None of this has been set up to preserve the day to day discourse between individuals and

the day to day democracy that we need to run the country," he said.

Berners-Lee also spoke out strongly in favour of changing a key and controversial element of internet governance that would remove a small but symbolic piece of US control. The US has clung on to the Iana contract, which controls the dominant database of all domain names, but has faced increased pressure post-Snowden.

He said: "The removal of the explicit link to the US department of commerce is long overdue. The US can't have a global place in the running of something which is so non-national. There is huge momentum towards that uncoupling but it is right that we keep a multi-stakeholder approach, and one where governments and companies are both kept at arm's length."

Berners-Lee also reiterated his concern that the web could be balkanised by countries or organisations carving up the digital space to work under their own rules, whether for censorship, regulation or commerce.

We all have to play a role in that future, he said, citing resistance to proposed copyright theft regulation.

He said: "The key thing is getting people to fight for the web and to see the harm that a fractured web would bring. Like any human system, the web needs policing and of course we need national laws, but we must not turn the network into a series of national silos."

Berners-Lee also starred in the London 2012 Olympics, typing the words "this is for everyone" on a computer in the centre of the arena. He has stuck firmly to the principle of openness, inclusivity and democracy since he invented the web in 1989, choosing not to commercialise his model. Rejecting the idea that government and commercial control of such a powerful medium was inevitable, Berners-Lee said it would be impossible: "Not until they prise the keyboards from our cold, dead fingers."

Creator of web free to use for everyone

As a boy growing up in south-west London, Tim Berners-Lee was a keen trainspotter, which led to his interest in model railways and then electronics.

But computers were already familiar concept in the family home – both his parents worked on the creation of the world's first commercially built computer, the Ferranti Mk1.

Berners-Lee got a first in physics at Oxford and then worked in a series of engineering roles. But it was at Cern, the European Organisation for Nuclear Research, in Geneva where he embarked on projects which would lead to the creation of the world wide web.

His aim was to allow researchers all over the world to share documents and his first proposals were judged as "vague but interesting" by a manager at Cern.

He combined existing technology such as the internet and hypertext and combined them to produce an immense interconnected document storage system. Berners-Lee labelled it the world wide web, although his Francophone collaborators found it difficult to pronounce.

The web was first open to new users in 1991, and in 1992, the first browser was created to scan and select the millions of documents which already existed.

Although the web has seen the creation and loss of countless fortunes, Berners-Lee and his team ensured that it was free to use for everyone.

Berners-Lee now works through various organisations to ensure that the web is accessible to all and that the concept of the neutrality of the net is observed by governments and corporations.

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