

# MARKLE FOUNDATION

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## An Accountability Framework for the Internet *A Project of the Markle Foundation*

The Markle Foundation's "Policy for a Networked Society" program is creating a body of research and a network of leaders to develop principles of regulation on critical policy issues and to represent the public interest as policies are developed and implemented. The priority of this program is to advance the public interest – and ensure that the public's voice is heard – in the development of Internet rules and policies. The Foundation believes that the legitimacy and efficacy of these rules and policies will depend in large part on whether they reflect the interests, and protect the rights, of the public.

The rise of a networked world is causing unprecedented changes in our lives and posing new challenges in both the private and public sector. Decision-making control is shifting in ways both hopeful and challenging. More than ever before, individuals and communities are empowered to promote and guard their own interests. Yet as government retrenches and policies that impact the public at large are increasingly shaped in the private sector, it is unclear where and how the public interest will be represented as the next generation of communications policies evolves.

In many ways, the Internet is at a point similar to the moments at which the telephone and television began to transform American life. The American public is now focused on the Internet as never before. Yet public officials and industry leaders need to do more to understand or take into account the views and interests of the public as choices are made that will have an enormous impact in the years ahead. Decision-makers need to craft policies that reflect the values and protect the rights of their customers or constituents.

Toward this end, the Markle Foundation has launched a major public opinion research effort that will focus on the question of accountability on the Internet. This research will be the basis for development of an "Accountability Framework." *This framework can provide concrete information to help policymakers, the public, public advocates, the press and industry leaders understand what Internet users and non-users alike expect from the full range of public and private sector actors who shape, regulate, or use the Internet environment.*

The project will focus on questions of public trust, rights, protections and trade-offs in the online world. By highlighting the differences between expert and public opinions and exploring the values that lie behind public attitudes, we hope to help inform upcoming policy and electoral debates at the national and local levels. We also hope to help define a new "public language" of the Internet, giving the public at large and the Internet elite common ground for understanding and debate. The Framework will also highlight areas in which further public education is needed.

The Foundation's "Accountability Framework" aims to go beyond what we know today about the public's concerns about privacy, consumer protection or offensive content on the Internet. It poses the next set of questions – exploring public expectations about corporate and governmental behavior and probing the values that lie behind those attitudes. On many questions related to the use of the Internet – from taxation of online commerce to the governance bodies that assign domain names – the public is only beginning to understand the issues at stake. The research will explore the values that the public holds that are likely to shape the way they process the new information, evaluate trade-offs, and form their opinions.

The project will use both qualitative and quantitative opinion research techniques, including focus groups with online simulations, telephone and Internet national surveys of the public, and in-depth interviews and a survey of Internet experts. The research will examine four basic issues:

- ***The institutions – both private and public – that the public trusts and holds responsible to protect its rights and interests online.*** The research will assess the public's level of trust in different institutions, the values that underlie those levels of trust, and the public's reaction when informed that parts of the governance of the Internet are in the hands of private organizations. Comparisons will be made with the attitudes of Internet experts.
- ***The rights and protections the public believes it carries from the offline world into the online world.*** The research will assess expectations about additional protections and rights that the public may want online; the institutions that the public expects and wants to protect its rights online; the similarities and differences the public perceives between the online and offline worlds; and the impact these concerns may have on non-Internet users.
- ***The trade-offs that the public feels may be necessary in order to create greater accountability in a networked society.*** The research will go beyond questions of "privacy vs. convenience" to examine the events that might make the public more concerned about online privacy threats, and those that will make them accept privacy risks. It will look at the public's desire to "comparison shop" for strong privacy protections, and the divergence between Internet users' declared concerns and their actual online behavior.
- ***The public's attitudes toward specific mechanisms of accountability – contracts and notices.*** The project will examine the public's awareness of privacy notices and contracts; the events and thinking that influence Internet users when they enter a website and confront such mechanisms; attitudes toward choice in accepting specific notices and contracts; whether the public believes they have protection without acting; and potential differences in reactions depending on the type of information, service, or product the user desires.

Taken together, the results of the survey should help build a Framework to better inform the decisions of the full range of private and public actors who shape the Internet environment, including ISPs, website operators, non-governmental bodies that set technical standards, local advocates and national political leaders. Armed with this information, these institutions will be better prepared to meet the unprecedented challenges ahead and protect and advance the rights of those who use the Internet.

The opinion research will be conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Research, a Washington-based firm internationally recognized for its groundbreaking research on public policy, institutional transformation and the intersection of technological and political change.