

**Event summary: Launch of the Ranking Digital Rights 2015 Corporate Accountability Index at the 4th Annual UN Forum on Business and Human Rights in Geneva
6:15pm on Monday, 16 November 2015, Room XXIV**

By Allon Bar

On November 16, Ranking Digital Rights (RDR) presented its inaugural Corporate Accountability Index at the UN Business & Human Rights Forum. The Index is the first global ranking of the world's largest technology companies based on their respect for two specific human rights, the right to freedom of expression and the right to privacy.

Amol Mehra of the International Corporate Accountability Roundtable chaired the session and outlined the need for greater understanding within the business and human rights community about how companies' commitments, policies, and practices affect these crucial rights of technology users all over the world. Rebecca MacKinnon, Ranking Digital Rights' director, presented key findings from the Index, which can be found at www.rankingdigitalrights.org/index2015. The ranking assessed 16 of the world's most powerful Internet and telecommunication companies. In general, the disclosure of assessed companies was poor, with the best performing company scoring 65% on its privacy & freedom of expression-related disclosures. Eight other companies scored higher than 30%, showing at least some meaningful effort to disclose information to their users. At the same time, seven, almost half the assessed companies, scored even less than 30%. MacKinnon underlined that companies need to serve their users, and treat them as their primary stakeholders with whom it is important to communicate about how their rights to freedom of expression and privacy are affected by companies' policies and practices. Unfortunately, companies were found not transparent at all about how they enforce their terms of service, nor did they explain well what data they hold about their users, how they collect it, and what they do with it.

Farnam Bidgoli of Sustainalytics, a sustainability-focused investment research firm, explained that the indicators used by RDR are key instruments to analyze companies' respect for users' rights. The project's transparent approach--the Index indicators, research guidance, and raw data are all published online--makes it especially useful for investors who can use the indicators and research approach to evaluate companies beyond those covered by the Index. Peter Micek, of digital rights advocacy group Access Now, highlighted that the Index findings offer companies very concrete steps that they can take to demonstrate respect for their users' rights. One particular issue of concern is when telecommunication companies shut down their networks for entire geographic areas, about which companies need to provide much clearer information.

Audience participants had many questions, including about whether regulatory environments factor in the score, and about what's next for the ranking. MacKinnon explained that even though regulatory environments sometimes impact companies' ability to perform, they are not factored in to the score: rather, the Index demonstrates how different regulatory environments can either help or hinder companies' respect for users' rights. The Index results highlight concrete ways that companies can do better regardless of

the countries in which they operate. While the Index should ideally be updated annually, to encourage companies' improvement, MacKinnon explained that as a start-up project, RDR is still seeking funding necessary to make that a reality. Micek described how his organization Access Now intends to spread the RDR results, and get investors involved at Annual General Meetings. Bidgoli recognized that as users' knowledge about these issues is increasing, privacy & free expression issues affect company reputation.

A representative of one of the assessed companies, François Bach of the French telecommunication company Orange, gave input from the audience. According to Bach, the Index helps companies improve, as they need help to deal with these difficult questions. MacKinnon in turn acknowledged the importance of dialogue with companies to help them resolve challenges in this realm. Closing off, she emphasized that the Index is a floor, not a ceiling; and others' should verify companies' disclosure based on the Index findings.