Plan to amend UN Consumer Protection Guidelines to safeguard access to education and culture

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Vilnius, Lithuania: At a United Nations (UN) Internet summit today, Consumers International (CI [2]) announced plans to push for the amendment of the UN Guidelines for Consumer Protection, to include new safeguards for consumers of goods protected by copyright [3] and patent [4] laws. Such goods include e-books, music, films, software [5], and the devices used for accessing these.

The global consumer body claims that copyright and patent laws are often misused by the producers of such goods for reasons that have little to do with stopping piracy, and more to do with limiting competition and preventing consumers from making innovative uses of their products.

Jeremy Malcolm, CI Project Coordinator for IP [6] and Communications, states:

DVDs are manufactured with region codes that prevent you from playing discs that you legally bought overseas. Devices as diverse as the iPhone, the Amazon Kindle e-book reader, and the Sony Playstation, have hidden limitations on the use of third-party content or applications. Works in the public domain [7], that should be free for all, are being kept in private hands using digital locks. Such practices are pervasive across the industry.

This year is the 25th anniversary of the UN Guidelines for Consumer Protection, which CI helped to develop. They were last amended in 1999, in response to a similar CI-led campaign for the inclusion of sustainable consumption principles. CI itself celebrates its 50th anniversary this year.

Proposed amendments to the Consumer Protection Guidelines will be developed by CI members worldwide, before being put to governments for adoption at the UN. Already, some governments have adopted similar principles in their local laws. Leading this trend is Brazil, which earlier this year opened consultations on its new copyright law, which will prohibit companies from using digital locks to prevent legal uses of works, such as making copies for education.

Malcolm says:

For too long, copyright and patent enforcement has been framed as an issue of ‘intellectual property rights’, with the implication that they have a similar status to human rights. But Consumers International believes the misuse of intellectual property rights are actually hampering freedom of expression, education, and participation in cultural life – and governments are beginning to agree with us.

We want to re-frame IP enforcement as an issue of consumer protection. The amendments CI and its members propose to the UN Guidelines for Consumer Protection will help to catalyse this shift in thinking. This campaign is about consumers taking back their rights to access content and to use devices that they have paid for.
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