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My Petition to the Ministers: E-Satyagraha in an Internet Age
Carl Malamud

I did the deed. This I confess. I copied those government documents without permission. But it was needful and it was lawful.

The Government of India publishes Indian Standards, technical laws such as building codes. These public safety codes specify how to keep factory workers safe, how to test for pollution in water, the minimum criteria to make our vehicles safe, to protect our food supply, to prevent horrific explosions. In today's highly technical world, these public safety codes are our most important laws.

In 2012, I bought all 19,000 Indian Standards from the government and put them on the Internet for anybody to use for free despite the notices the Bureau of Indian Standards that maintain they may only be copied with their permission. The Bureau is not alone. Throughout the world, there has arisen a set of special laws, public safety codes with stringent restrictions on use and deluxe price tags. In Europe, for example, the 58-part building code costs over 6 lakh rupees per copy.

My yearly subscription for updates to the standards in India costs 4 lakh rupees per year. And, this year, they have refused to renew my subscription, threatening litigation and conveying that the efforts to put Indian Standards on the Internet for citizens to see was "not appreciated." The position of the Bureau, which is no different from their cousins around the world, is that each person should pay for each copy they consume of these laws and that any use of these public safety codes in public must be approved.

Just imagine if the government required a license before you could read an act of Parliament, which prohibited you from repeating that law without special permission? Or if the Supreme Court sold their opinions to the highest bidder?

This is about speech, a fundamental right. When we post these standards on the Internet, we retype them into modern formats so the diagrams look good and the documents work on smart phones.

This is not my first time putting public information online. It is what I have done for 30 years. In my home country, the United States, I've helped put all our patents, court opinions, and reports of public corporations and charities on the net. As in India, these efforts have sometimes met with resistance from the civil servants. There has been grumbling and even dark mutterings of prosecution. But, sometimes the government listens and does the right thing

So, when the babus growl about Indian Standards, I know it is important to stand up, to speak calmly, and to show no fear, because it is the right of all people in a democracy to read and speak the laws by which we choose to govern ourselves.

This is why I confessed and sent a Petition to the Honorable Ministry that oversees the Bureau and stated my case. I was joined in this petition by Sri Sam Pitroda, who spoke eloquently about the democratization of knowledge and his challenge to all to "invent a new India using knowledge." I was joined by intellectual property expert, Swaraj Paul Barooah who spoke about how medical knowledge embodied in Indian Standards needed to reach health workers in the field. I was joined by Dr. Sushant Sinha, who has spent his spare time and money to create IndianKanoon.Org, an amazing free search engine for Indian law. We were joined by distinguished professors of water resources at IIT and Dr. Vinton G. Cerf, the father of the Internet.

We are convinced the government will listen. Gandhiji had an amazing faith in the power of the petition. Sometimes petitions were ignored, but sometimes those in power listened.

In the mean time, while this dispute ricochets through the halls of power, I will keep those Indian Standards on the Internet because it is the right and just course to take. When you copy a law and speak it to others so that the citizens may be informed and the public safety may be protected, you are practicing the rule of law. In a democracy, it is the people who own their government and that means the people own their laws.

Making a law available because it is needful is no different than making more salt available. Both are essential to a government for the people and by the people. Making the law available without permission is not a crime, it is an act of satyagraha, of knowing you disagree with the policy and hoping the ministers will come to see the truth.

Making a law available in a better format so it is easier to read is like making khadi. It is about swadeshi, knowing our laws instead of buying them at a kiosk. It is about citizens working with the raw materials of our democracy. It is about swaraj, knowing our rights and obligations.

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Carl Malamud is the President of Public.Resource.Org, an NGO based in California.

The Petition to the Honorable Ministry and the text of all Indian Standards may be viewed at:

<https://law.resource.org/pub/in/>