

Broadband: A Basic Human Right?

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Every once in a while I read about something that fundamentally changes the way I think about things.

In May of 2011, the United Nations issued a special report entitled, "Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression." The following text is taken directly from that report, which you can find at http://broadband.about.com/gi/o.htm?zi=1/XJ&zTi=1&sdn=broadband&cdn=b2b&tm=176&gps=315_24_1525_657&f=00&tt=2&bt=3&bts=31&zu=http%3A//www2.ohchr.org/english/bo dies/hrcouncil/docs/17session/A.HRC.17.27_en.pdf.

I have shortened it here, but please read the original report – it is fascinating.

While the Internet has been in existence since the 1960s, its current use throughout the world across different age groups, and incorporation into virtually every aspect of modern human life, has been unprecedented.

The Special Rapporteur believes that the Internet is one of the most powerful instruments of the 21st century for increasing transparency in the conduct of the powerful, access to information, and for facilitating active citizen participation in building democratic societies. Indeed, the recent wave of demonstrations in countries across the Middle East and North African region has shown the key role that the Internet can play in mobilizing the population to call for justice, equality, accountability and better respect for human rights. As such, facilitating access to the Internet for all individuals, with as little restriction to online content as possible, should be a priority for all States.

In this regard, the Special Rapporteur would like to underscore that access to the Internet has two dimensions: access to online content, without any restrictions except in a few limited cases permitted under international human rights law; and the availability of the necessary infrastructure and information communication technologies, such as cables, modems, computers and software, to access the Internet in the first place.

This in and of itself is interesting, but it is the conclusion of the report that is most striking:

The Internet, as a medium by which the right to freedom of expression can be exercised, can only serve its purpose if States assume their commitment to develop effective policies to attain universal access to the Internet. Without concrete policies and

plans of action, the Internet will become a technological tool that is accessible only to a certain elite while perpetrating the “digital divide”.

Given that the Internet has become an indispensable tool for realizing a range of human rights, combating inequality, and accelerating development and human progress, ensuring universal access to the Internet should be a priority for all States. Each State should thus develop a concrete and effective policy, in consultation with individuals from all sections of society, including the private sector and relevant Government ministries, to make the Internet widely available, accessible and affordable to all segments of population.

At the international level, the Special Rapporteur reiterates his call on States, in particular developed States, to honour their commitment, expressed inter alia in the Millennium Development Goals, to facilitate technology transfer to developing States, and to integrate effective programmes to facilitate universal Internet access in their development and assistance policies.

Where the infrastructure for Internet access is present, the Special Rapporteur encourages States to support initiatives to ensure that online information can be accessed in a meaningful way by all sectors of the population, including persons with disabilities and persons belonging to linguistic minorities.

States should include Internet literacy skills in school curricula, and support similar learning modules outside of schools. In addition to basic skills training, modules should clarify the benefits of accessing information online, and of responsibly contributing information. Training can also help individuals learn how to protect themselves against harmful content, and explain the potential consequences of revealing private information on the Internet.

This is ... rather important. The BBC conducted a survey recently of 26 countries, the result of which was that 79% of those surveyed believe that access to broadband is a basic and inalienable human right. In fact, several countries have written it into national law, including Finland and Estonia. France and England have stipulated they will legally guarantee a certain minimum level of broadband to all citizens, and other countries are close behind.

One need only look to Egypt, Myanmar, Libya, Tunis, China, Syria, Yemen, Kenya, and a host of other countries to see the impact that the Internet has had on society at-large. So, do broadband and Internet access qualify as basic human rights, alongside access to basic human freedoms such as speech, worship, freedom from fear, oppression and false imprisonment? Perhaps not. But if they

serve as tools that make it possible for a society to confront its oppressors, then there is no question that it should be taken just as seriously.

What a world we live in. Thanks for reading.