Is Internet Access a Basic Human Right?

Yes

Internet access is a basic human right, and within 10 years, it will be an essential human right, because it will play an increasing gatekeeper role in three components of our rights as humans to realize our full potential: freedom of expression, democratic participation, and economic livelihood.

The Greatest Generation understood the importance of freedom, including freedom of expression. Having survived the tyranny and oppression that engendered World War II, the General Assembly of the United Nations announced the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (www.un.org/en/documents/udhr) on December 10, 1948. The Declaration comprises 30 articles that member nations identified as essential for the human liberty and dignity so many had fought and died for. Article 19 states: “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold...”

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No

Internet access is not a basic human right. It can contribute to meaningful and profound communication between disparate cultural groups, it can provide educational opportunities to individuals at a lower cost than ever before in the history of the world, and it can offer vast audiences that are no longer limited by geography or nationalized institutions. Internet access can deliver all of these societal benefits and more, and yet none of these makes it a basic human right.

Basic human rights do not govern what an individual can receive. They refer instead to components inherent in the makeup of social structures that allow an individual to remain an individual, pursuing individual aspirations and expressions, even while in the context of the group. A basic human right allows one to remain true to oneself as a human being rather than subsuming one’s identity into a group construct. Consider “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” as promoted by the pens of...
opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”

No doubt, fresh in their minds as they wrote this was the image of people huddled around forbidden radios eagerly searching for precious information and ideas upon which their hopes for security would rise or fall. That same image springs to mind as we read of the ongoing struggles of Iranian dissidents who fervently seek to maintain their connections and have their voices heard by the outside world despite government censorship of Internet and cell phone service.

Perhaps less dramatic, but no less significant, is the shift seen in the 2008 U.S. presidential elections to mobilize voters to participate in the democratic process through an unprecedented grassroots effort conducted online. It was this online presence that arguably helped win the race for Barack Obama. It doesn’t take much imagination to visualize the kingmaker role the Internet will play in the 2012 elections and beyond.

So Internet access is vital for a participatory democracy. But what about something more basic, such as having a roof over one’s head and food on the table? Can a person make a decent living without knowing how to use Twitter? Well, sure. For now. But literacy is to gainful employment generally as media literacy is to 21st-century employment. Being able to navigate and collaborate in a variety of Internet environments, including social networking sites, is an essential skill for employees of the future. Try to imagine a college graduate in 2020 finding a decent job where Internet skills aren’t important. Yeah, I can’t either.

Freedom of expression, democratic participation, and economic livelihood are essential components of our human right to achieve our full potential and to participate in making our community one that supports, not suppresses, our collective human capacity. The Internet has redefined community and our role in it. Access to the Internet is essential. To be denied that access is to be denied the right to be a fully functioning member of the community.

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Locke, Jefferson, Mason, and others. These basic human rights express how an individual is entitled to live life in society. Access to the Internet can aid in exercising such rights, but it is merely one of innumerable tools to do so.

Basic human rights do not depend on the presence of long chains of resources. They are supportable through clearly defined laws wherein it is clear whether or not a right is being violated. Internet access depends on providing a computing device, a network gateway, electricity, an environment in which to use the device, transportation to that environment, security to be free from coercion or undue influence in using the device, education on how to use the device and how to navigate the Internet, ways to overcome language barriers, and on and on, all irrespective of an individual’s ability to pay for such resources. If any one of these elements is not provided to every individual on the planet, does that necessarily mean that basic human rights have been violated?

Basic human rights are not invented as technologies emerge. They exist perpetually from the first moments that humans gathered into familial and social groups. Claiming that basic human rights are dependent on inventions leads one down a path where rights pop into and out of existence on a never-ending basis. Consider, for example, a future where the Internet no longer exists. With no Internet, there could no longer be a basic human right to access it. How could it have been a basic human right at one time in our future history, but not after? Were access to pens and paper, typewriters, and printing presses basic human rights prior to the invention of the Internet? Basic human rights are absolutely fundamental aspects of individualism in a societal context that do not change over time.

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