

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

VINT CERF: INTERNET IS A HUMAN RIGHT

San Francisco, January 12, 2012—

The following is a response to an article written by Vint Cerf published in the New York Times on January 4, 2012. It can be read in its entirety here:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/05/opinion/internet-access-is-not-a-human-right.html>

Vint Cerf recently wrote an op-ed in the New York Times entitled “*Internet Access is Not A Human Right.*” His argument is straightforward: to equate a technology to “freedom from torture or freedom of conscience” is a mistake – that the Internet “is an enabler of rights and not a right in itself.” He defined human rights as, “the things we as humans need in order to lead healthy, meaningful lives...”

Although I appreciate Vint’s brilliance and extraordinary contributions to the Internet, I believe he is mistaken.

Vint’s argument is based on a narrow definition of human rights. Freedom from torture and freedom of conscience are powerful human rights, of a class that Internet access may not belong. The UN Declaration of Human Rights, however, includes a strata of human necessities like: “the right to a standard of living [...] including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services...” and “the right to rest and leisure...”

Ratified in 1948, the framers of the Declaration couldn’t have dreamed the role the Internet would play in shaping our global society. Snugly fit between the right to have a home, a job, and leisure time it isn’t hard to imagine the right to affordably access the network that unifies all people as equals: the Internet.

--

Vint describes the Internet as *only* a technology, arguing, “Internet access is always just a tool for obtaining something else more important.” He believes that to enter a technology into the pantheon of human rights is a mistake as it “will lead us to valuing the wrong things.”

But this is a misconception about what human rights are, since many owe their roots to technologies. Take for example the right to adequate housing, which wouldn’t be possible without technologies that have been developed throughout human history. Technology is *required* for housing to exist adequately. Other rights like access to clothing, education, and food have all required technologies to enable them.

The potpourri of protocols, wires, and bits that make the Internet are no more special than the hammer and nails used to build a home, and to classify either as a human right would be a sincere mistake. But just as a home is much more than the sum of its parts, so is the Internet: Built on top of the brick and mortar society we call civilization, the Internet is its own unique society that enhances and grants a global perspective to our lives. To access the Internet is to be allowed global citizenship – the ability to collaborate, learn, empathize, and participate globally. This is an incredible feat that inherently enables a number of human rights.

Human rights like access to education and freedom of speech are highly suited to take place online. For example, in Kabul Afghanistan, where hundreds of young Afghani women have been poisoned for attending school and brutalized for expressing themselves, a small women's only cyber café has opened. Access to the Internet for these women has partially re-enabled those rights, but it has also allowed for something more spectacular to happen: they have joined our digital society, and the digital society welcomed them with open arms. Donors from around the world contributed thousands of dollars to keep the café open and for the continued growth of this grand experiment.

The Internet and its power to enable global citizenry makes it as much a place as any country and as much a community as any village. The term 'Netizen' barely begins to describe the camaraderie that emerges across borders, nationalities, genders, and belief systems online. For these reasons and more the United Nations has identified the Internet as "one of the most powerful instruments of the 21st century [...] for facilitating active citizen participation in building democratic societies."

--

Five billion people don't have access to the Internet. It's awful that 70% of us remain disconnected from the emerging digital society shaping our physical world. Without access, those individuals don't have a voice in the process, and the world moves on without them. With it, they can help steer.

Access to food, clothing, housing, and medical care are human rights. The Internet should belong among them.

Everyone deserves the opportunity to be connected.

Kosta Grammatis is the founder of *A Human Right*, an international non-profit organization charged with bringing Internet access to all people and ensuring that it is considered a basic human right. Learn more at: <http://ahumanright.org>

Countries That Consider Access A Human Right

Costa Rica: A 30 July 2010 ruling by the Supreme Court of Costa Rica stated: "Without fear of equivocation, it can be said that these technologies [information technology and communication] have impacted the way humans communicate, facilitating the connection between people and institutions worldwide and eliminating barriers of space and time. At this time, access to these technologies becomes a basic tool to facilitate the exercise of fundamental rights and democratic participation (e-democracy) and citizen control, education, freedom of thought and expression, access to information and public services online, the right to communicate with government electronically and administrative transparency, among others. This includes the fundamental right of access to these technologies, in particular, the right of access to the Internet or World Wide Web."

http://200.91.68.20/pj/scij/busqueda/jurisprudencia/jur_texto_sentencia.asp?nValor2=483874&tem1=013141¶m7=0&IResultado=3&nValor1=1&strTipM=T&strLib=LIB

Estonia: In 2000, the parliament passed a law declaring Internet access a fundamental human right and launched a massive program to expand access to the countryside. The Internet, the government argues, is essential for life in the 21st century.

<http://www.csmonitor.com/2003/0701/p07s01-woeu.html>

Finland: By July 2010, every person in Finland was to have the right to a one-megabit per second broadband connection, according to the Ministry of Transport and Communications. And by 2015, access to a 100 Mbit/s connection will be a legal right.

http://news.cnet.com/8301-17939_109-10374831-2.html

France: In June 2009, the Constitutional Council, France's highest court, declared access to the Internet to be a basic human right in a strongly-worded decision that struck down portions of the HADOPI law, a law that would have tracked abusers and without judicial review automatically cut off network access to those who continued to download illicit material after two warnings.

<http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,525993,00.html>

Greece: Article 5A of the Constitution of Greece states that all persons has a right to participate in the Information Society and that the state has an obligation to facilitate the production, exchange, diffusion, and access to electronically transmitted information.

<http://www.hellenicparliament.gr/UserFiles/f3c70a23-7696-49db-9148-f24dce6a27c8/001-156%20aggliko.pdf>

Spain: Starting in 2011, Telefónica, the former state monopoly that holds the country's "universal service" contract, has to guarantee to offer "reasonably" priced broadband of at least one megabyte per second throughout Spain.

<http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSLH61554320091117>

Contact:

Edward Perkins