Forum: General Assembly First Committee

Issue: Universal Internet access as a component to the right to an adequate standard of living

Student Officer: Raseel Ghoul

Position: Deputy Assistant President of General Assembly First Committee

---

Introduction

Outlining human rights has, and always will remain a somewhat controversial task to governments and citizens around the world. It has brought the division of different political and social groups, and has undoubtedly acted as a catalyst for multiple revolutionary movements. The idea of outlining human rights on the Internet, a medium widely used in today’s technologically advanced society, places an even more difficult task on nations who attempt to outline human rights in their communities. Today, the Internet has led to multiple violations in traditional human rights, particularly through censorship and the withholding of access and freedom of speech.

The widespread use of the Internet has also led to the ineffective management of online activity. As the medium gradually became more accessible, the Internet suddenly became a dangerous instrument in cyber-attacks, the organization of revolts, and the implementation of espionage. This led to multiple international governments to place driving forces on the protection of citizens from Internet and technological fraud, which as a result led to the unprecedented limiting of citizens’ access and activity online, a factor some still consider as a limit to human rights. The idea of limiting Internet access, however, varies amongst different nations, adding to its controversial nature. In the United States for example, Internet is largely uncontested and almost 80% of adults have Internet access in their homes. In nations such as India, however, only 13% of the nation’s population utilizes the internet, with only 6% exposed to unlimited use of social media.

Definition of Key Terms

Human Rights

A right, which is believed to belong to every person.

Violation

The act of failing to comply with a certain rule or policy.

Censorship
The examination of books, films, news, media, etc. for the finding and removal of content deemed inappropriate or unacceptable politically, socially, religious, or morally.

**Freedom of Expression**

The right to express any opinions without censorship or restraint.

**Background**

The use of the Internet and it’s relation to Human Rights can be divided amongst several categories, including, but not limited to, lack or limitation of access, censorship, and freedom of expression and speech online.

As mentioned previously, lack or limitation to Internet access still stands as a major international controversy. Today, nations such as the United States provide almost 80% of their population with Internet access that is virtually unlimited. Worldwide, however, countries only spend an average of 2.5% of their Gross Domestic Product on Internet usage amongst nations. This is heavily dependent on the correlation of nations’ GDP and development. Comparing the usage of the Internet in technologically advanced nations such as the United States, developed nations such as South Africa (where 36% of adults are exposed to Internet usage), and developing nations such as India (where only 13% of adults utilize the Internet), is a clear demonstration of how nations with higher, more consistent Gross Domestic Products tend to provide more consistent Internet access to their citizens.

Censorship is another topic that also poses controversy when discussing Internet usage and Human Rights. In different societies and nations, governments are constantly aiming to increase censorship on Internet usage as means of protecting the safety of citizens against Internet fraud. However, many argue that limiting the content Internet users can view and interact with is a violation of every human’s basic right. Advocates of this idea mainly target nations such as The People’s Republic Of China, whose internet policies include;

a) The permission for only State-licensed companies to provide Internet access to Chinese citizens

b) The deeming of several keywords or popular websites forbidden, which leads to the blocking of several social media platforms including Facebook and Twitter, and many search engines including Google. This leads to Chinese citizens reading and witnessing scholarly articles and blog posts that have been reviewed and approved by the Republic’s government.

c) The immediate arrest of internet users who attempt to violate the Chinese government’s Internet firewalls or those publically advocating for Internet freedom. A publically discussed example of the nation’s harsh punishment were seen in the 2011 arrest of Wang Lihong, a Chinese citizen whose protest against the prosecution of Chinese bloggers “created a disturbance” in the nation’s internet community.

Freedom of expression is another important factor which comes with the use of Internet worldwide. This is especially relevant in many developing nations who have recently faced revolution, including the Arab Spring, which has been dubbed “Revolution 2.0” because of it’s heavy dependence on Internet propaganda and publicity.
While this may seem to beneficial to those who are supportive of governmental change, many governments have taken extraneous means to end opposition through Internet means. This was seen in many nations including Tunisia, Libya, Syria, and Egypt, who actually prosecuted a Google employee, Wael Ghonim, who utilized his Facebook blog page as means of advocating for governmental change during Egypt’s 2011 revolution. Increased governmental control here has led to multiple debates about whether it is rightful of the government to interrupt or be involved in their citizens’ daily Internet usage.

As Internet usage becomes a widespread medium for the citizens of the world, different nations, societies, and individuals will aim to question how involved their governments can be in their citizens’ Internet access and usage. Governments will also continue to wonder whether or not implementing certain internet policies will increase their citizens’ safety, or lead to further rebellion. The question lies, at this point, on whether or not each and every individual should aim to practice Internet usage as a basic human right, and whether governments should interfere in this policy or not.

**Major Parties Involved**

**United Nations**

In June of 2011, a report issued by the United Nations’ Human Rights council, following it’s seventeenth session, argued that the disconnection of individuals from the internet was a violation of human rights policies. This sudden surge of support for universal Internet access was primarily due to the political tensions of the time, including the Arab Spring, a movement that was heavily dependent on Internet promotion and propaganda. According to the report’s authors, ““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.” (Jackson, 2011). In addition, the organization was highly concerned for sudden shut down of two thirds of federal Internet access in Syria the very same day.

**United States Government Department of Human Rights and Labor**

The United States is a major advocator of Human Rights not only on it’s own territory but around the International community. This can most definitely be seen in the nation’s policy on Internet access as a human right and a component for adequate standards of living. According to the nation’s Department of State, the United States’ goal is to “ensure that any child, born anywhere in the world, has access to the global internet as an open platform on which to innovate, learn, organize and express herself free from undue interference or censorship.”

In order to adopt it’s beliefs on it’s own nation and on the international community, the United States has taken a number of worldwide initiatives designed to increase the quality of internet access and freedom around the globe.
These include the nation’s participation in the Freedom Online Coalition, which, according to the nation’s Department of State, is a “forum for like minded governments […] committed to collaborating to advance internet freedom. Participation in organizations such as the Freedom Online Coalition have allowed the United States to launch new initiatives that aim in exercising their idea that universal internet access is in fact a universal right to all individuals that must not be abused. These include the Digital Defenders Partnership, a program designed, according to the United States’ Department of State as “an unprecedented collaboration among government donors to provide emergency support for Internet users under threat in repressive environments”

The nation is mainly concerned with this particular issue for several reasons, including:

- The Internet helps boost nationwide economy (Access to the Internet has led to the creation of 2 million new professions worldwide in 2011. This change, according to a study commissioned by the Interactive Advertising Bureau and Harvard Business School in 2011, states that new Internet professions contributed “$530 billion to the U.S economy [in 2011], up 77 percent from 2007’s $300 billion mark.” This can demonstrates why certain nations such as the United States are very keen on providing Internet access to those around the world.
- The Internet’s ability to bring information and resources to those who have historically been isolated or deprived of this privilege. The internet can allow such individuals to prosper in their communities and become productive citizens. This is one of the reasons why the United States’ President, Barack Obama, proposed for the adoption of “tighter regulations on broadband service [which can hinder the amount of Internet access US citizens can be exposed to] in an effort to preserve [free and open internet access for all economic brackets of US society].” (Reisinger and Chen, 2014).

Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

Attempts to resolve the issue of Internet usage and human rights in today’s society have often faltered and/or have proved to be weak or ineffective. Because of how recent the medium is, nations have not necessarily been able to outline the rights of citizens’ in terms of Internet usage. However, different groups and individuals within different nations are attempting to demonstrate the importance of the issue to the public. Such initiatives include:

- Frank La Rue’s, the UN’s Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression, resolution on guaranteeing Internet freedom under Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However many nations, including Russia, China, Saudi Arabia, Iran and North Korea, were not present in support of this Resolution. (16 May 2011, United Nations General Assembly, A/HRC/17/27)

- Once again, the United States’ government’s effort in securing Internet access to it’s citizens, regardless of income bracket, in Barack Obama’s plea to provide internet neutrality to all citizens, with prohibitions on site and add blocking. The United States Federal Communications Commission actually established a new
order enforcing this on US Internet users. The article pronouncing this new rule can be found at:  

- The Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI). The aim of this organization is, according to their Vision statement, for everyone “to be able to access the life-changing power of the Internet affordably.” The alliance has partnered with a number of organizations, primarily in Africa and Asia, to help provide Internet access for developing communities either through funding or referral to areas in Africa and Asia that can assist in Internet installment. Such organizations include:
  - The Ghana-India Kofi Anan Center of Excellence in ICT (assists in providing ICT training and skill development in the African region)
  - The Africa ICT right (organization aimed at addressing the critical need for ICT infrastructure and while training underserved communities in Ghana)
  - The Microsoft Innovation Center in Nepal (a facility for local and regional software development and training in the Indian subcontinent)

Possible Solutions

- The United Nations is clearly in direct need of creating a solid plan outlining Internet usage policies to be implemented worldwide. Countries must come together to establish links between ensuring citizens’ safety while also allowing them the freedom of expression on virtual means. As mentioned above, the UN’s primary task at this stage is to discuss with nations of different Internet policies the ways in which the issues of Internet access, censorship, and freedom of speech should be managed and dealt with.

- It is in the hands of the International Community to provide solid Internet infrastructure to all global citizens in order to ensure that Internet access is guaranteed as a human right. Today, only 31% of people in what we classify as developing countries have continuous, uninterrupted access to the Internet. Regardless of the reasons, the International Community is in dire need for the assistance in establishing Internet infrastructure in developing areas. Without this assistance, it is physically impossible to ensure the right to internet access among the international community.

- Censorship can also serve as a blocking or hindrance at ensuring the universal right to Internet access. Are there political motives as to why certain nations do/do not censor what their citizens are exposed to? It could be up to the International community to draft compromises that would;
  - Collaborate with nations that enforce strict censorship to provide more access for their citizens, particularly in the education and development sectors
-Come to understand why exactly these nations censor their citizens. (Could this be a political motive to obstruct revolution, such as the Arab Spring? Could over-exposure to the Internet obstruct the nation’s morals and values?)

-Come to a consensus with nations that censor their Internet access and convince them that there are means of providing Internet access to citizens while still keeping the Internet safe and free from political obstruction. When discussing with these nations, it is best to take their political motives/moral beliefs, etc. into account.

  • Work with other nations with strong beliefs for Internet access as a human right to secure funding for nations who simply cannot afford Internet infrastructure in their areas. It is important for nations who already have solid and consistent Internet access in their own nation to help communities who simply do not have the financial needs to do so. As delegates, begin to think of ways in which different nations can partner with funding based organizations (such as the Alliance for Affordable Internet Access) that not only advocate, but can financially assist in the building of Internet Infrastructure in specific developing areas for consistent periods of time.

Bibliography


**Appendix**

Some resources to better prepare delegates for this topic in particular: (Extracted from the bibliography of the Montessori Model United Nations report- cited above)


[iii] Ibid.

