

Vint Cerf is Too Modest; Internet Access is a Human Right

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By Dr Nathaniel Borenstein

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12/01/2012 10:03am GMT

Updated March 13, 2012



In his [4 January op-ed piece](#), Vint Cerf argued that internet access is not a human right. While I consider Vint a friend and have tremendous respect for his achievements, I think he's wrong in this

case. Perhaps out of modesty, the man often called the "father of the internet" is undervaluing the global network he played such an important role in developing. I fear his underestimation may be as fundamental and consequential as his belief, 30 years ago, that 4 billion internet addresses would be sufficient -- another of the rare times I disagreed with him. I believe that in the future, the internet will be nearly as fundamental to civilized human life as food, clothing, and shelter.

Vint centers his argument on the claim that "technology is an enabler of rights, not a right itself." This is patently incorrect. Among the most widely recognised human rights are clothing and shelter, which are among the most fundamental of human technologies. It is true that some rights are more abstract, but many are not. The US Bill of Rights guarantees freedom of the press and the right to bear arms; technology is fundamental to both of those rights.

The UN Declaration of Human Rights goes further, in Article 19, asserting a fundamental human right "to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers." It is no great stretch to say that Article 19 itself makes Internet access a basic human right. Article 27 declares a right "to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits." Does anyone really believe this is possible, in the modern world, without access to the internet?

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More broadly, it is increasingly impossible to participate fully in the political life of a developed nation without internet access. All rights related to such participation will, in the future, be meaningless without a right to access. In his modesty, perhaps, Vint fails to recognise the extent to which the Internet is transforming almost every aspect of society, certainly including the political and cultural spheres in which many of our hitherto-guaranteed rights will become meaningless without internet access.

It might be argued that this just means that internet access is necessary for, and implied by, some of our existing rights. The truth of that statement, however, in no way negates the fundamental importance of internet access. The right to participate fully in society also implies a right to food and shelter, but that doesn't mean we don't view those things as basic rights themselves.

What's hardest for us old internet hands to accept is that the internet hasn't just been a success; it is changing the very nature of what it means to be human. Recent studies have already shown that the availability of the internet changes the way we use our own memories -- that is, it alters the very fabric of our thought, let alone our discussion and debate. Increasingly it will be impossible -- and already is in many countries -- to be a full participant in civil society without Internet access. If internet access is a prerequisite to full participation in citizenship, it should certainly be viewed as a human right.

Vint, the internet is more important than even you think!

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