

Topic 1: Realizing the right to information and access to the Internet

The right to information (ROI) is defined as the legal right to access facts and data concerning public entities, such as governments, and actions taken through public funds. Therefore, citizens of countries with ROI laws are legally allowed to access any information or documents from governments or other relevant organizations (Transparency International 2020).

The right to information is considered crucial for the upholding of justice in a country. Indeed, ensuring access to information is a clause under UN Sustainable Development Goal 16: Peace Justice, and Strong Institutions (Unit 2019). Access to information enables citizens to be able to claim what is lawfully theirs and to combat unlawful treatment by governments and institutions (“Right to Information” 2021). Over 100 countries have implemented some sort of freedom of information legislation (“Access to Information Laws” 2023), with Sweden’s Freedom of Press Act of 1766 being the oldest in the world (Weibull 2014).

Mass media is considered the primary source of public information. This can include print media, such as newspapers and magazines, radio, television, film, video and audio recordings, and the Internet. Mass media can also refer to organizations, public or private, that disseminate information through the means listed above. This includes entities such as publishers, newspapers, libraries, radio and television networks, movie studios, libraries, and record companies (Duignan 2022).

The internet has become the dominant source of information dissemination over the past 30 years. The Internet is at once a worldwide broadcasting capability, a mechanism for information dissemination, and a medium for collaboration and interaction between individuals and their computers without regard for geographic location (Internet Society 2022). The Internet represents one of the most successful examples of the benefits of sustained investment and commitment to research and development of information infrastructure (Internet Society 2022).

The Internet started in the 1960s as a way for government researchers to share information. Computers in the '60s were large and immobile and in order to make use of information stored in any one computer, one had to either travel to the site of the computer or have magnetic computer tapes sent through the conventional postal system (“A Brief History of the Internet,” n.d.).

The Cold War was a big catalyst for the formation of the internet too. The Soviet Union's launch of the Sputnik satellite spurred the U.S. Defense Department to consider ways information could still be disseminated even after a nuclear attack. This eventually led to the formation of the ARPANET (Advanced Research Projects Agency Network), the network that ultimately evolved into what we now know as the Internet (Internet Society 2022). ARPANET

was a great success, but membership was limited to certain academic and research organizations. In response to this, other networks were created to provide information sharing (“A Brief History of the Internet,” n.d.).

In the 80’s a new communications protocol was established called Transfer Control Protocol/Internet Protocol (TCP/IP). This allowed different kinds of computers on different networks to “talk” to each other. Prior to this, the various computer networks did not have a standard way to communicate with each other. ARPANET and the Defense Data Network officially changed to the TCP/IP standard on January 1, 1983, hence the birth of the Internet. All networks could now be connected by a universal language (“A Brief History of the Internet,” n.d.).

What makes the internet unique is that it is not controlled by any one entity and is almost universal. And most of the world's mass media has an online equivalent. It is now common for newspapers, periodicals, and books to be published on the Web or through Web-based applications and for musical recordings, television programs, and films to be accessible on individual websites or through dedicated streaming services (Duignan 2022). The fact that the World Wide Web quite literally spans the world means people from remote corners of the world access information they usually would not.

Enabling access to the internet is vital in order to realize the right to information. However, there are different factors that could prevent people from accessing the internet, such as government restrictions. These vary by country, but it could be anywhere from moderate censorship of certain domains to restriction of any site outside the jurisdiction of the state to limiting access to news or discussion between citizens to total internet blackout. One way people circumvent these restrictions is by using VPNs (virtual private networks) (“What Is Internet Censorship?,” n.d.). However, the question remains, should they have to resort to this just to access the information they require? We must ask ourselves a very important question, where do we draw the line on the right to information and access to the internet? And realistically, how much control does the international community have over cyberspace?

Governmental interference in citizens’ ability to access the internet can have different consequences (“Access Denied” 2008). One large one is the violation of the right of the citizens to access information. This can cause injustice as people will not have the information they need to stand up to unlawful treatment by their government or other entities. Additionally, the state's control of the information available to citizens is closely related to indoctrination and propaganda (“Freedom of Connection, Freedom of Expression: The Changing Legal and Regulatory Ecology Shaping the Internet” 2011). People cannot understand they are being manipulated if they cannot see opposing views of their government. Finally, given how some states monitor discussions between citizens, this can lead to violations of people’s right to privacy (“Right to Privacy,” n.d.).

The right to privacy, as stated in Article 12 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is the right of people to be protected from interference to their privacy, home, family, or correspondence (United Nations, n.d.). In the case mentioned above, government suppression of discourse between citizens is interference in people's correspondence.

Delegates tackling this topic must also consider the fine line between protecting the right to free speech on the internet and any other content that may be harmful to others. This goes beyond just the privacy and safety of the personal information of regular civilians, it also concerns the overall cybersecurity of the nation. Some notable examples would include the Russian infiltration of the American election in 2020 or the use of different social media applications, such as Tik Tok developed by China to gain information from different countries.

As we have established, the internet is not the only source of information. Government laws regarding other mass media can also interfere with the realization of the right to information. Earlier, propaganda was mentioned, propaganda is the dissemination of information, factual or not, for the express purpose of influencing public opinion. Propaganda can be found in news and journalism, government, advertising, entertainment, education, and activism and is often associated with material which is prepared by governments as part of war efforts, political campaigns, health campaigns, revolutionaries, big businesses, ultra-religious organizations, and the media (Smith 1999). If there is strong governmental control of the mass media of a country, it is simple to sway public opinion in particular ways.

Additionally, other laws regarding mass media impact people's access to information. Even if a country's mass media is relatively free of governmental control, the ownership of mass media corporations is an important factor. In countries where corporate monopolies are allowed, the sources of information outside of the internet could be heavily controlled by a handful of individuals. This means they can direct people's attention to whatever benefits them and their agenda, whether that is increasing profits or something else.

Accountability is the hardest challenge of all. While in past incidents there have been measures and actions taken against the perpetrator, ensuring that their actions are held accountable, there is still a lack of international benchmark for these types of violations and following actions for these violations. At the end of the day, the handling of different nations should also be taken into account and respected, as the public policy and approach of European countries, Eastern Asia, and North America are vastly different. It is also recommended that we look into the shortcomings of current legal provisions surrounding this area and further improve in filling in these gaps.

You are charged this conference to think of what solutions can be implemented to address the issue of realizing the right to information.

Questions to consider:



1. Is it possible to realize the right to information/access to the internet for all states?
2. What actions could be taken by governments to ensure their citizens are able to exercise their right to information?
3. What could be done to guarantee governmental transparency in shared public information?
4. How can we enable as many people as possible to have internet access?
5. How does the state balance access to information with its security concerns?

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Further Reading

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