

Free Internet access should be a basic human right, study says

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Free internet access must be considered as a human right, as people unable to get online—particularly in developing countries—lack meaningful ways to influence the global players shaping their everyday lives, according to a new study.

As [political engagement](#) increasingly takes place online, basic freedoms that many take for granted including free expression, freedom of information and freedom of assembly are undermined if some citizens have access to the internet and others do not.

New research reveals that the internet could be a key way of protecting other basic human rights such as life, liberty, and freedom from torture—a means of enabling billions of people to lead 'minimally decent lives'.

Dr. Merten Reglitz, Lecturer in Global Ethics at the University of Birmingham, has published his findings—the first study of its kind—in the *Journal of Applied Philosophy*.

"Internet access is no luxury, but instead a moral human right and everyone should have unmonitored and uncensored access to this global medium—provided free of charge for those unable to afford it," commented Dr. Reglitz.

"Without such access, many people lack a meaningful way to influence and hold accountable supranational rule-makers and institutions. These individuals simply don't have a say in the making of the rules they must obey and which shape their life chances."

He added that exercising free speech and obtaining information was now heavily dependent on having [internet access](#). Much of today's political debate took place online and politically relevant information is shared on the internet—meaning the relative value these freedoms held for people 'offline' had decreased.

Dr. Reglitz's research attributes to the internet unprecedented possibilities for protecting basic human rights to life, liberty and bodily integrity.

Whilst acknowledging that being online does not guarantee these rights, he cites examples of internet engagement that helped hold Government and institutions to account. These examples include:

- The 'Arab Spring'- new ways of global reporting on government atrocities.
- Documenting unjustified police violence against African Americans in the US.
- #MeToo campaign—helping to 'out' sexual harassment of women by powerful men.

Dr. Reglitz defines 'moral human rights' as based on universal interests essential for a 'minimally decent life'. They must also be of such fundamental importance that if a nation is unwilling or unable to uphold these rights, the international community must step in.

The study points to a number of important political institutions which have committed to ensuring universal access for their populations, convinced that this goal is affordable:

- The Indian state of Kerala has declared universal internet access a human right and aims to provide it for its 35 million people by 2019.
- The European Union has launched the WiFi4EU initiative to provide 'every European village and city with free wireless internet access around main centres of public life by 2020.
- Global internet access is part of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, with the UN demanding states help to deliver universal Internet access in developing nations.

Dr. Reglitz outlines the size of the challenge posed in providing universal internet access, noting that the UN's International Telecommunication Union estimated that, by the end of 2018, 51 percent of the world's population of 7 billion people had access to the Internet.

Many people in poorer parts of the world are still without internet access, but their number is decreasing as technology becomes cheaper.

However, internet expansion has slowed in recent years, suggesting universal access will not occur without intentional promotion.

"Universal internet access need not cost the earth—accessing politically important opportunities such as blogging, obtaining information, joining virtual groups, or sending and receiving emails does not require the latest information technology," commented Dr. Reglitz.

"Web-capable phones allow people to access these services and public internet provision, such as public libraries, can help get people online where individual domestic access is initially too expensive."

He added that the human right to internet access was similar to the global right to health, which cannot require globally the highest possible medical treatment, as many states are too poor to provide such services and thus would face impossible demands.

Instead, poor states are called upon to provide basic medical services and work toward providing higher quality health care delivery. Similarly, such states should initially offer locations with public Internet access and develop IT infrastructure that increases access.

According to the NGO The World Wide Web Foundation, founded by World Wide Web inventor Tim Berners-Lee 'affordability' remains one of the most significant, but solvable, obstacles to [universal access](#).

For the Foundation, [internet](#) access is affordable if one gigabyte of data costs no more than two percent of average monthly income—currently some 2.3 billion people are without affordable Internet access.

More information: 'The Human Right to Free Internet Access' - Dr. Merten Reglitz is published in the *Journal of Applied Philosophy*.

Provided by University of Birmingham

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