Internet access must become a human right or we risk ever-widening inequality, argues researcher

April 7 2023

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People around the globe are so dependent on the internet to exercise socioeconomic human rights such as education, health care, work, and housing that online access must now be considered a basic human right,

a new study reveals.

Particularly in developing countries, internet access can make the difference between people receiving an education, staying healthy, finding a home, and securing employment—or not.

Even if people have offline opportunities, such as accessing social security schemes or finding housing, they are at a comparative disadvantage to those with Internet access.

Publishing his findings today in *Politics, Philosophy & Economics*, Dr. Merten Reglitz, Lecturer in Global Ethics at the University of Birmingham, calls for a standalone human right to internet access—based on it being a practical necessity for a range of socioeconomic human rights.

He calls for public authorities to provide internet access free of charge for those unable to afford it, as well as providing training in basic digital skills training for all citizens and protecting online access from arbitrary interference by states and private companies.

Dr. Reglitz commented, "The internet has unique and fundamental value for the realization of many of our socioeconomic human rights—allowing users to submit job applications, send medical information to health care professionals, manage their finances and business, make social security claims, and submit educational assessments.

"The internet's structure enables a mutual exchange of information that has the potential to contribute to the progress of humankind as a whole—potential that should be protected and deployed by declaring access to the Internet a human right."

The study outlines several areas in developed countries where internet access is essential to exercise socioeconomic human rights:

- Education—students in internet-free households are disadvantaged in obtaining a good school education with essential learning aids and study materials online.
- Health—providing in-person health care to remote communities can be challenging, particularly in the U.S. and Canada. Online health care can help to plug this gap.
- Housing—in many developed countries, significant parts of the rental housing market have moved online.
- Social Security—accessing these public services today is often unreasonably difficult without internet access.
- Work—jobs are increasingly advertised in real time online and people must be able to access relevant websites to make effective use of their right to work.

Dr. Reglitz's research also highlights similar problems for people without internet access in developing countries—for example, 20 percent of children aged 6 to 11 are out of school in sub-Saharan Africa. Many children face long walks to their schools, where class sizes are routinely very large in crumbling, unsanitary schools with insufficient numbers of teachers.

However, online education tools can make a significant difference, allowing children living remotely from schools to complete their education. More students can be taught more effectively if teaching materials are available digitally and pupils do not have to share books.

For people in developing countries, internet access can also make the difference between receiving an adequate level of health care or receiving none. Digital health tools can help diagnose illnesses—for example, in Kenya, a smartphone-based Portable Eye Examination Kit

(Peek) has been used to test people's eyesight and identify people who need treatment, especially in remote areas underserved by medical practitioners.

People are often confronted with a lack of brick-and-mortar banks in developing countries, and internet access makes possible financial inclusion. Small businesses can also raise money through online crowdfunding platforms—the World Bank expects such sums raised in Africa to rise from $32 million in 2015 to $2.5 billion in 2025.

More information: The Socio-Economic Argument for the Human Right to Internet Access, *Politics Philosophy & Economics* (2023). DOI: 10.1177/1470594X231167597

Provided by University of Birmingham