

Towards Community level Access to the Internet for Freedom of Expression

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We are at the initial stage of the use of new information and communication technologies for the enhancement of human dignity. We are witnessing the early effects of it in the form of Wikileaks and democratic movements in some countries. Internet is speedily becoming a all-encompassing and ubiquitous media in human society.

The Internet, in the beginning, looked like any other traditional communication media with a few extra features like multimedia and interactive conveniences. However it has developed very fast and it has become a backbone of all the media of communication and an essential driver of economy. At the same time it has become a unique instrument of accessing information and knowledge, and a new forum for freedom of expression for individual citizens.

The struggle for centuries-long struggle for freedom of expression, which was started after the advent of printing technology, was shaped by the traditional media of mass communication, such as newspaper, radio and TV. Although the newspaper, radio and television look different they have similar nature and characteristics. They are produced in a particular place by more than one person in various steps and distributed through different channels. Different people of different skills and professions are involved in the process. There are different gatekeepers in different steps and activities. Hence, it is easier for different power centers and interest groups to censor or manipulate them.

However, the nature and characteristics of the Internet is different from the traditional media. There are very few production-stages and almost no gatekeepers. Every person with the access to the Internet can be a producer and a consumer of the media content. Thus it has become a cheap and easy instrument for common people to express their opinion and access to information and knowledge. Therefore the issue of connectivity or access to the Internet has become as important as the freedom of opinion itself.

There was no Internet six decade ago when the first Universal Declaration of Human Rights was envisioned. However, fortunately, the freedom of medium was guaranteed by Article 19 of the Declaration with these provisions: '... through any media and regardless of frontiers.' Hence the constitutions, laws and courts decisions of many democratic countries have acknowledged "any media" as an important channel of freedom of expression.

Obviously there are vast differences between the traditional and the new media. Printing paper and radio frequencies have various limitations. They cannot function without new information and communication

technology. Therefore the dependence and survival of traditional media is increasing on the Internet.

Apart from its communication role the Internet has become essential in all activities of people's lives. Internet is becoming obligatory and ubiquitous in human society. Therefore access to the Internet has become as important as other fundamental human rights. There is no doubt that it will be recognized as a fundamental right quite soon. Sooner the better!

However, a lot has to be done to establish the right to access the Internet as a fundamental right. There are immense challenges and opportunities regarding the universal access to and use of the Internet – ranging from formulation of policy to educating and capacity building of the people. It may be like the compulsory literacy to access and use traditional media.

To address various challenges regarding the access to the Internet community involvement may be one of the important and effective means.

While it is true that the Internet is an end to end medium it is also true that to narrow the digital divide in the least developed and developing countries there is the need of community based intermediaries. The intermediaries can provide affordable connectivity and help to produce content in local language, which is very important to overcome some of the acute challenges.

Based on the experiences of operating community media like community radio, rural journalism, participatory communication, village telecenters etc. in the least developed and developing countries, community initiative such as community Internet Service Providers and creating other intermediaries may be quite effective to access the Internet in rural and remote communities. Community ISPs and community intermediaries will not only provide connectivity but also help to use and produce appropriate content in local language and appropriate socio-cultural context in affordable price.

Therefore it is important to create appropriate community intermediaries for the freedom of expression in grassroots level. Experiences of community media in the South Asian countries, particularly Nepal where there are about 300 non-governmental FM radio stations and more than 100 of them are community radio, and first rural press in South Asia, and which has recognized the concept of community ISP may be useful in this respect.

For this there should be support from international and national organizations and governments. The support may be in various levels and fields.

Governments should adopt appropriate broadband policy because in the countries like Nepal where half of the population cannot read and write audio and audiovisual contents are quite effective and without adequate bandwidth it is not possible to provide audiovisual content.

Governments and International stakeholders should invest in the infrastructures of telecommunication and make the cost of satellite communication and cost of bandwidth affordable.

Appropriate technology and cost effective equipments are important for the access in the rural and remote areas. At the same time skill development of the common people is another crucial area for the access to Internet.

Therefore I request the experts and respectable members of this consultation meeting to recommend International and National organizations and governments to support community based initiatives for the universal access to the Internet in their respective areas.

So far as the initiatives within Nepal by the government are concerned following measures must be taken to establish universal access to the Internet to ensure freedom of expression for the grassroots people:

- Update/revise cyber policy.
- Formulate Broadband Policy that ensures broadband as an open medium, that can be used by everybody (economically affordable) and every citizen must have equal right to use it. It must be ubiquitous, i.e. it must be present everywhere, all the time. Its speed should be such that everyone can upload and download video images easily – in our case it must be more than 256 kbps.
- The policy should treat all the content providers – whether text, voice, video or data equally. There should be no intervention of particular carrier or Telecommunication Company and there should be no subsidy or special privilege any company.
- Single company should not provide telecommunication and Internet service. The principle of Common Carrier should be applied.
- Various taxes on telecommunication services must be eliminated or reduced.
- Cost of the satellite communication, including the bandwidth should be made cheaper.
- Encourage and promote free and open software.

Thank you.

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