

Chapter 7

Information as a Human Right

Lesley Farmer
California State University, USA

ABSTRACT

Information lies at the core of freedom of expression since it empowers citizens to understand the functions of media and other information providers, to access and critically evaluate their content, and to make informed decisions as users and producer of information and media content. Information and related technologies have become increasingly essential to education, employment, social interaction, and civic participation. Resultantly, greater focus has been placed on the idea that information is a necessary human right. While physical access to technology is now imperative to survive and contribute in today's Information Society, intellectual access is also required, particularly with the Internet's interactive socially collaborative mode. In addition, organizations need to provide the infrastructure and other preconditions to insure equitable access and use of information.

1. INTRODUCTION

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers (United Nations, 1948, Article 19).

Throughout history, the creation and application of new knowledge -- and its communication to others -- have contributed to the evolution and improvement of societies. Information and related technologies have become increasingly essential to education, employment, social interaction, and civic participation. Resultantly, greater focus has

been placed on the idea that information is a necessary human right. This right draws attention to the digital and knowledge divide. While physical access to technology is imperative to survive and contribute in today's Information Society, intellectual access is also required, particularly with the Internet's interactive socially collaborative mode. Furthermore, civic engagement requires information literacy, particularly with the increase in user-generated content and use of virtual spaces.

In sum, information in itself does not impact humanity; it is the relationship between information and humanity that gives it value, and impacts society. As such, discussion about information as a human right must also address contexts and conditions.

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2. SOCIETAL CONTEXT

2.1. The Information Society

Since information and material have always been needed, what particularizes the recent notion of an information (or knowledge) society? New information and technology have vastly increased the speed, access, and interconnectedness of information worldwide. Simultaneously, information and communication have converged, such as telecommunications and broadcasting, giving rise to informational industries. At this point in history, telecommunications and media constitute one-sixth of the U. S. economy, and 30 percent of all economic growth between 1996 and 2000 was attributed to enhanced productivity based on information technology (Wilhelm, 2004). More recently, Brynjolfsson (2011) asserted that innovative technology is reshaping the economy as a whole. The cost of technology has dropped precipitously so that the majority of people can access it, thereby reinforcing mass media and other information entities. As a result, new forms of organization and social interaction have emerged (Webster, 2002).

At the 2003 World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), governments and world leaders “made a strong commitment towards building a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society for all, where everyone can access, utilise and share information and knowledge” (United Nations, 2003, p. 1). The summit came to understand that the information society is one in which information replaces material goods as the chief driver of socio-economics. Human intellectual capital has higher currency than material capital, or at least intellect is needed to optimize the use of material resources.

In that respect, information may be considered as a commodity. Certainly it has value, both in terms of the person who creates it as well as the

person who accesses and uses the information. The creator spends considerable time and effort, and often material resources, in the process. For that effort, the creator expects some kind of remuneration or at least credit for the intellectual property. The individual who can access and apply the information is poised to make better decisions and build knowledge, benefitting intellectually and often materially. Specifically, when information is bought or sold, it acts as a commodity. However, information does not equal knowledge; information is a fixed stabilized form while knowledge is a dynamic mental construct. Knowledge, then, transcends commodification; a society that shares knowledge work can for the common good (UNESCO, 2005).

2.2. Technology and Information

Today’s technology has substantially changed the face of society. First, technology significantly expands and speeds up access to the world of information. Telecommunications has collapsed time and space. People potentially have more access, more quickly, to information around the world. Moreover, people can respond to each other and share group information much more easily than in the past. The convergence of communication industries such as telephony and television further expands the dissemination of information.

The nature of the information itself has been affected by digital technology. Besides the obvious combination of text, image, and sound, technology facilitates the repurposing and transformation of information to address different objectives or different audiences. Applications such as Google docs and wikis enable participants to literally change documents on the fly, thereby chipping away at the idea of a permanent recorded document (Iacono, 2010). More than ever, individuals need to interpret the format of information as well as its content, and their interdependence.

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