INTERNATIONAL **HUMAN RIGHTS FUNDERS** GROUP

IN FOCUS
Human Rights Have Moved Online: Rights in the 21st Century
Contributed by Helen Brunner, Director, Media Democracy Fund
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When Chinese political dissident Liu Xiaobo was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize this fall, many democracy and human rights advocates around the world cheered. But citizens of Liu Xiaobo's homeland were unlikely to have heard the news unless they could gain access to illegal websites. The Chinese government has long censored broadcast media, blocked social networking sites, blogs, and even text messages. China is, of course, just one example. Across the world – including in the United States – governments and corporations are trying to limit people's access and freedoms in the Digital Age.

Internet café in Yemen

As people's ideas, conversations, and interactions move online, the fight for human rights needs to move online as well.

If we are to achieve the promises of the 21st century and protect basic human rights, we must support organizations working to advocate for rules that allow a free flow of information, prevent abusive monitoring, ensure fair deployment and pricing, and create equal access for all. Modest investments can make an enormous difference in this chronically under-resourced field.

As funders, we can start with focusing on our core program areas and values. The principles are the same online. Here are some examples:

Free Speech and Expression
Freedom of speech and freedom of expression are foundational human and civil rights enshrined by both the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Inherent in these rights are the acts of seeking, receiving, and imparting information or ideas.

Sounds a lot like surfing the web, blogging, texting and tweeting.

From the upcoming election in the United States, to the disputed Iranian and Kenyan elections and countless other democratic processes, an open and unfiltered online sphere has served as a critical platform for citizens to organize, mobilize, organize, express their political views and protect each other's voting rights and personal safety. Mobile video and other new "apps" are being utilized to expose human rights abuses as well as support activities that help achieve other rights.

Just because the medium is new doesn't mean that people should lose basic communication rights. Expression via the Internet or mobile phone needs to be protected just as closely as any other expression. It better be. The amount of speech made online or via mobile phone is growing exponentially every day.

Openness

Media and news are being transformed. In today's communications environment, "the media" is shifting from a top-down system of delivering news and information to a model in which influential communications through blogs, webcasts, text messages, e-books, online universities, and more can be produced by anyone. It's happening increasingly over phones and mobile devices, which proliferate across all income levels. Open communications networks are the lynchpin of a democratic communication system that provides space for perspectives and issues that have been too often marginalized. Video, text and voice need to be distributed equally, and without discrimination.

As Ethan Zuckerman, a digital affairs scholar, pointed out at a recent conference and his blog that many critically important public debates are taking place on closed corporate platforms like YouTube, Twitter and Face Book. He cited the recent example of YouTube removing videos by Egyptian journalist and activist Wael Abbas that exposed police brutality.[1] You Tube managed to suppress expression that even the Egyptian government had not been able to contain. While the videos were restored after an outcry from the human rights community, the act highlights the need to address freedom of expression policies within corporations as well as governments.

Equal Opportunity

The Internet has become so instrumental for education, economic development, and health care that communities and families without access find themselves critically disadvantaged. Rural villagers with Internet can access information and state of the art educational tools. Small businesses can expand their markets and advertise outside of their regions. Health clinics can implement efficient telemedicine strategies with broadband and mobile devices. Marginalized political factions and minority groups can voice their positions and build networks for advocacy and solidarity.

Like water or electricity, broadband has become a basic necessity and a vital tool for economic and political empowerment. It's no surprise that a recent global poll by the BBC found four out of five people worldwide consider Internet access a human right. In 2009, Finland took leadership as the first nation to officially declare broadband access a legal right for its citizens. In the United States, recently awarded stimulus funds to Digital Justice Coalitions in Detroit and Philadelphia are enabling a small step toward leveling the economic playing field in those cities. As another strategy, 64 communities around the United States have developed their own community owned networks, offering affordable high speed broadband to previously un-served residents and businesses.[2]

Promoting and Protecting a Diversity of Views

Currently many of us have the freedom to access any information we want—and producers of information have the freedom to distribute it to anyone who wants to access it. These freedoms are taken as a given for many of us. But across the globe people living under repressive regimes don't have these same freedoms.

Access to a diversity of voices and the freedom to distribute your information to a diversity of populations needs to be expanded across the globe—and protected here in the United States As

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[1] Ethan Zuckerman's blog: http://www.ethanzuckerman.com/blog/index.php?s=Egypt+youTube

[2] Christopher Mitchell, *Breaking the Broadband Monopoly: How Communities Are Building the Networks They Need*, New Rules Project, May 2010.

technologies are being developed to make access possible, so are the technologies to monitor, track, censor and identify dissidents. Agreements and technologies that address this problem need to be created.

What Funders Can Do:
- Conduct a review of your grants to learn which media policies may have an impact on their effectiveness
- Convene and educate grantees: discuss barriers to communication and present strategies for overcoming these barriers
- Join funder education and media affinity groups such as Grantmakers in Film and Electronic Media (GFEM) that offer informative conference calls and events
- Contact the Media Democracy Fund to participate in a collaborative grantmaking program

For more information, visit www.MediaDemocracyFund.org.