

# The impact of the Internet

*In every great technology there is a political or social prejudice.*

**Themes** Media, Globalisation, General human rights  
**Complexity** Level 4  
**Group size** 8-50  
**Time** 180 minutes

**Overview** This activity involves both small-group and plenary discussions to analyse issues of:

- the future of the Internet and the digital divide
- the use of the Internet for the promotion of human rights.

**Related rights** Any human rights

**Objectives**

- To raise awareness about the implications of the Internet and access to information world-wide
- To develop imagination and critical thinking skills
- To promote justice and solidarity with others working to promote human rights issues.

**Materials**

- Copies of the handouts
- Large sheets of paper and markers for each group
- Space for plenary and small-group work

**Preparation**

- Make copies of handout no. 1, "Six options for predicting the impact of the Internet", enough for one copy between 2 people.
- Copy handouts 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6, enough so that each member of the five working groups will have a copy.

## Instructions

This activity is in three parts: part 1, introduction (10 minutes), part 2, predicting the impact of the Internet (60 minutes) and part 3, how the Internet can be used to promote human rights (90 minutes).

### Part 1. Introduction (10 minutes)

1. Introduce the activity by explaining that it will need the imagination and critical thinking skills of all participants. Their task will be to assess the impact of the Internet and new information technologies on our lives and on human rights' work.
2. As a quick warm-up and to provide some common knowledge, give the group a few basic facts about the Internet, and then ask them to talk in pairs about their own experiences with the Internet and the advantages and disadvantages of using it. Allow about ten minutes for this.

### Part 2. Predicting the impact of the Internet (60 minutes)

1. Distribute copies of handout no. 1, "Six options for predicting the impact of the Internet". Explain that, in order to polarise decisions, the scenarios have been written in fairly extreme terms.

#### THEMES



MEDIA



GLOBALISATION



GEN. HUMAN RIGHTS

#### COMPLEXITY



LEVEL 4

#### GROUP SIZE



8-50

#### TIME



180 MINUTES

2. Ask each pair to decide which scenario is the most likely to happen and which one is the least likely to happen. Give them 15 minutes to do this.
3. Ask all participants to come into plenary to give feedback on their decisions. Try to summarise the discussions about:
  - The most likely scenario(s).
  - The relevance of human rights on information technology, for example, the right to freedom of expression.
  - The digital divide.
4. Ask one or two participants to write the key points up on the flipchart.

**Part 3.** How the Internet can be used to promote human rights (90 minutes).

1. Divide the participants into five groups, A-E. Distribute the handouts. Each person in group A should have a copy of the “Handout for group A, the ‘Future scenarios: Pessimistic view’ “, those in group B should each receive a copy of the “Handout for group B, ‘Future scenarios: Optimistic view’ “, etc.
2. Give them 20 minutes to read the handouts and to share general comments.
3. Ask them to consider the information on the sheets in relation to the outcomes of the discussions in part I on the impact of the Internet. They should pay special attention to this part of the work as it provides them with relevant information for the next stage of the activity.
4. Divide the participants into new groups. There should be five people in each new group, one person originating from group A, one from group B, one from group C, and so on.
5. The task for each of these new groups is to decide which are the three most important advantages or uses of the Internet for promoting human rights.
6. Suggest that they start with a round of sharing information, beginning with the people from the C, D and E groups (that is, those who have the information about NGO work) and ending with the people from groups A and B. After that, they will be in a better position to go on to the tasks of identifying and agreeing the uses of the Internet for promoting human rights.
7. They should also appoint a rapporteur to present the results on a flipchart for the final plenary. Give them 35 minutes to complete this phase.
8. Call the participants into plenary to share the results of their work.

### Debriefing and evaluation

Start with a review of the activity and how people participated. Then go on to review what they learned.

- How much do people already know about the Internet? How much do they use it? What do they use it for?
- Was there a digital divide amongst the participants? What effect did this have on peoples’ ability to participate in the activity? Did some people feel excluded because they did not feel competent enough to contribute?
- Did others see this lack of experience as a handicap to the group’s work?
- What are the advantages of working in a group where people have very different experiences and attitudes to an issue?
- What were the most interesting things people learnt about the work of the human rights NGOs? Were there any surprises?

- The Internet is a world-wide network of interconnected computers.
- The Internet is accessible to over 150 million people around the world.
- 90% of Internet-users live in North America, Europe, Japan and Australia.
- People talk about the digital divide, meaning this very unequal access to the new information technology.
- The Internet allows users to publish and access information on-line and to communicate directly with each other through electronic mail (e-mail), mailing lists, newsgroups and chat rooms.

- Do the overall advantages of using the Internet to promote human rights outweigh the disadvantages?
- What needs to be done to address the disadvantages?

### Tips for facilitators

Assess how familiar the participants are with the Internet prior to the activity so that you can pitch the level and the overall approach.

In the debriefing, it is a good idea to focus on global as well as on local issues of access to new information technology, making sure that those who lack or have difficulties accessing the Internet can make their voices and feelings heard. The aim of the questions about the digital divide within the group and the advantages of working with people with very different experiences is to encourage people to consider various issues about making decisions.

### Variations

You can extend the activity to include an exercise in building consensus, as follows:

1. In part I, after step 4 (decision in pairs), ask each pair to join another pair and in groups of four compare their choices and come to a consensus concerning which scenario is most likely to happen and which one is least likely to happen. Ask each group of four to add a couple of sentences about potential human rights issues (such as freedom of expression) to the scenario they think is most likely to happen. The writing should ensure that group(s) that come to a consensus quickly are encouraged to continue to reflect together on the chosen scenario and have a greater sense of ownership about it, before going on to the next step (15').
2. Now ask each group of four to join another group of four, and in groups of eight compare their choices and come to a consensus concerning which scenario is most likely to happen and which one is least likely to happen. Ask each group to appoint a rapporteur (15 minutes) Now proceed with the activity as from step five, that is, the report of group results in plenary.
3. In the plenary, ask participants to read the additional key sentences/human rights issues and provide the main reasons for their choices. Encourage the participants (and not only the rapporteurs) to:
  - reflect on the differences and similarities in the choices made by the different groups,
  - the reasons motivating the choices,
  - the human rights issues in relation to the Internet ,
  - the actual consequences of the chosen scenario(s).
4. Also ask people to reflect on how they worked.
  - Did people change their ideas during the various negotiations?
  - Was it harder to work in larger groups?
  - Who tended to take the lead (for example: those experienced/inexperienced with Internet)?
  - Could people express themselves freely regardless of their specific Internet competence?

## Suggestions for follow-up

Encourage participants to visit the web sites (and links) listed in the handouts “NGO Profiles”. They could then go on to reflect about a project to:

- (a) Use available Internet resources to increase awareness about human rights issues in their neighbourhood
- (b) Find new ways of using the Internet for the promotion of human rights issues.
- (c) Create their own web site and link to other youth groups.

If participants are interested in working with a specific example of the Internet being used to promote human rights, they could do “When tomorrow comes”, on page 250. This activity, which is about the right to life, uses material from a web site created by a prisoner facing the death penalty.

## Ideas for action

Take the ideas developed in the activity and follow-up, or take up one of the numerous possibilities for actions offered by the web sites (and links) listed in the handouts “NGO Profiles”.

## Further information

The 2001 UNDP “Human Development Report” focuses on the digital divide and is available at [www.undp.org](http://www.undp.org)

## Key date

**17 May**

World

Telecommunications Day

## HANDOUTS

### Six options for predicting the impact of the Internet

1. **THE WORLD WILL BE A BETTER PLACE!** By 2010, everyone in the world will be on-line. The Internet will make shops, offices, and business travel entirely unnecessary. This will save so much money that everything will be free! Wars will end! Everyone will be happy!
2. **THE WORLD WILL BE A WORSE PLACE.** By 2010, everyone *in the West* will be on-line, but growing billions outside developed capitalist society will still live in poverty. The resulting instability will cause world-wide war, or someone will finally use the nuclear bomb recipe – available on-line. Everyone will die.
3. **PEOPLE WILL TAKE OVER THE INTERNET.** By 2010, the sheer volume of Internet traffic will mean that government control will be impossible. Self-governing little societies will spring up with people living in “virtual villages”. Everyone will be free.
4. **GOVERNMENT WILL TAKE OVER THE INTERNET.** As Orwell had predicted in “1984”, by 2010, Big Brother will really be watching you. All your e-mails, all your bank details, all your personal schedules and purchases – everything will be recorded and scrutinised. Internet computers will be equipped with cameras that will monitor you 24 hours a day. Totalitarian regimes will be in power everywhere. Everyone will be oppressed.
5. **THE INTERNET IS A PASSING FAD.** By 2010, the novelty of cyberspace will fade. Everyone will go about their business, just as they always did. There is no more need for discussion about new information technology being another battleground for freedom of expression. It will save you a lot of money to ignore the cyberspace – it will go away.
6. **THE INTERNET IS HERE TO STAY.** By 2010, everyone in the world will be connected to everyone else. You will socialise through your computer screen, go on holiday without leaving your living-room, and have arguments with thousands of people you have never met before. The Internet will be so pervasive that your only chance for economic survival is to invest heavily and re-orient your entire strategy around the Net.

Source: Adapted from “Human Rights and the Internet”, by S. Hicks, E. F. Halpin and E. Hoskins (ed.), McMillan Press Ltd, London, 2000

**Group A. Future scenarios: Pessimistic view**

**Neil Postman, “Five ideas about technological change”**

**First**, that *we always pay a price for technology*; the greater the technology, the greater the price.

**Second**, that *there are always winners and losers*, and that the winners always try to persuade the losers that they are really winners.

**Third**, that *there is embedded in every great technology an epistemological, political or social prejudice*. Sometimes that bias is greatly to our advantage. Sometimes it is not. The printing press annihilated the oral tradition; telegraphy annihilated space; television has humiliated the word; the computer, perhaps, will degrade community life. And so on.

**Fourth**, *technological change is not additive; it is ecological*, which means, it changes everything and is, therefore, too important to be left entirely in the hands of Bill Gates.

And **fifth**, *technology tends to become mythic*; that is, perceived as part of the natural order of things, and therefore tends to control more of our lives than is good for us.

*(From a speech delivered at the Conference, “The New Technologies and the Human Person: Communicating the Faith in the New Millennium” Denver, Colorado, March 27, 1998, [www.newtech.org/address10\\_en.htm](http://www.newtech.org/address10_en.htm))*

**Group B. Future scenarios: Optimistic view**

**Sean Kidney, “The Internet as a facilitator of citizen activity”**

For people interested in the web, I think the scenario is optimistic. Like any kind of major upheaval and change, the web creates opportunities, but also losses. We will see some losses of print media as a result. I think this is a revolution where there is enormous scope for individuals to have an impact, because there is scope for people to actually have their say - scope to be informed. News usually disappears in revolutions, but here it doesn't.

One of my hopes for the Internet is that it will become a facilitator of citizen activity, and lead to a different kind of democracy. I think this is quite important for us if we are to make sure we don't increase social division, especially in the next 10 years or so while the revolution slowly catches up with the rest of the world. We need to work together, not just nationally, but also globally, to help craft the future of this particular revolution.

If you *can* read, the next barrier to knowledge is access to information, access to stuff to read, like a library. Think about what a revolution community libraries have been in our culture.

The promise of the web, of course, is of a global library. *(From a Talk to the NSW Society of Editors, 6 April 1999, <http://online.socialchange.net.au>)*

**Group C. NGO profile: Amnesty International ([www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org))**

Amnesty International, founded in 1961, campaigns to free all prisoners of conscience; ensure fair and prompt trials for political prisoners; abolish the death penalty, torture and other cruel treatment of prisoners; end political killings and “disappearances”; and oppose human rights abuses by government or opposition groups. Amnesty International has around a million members and supporters in 162 countries and territories. Activities range from public demonstrations to letter-writing, from human rights education to fundraising concerts, from individual appeals on a particular case to global campaigns on a particular issue. It is impartial and independent of any government, political persuasion or religious creed. Amnesty International is financed largely by subscriptions and donations from its world-wide membership. Its web-site offers a campaigning manual, a fair-trial manual and opportunities to participate in campaigns, register to receive urgent appeals on your mobile phone (SMS message), and send postcards to get torture abolished.

**Examples of Amnesty International's work**

After some mistakes and consequent bad publicity, in the late 1960s, Amnesty International adopted the rule that people in the organisation were to work only on cases outside their own countries. Volunteers still carry out most of Amnesty International's work. They write letters to governments that abuse the human rights of those who hold opposing viewpoints, whether through imprisonment, harassment, threats, physical mistreatment, torture, “disappearances”, or politically motivated murder. They staff tables at public events, passing out information to the public on prisoners of conscience and human rights issues. They organise demonstrations, write press releases, found letter-writing groups at their churches, synagogues, or mosques and exercise their intelligence and imagination in almost unlimited ways.

Amnesty International never claims credit for the release of prisoners. Releases are the result of many factors, not the least of which are the actions (often taken at considerable risk) of families and friends. However, many released prisoners have said that Amnesty International's publicity and letters were very important.

In 1977 Amnesty International was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for its work. Its “Get up Sign up” campaign to mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the UDHR collected 13 million pledges in support of the declaration. In 2001 the AI Stoptorture Web-site won the Revolution Award 2001 for “best use of e-mail”. ([www.stoptorture.org](http://www.stoptorture.org)).

### Group D. NGO profile: Derechos Human Rights ([www.derechos.org](http://www.derechos.org))

Derechos Human Rights was founded in 1995, probably the first Internet-based human rights organisation. Together with Equipo Nizkor, the group's sister organisation in Spain, Derechos started with the clear realisation that the Internet has the potential of being a most efficient tool in the battle against human rights violations world-wide and to allow human rights organisations to speak to the world in their own voice. Derechos works with human rights organisations in Latin America and the world to spread accurate and timely information on the human rights situation in their countries, as well as to give opportunities to help. The organisation also co-ordinates several human rights mailing lists, publishes an internet human rights journal, and works on the preservation of memory and justice for the disappeared. The web-site offers a comprehensive list of links to other human rights organisations.

#### An example of Derechos' work

In 1998, Javier Vildoza (21) read the following statements on the Derechos web-site: "Vildoza, Jorge (alias) 'Gaston', Lieutenant Commander, subchief GT332 (...); currently a fugitive, he lives in England; he may have taken the son of Cecilia Vinas, born in mid-September 1977". Javier found that the man he thought to be his father was a known human rights abuser, and that this man had stolen a child born at the same time he was born at the Naval Mechanical School, a notorious concentration camp during the Argentine dictatorship. He was the son of Cecilia Vinas and Hugo Reinaldo Penino but had been taken by Jorge Vildoza, who was later indicted on over 60 charges of torture and murder. He had been registered as Javier Gonzalo Vildoza Grimaldo and raised by Vildoza and his wife as their own child and had never been told the truth about his origins.

'Surfing' through the Derechos and Project Disappeared web sites, Javier discovered that his natural parents are still on the list of the disappeared and that his natural grandparents had been searching for him for more than 20 years. In 1998, he found them. His realisation as to who he really was and what his father had done compelled him to write to an investigating court in Argentina and request a DNA test. The results were conclusive: he was the son of Cecilia Vinas and Hugo Reinaldo Penino. He has since been reunited with his natural grandparents. The story of Javier illustrates how on-line activism can bring unpredictable results and can far exceed expectations. When Project Disappeared was conceived, its purpose was to memorialise the disappeared as human beings, to denounce those responsible for their disappearances in Latin America and the world. It was never expected that the web site would help one of the disappeared's children to learn the truth about himself.

(Adapted from "Doing Human Rights Online: the Derechos' Cyberbirth", by Michael Katz-Lacabe and Margarita Lacabe, in "Human Rights and the Internet", by S. Hicks, E. F. Halpin and E. Hoskins (ed.), McMillan Press Ltd, London, 2000)

### Group E. NGO profile: Human Rights Watch ([www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org))

Human Rights Watch is an independent, non-governmental organisation, supported by contributions from private individuals and foundations world-wide. The organisation was founded in 1978 as Helsinki Watch (now Human Rights Watch/Helsinki), in response to a call for support from embattled local groups in Moscow, Warsaw, and Prague, which had been set up to monitor compliance with the human rights provisions of the landmark Helsinki accords. It accepts no government funds, directly or indirectly. Human Rights Watch works to end a broad range of abuses, including summary executions, torture, arbitrary detention, restrictions on the freedom of expression, association, assembly and religion, violations of due process, and discrimination on racial, gender, ethnic and religious grounds.

Human Rights Watch publicises information on abuses in order to embarrass a government before its own citizens and in the eyes of the international community. Human Rights Watch also presses for the withdrawal of military, economic and diplomatic support from governments that regularly abuse human rights.

#### Three examples of Human Rights Watch's work:

*The International Criminal Court:* Human Rights Watch has been at the forefront of efforts to create the International Criminal Court, a permanent tribunal that will be available to try the most serious human rights crimes, regardless of where they are committed. As a result of public pressure and advocacy efforts with governments and civil-society groups around the world, 114 governments have agreed to the treaty establishing the ICC and 21 have ratified it.

*Chechnya:* Human Rights Watch was the only international human rights group stationed continuously on the Chechnya border throughout the Russian offensive, providing information leading the United Nations Commission on Human Rights to adopt a resolution condemning Russia's conduct in Chechnya. The resolution marked the first time the commission had censured one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council.

*Kosovo:* Human Rights Watch launched a significant research operation in Kosovo, well before the NATO bombing campaign. Its first book-length report on Kosovo was published in 1990, and the organisation monitored developments closely throughout the 1990s. On-site investigations of several massacres in late 1998 and early 1999 led to front-page stories around the world.