



The Universal Right to Internet Access Manifesto

2020

Against digital and cognitive gaps

The pandemic caused by **COVID-19** has revealed various strengths and weaknesses of international education and communication systems and it is, without a doubt, in these crises, where, out of sheer need for survival, inventiveness and ability to **create new opportunities to ensure progress.**

The fact that more than 40% of the world population has been forced to confine themselves in their homes for a long period of time, a situation unknown until now for current generations, has forced a change in the life strategies for a large group of people, families and companies.

One of the consequences of this crisis has been **the significant intensification of the use of Internet as a means of communication**, by increasing videoconferencing tools unimaginable just four months ago, or the constant use of mobile telephones, both to keep in touch with family and friends, and to be able to follow certain work routines linked to this new way of working or simply for leisure reasons. Similarly, it has highlighted the importance of social networks in shaping climates of opinion.

There is a field where the revolution has been absolute, and that is the field of **education**, where millions of children, teenagers and young university people have been obliged, overnight, to use these tools as the only way to keep in touch with the educational environment to which they belong. It is in this area where, in a more extreme way, the **inequalities have become evident** between those who have and those who do not.

According to a 2017 UNICEF report, 29% of the world's children and youth can be deprived of continuing their training because they lack the basic technical means to network with their teachers and peers. In Africa that inequality reaches unacceptable proportions with figures close to 60%.

There is also an open gap between men and women, since, according to that same report, there are 12% more men with Internet access than women, which is accentuated for cultural reasons and the lack of opportunities for women in some highly populated places on the planet.

The workplace has also been greatly affected, since remote working has been revealed as an instrument with more possibilities than had previously been explored in multiple occupations. In this new economy, households have been converted into **experimental work centers**, which often do not have the technical infrastructure (bandwidth, sufficient terminals) necessary for all its members, for work or study reasons, or also due to new ways of communication by teleconference or simply for leisure. They do not effectively have Internet access according to their needs.

This inequality in Internet access is so serious that it has clearly generated two worlds even more separated than they already were and has caused this "**digital fracture**" to widen to the geological proportions of a tectonic fault. A fracture that threatens to become a "**cognitive fracture**" in the medium term whose impact on the growth of inequality may become irreversible.

In the 21st century, that of technologies, that of advances in medical science and computational science, that of planned space travel which is announced as a scientific breakthrough, it should also be the century of education for all, as a supreme value, unquestionable and inalienable, it should become the main cause that unites all those countries, institutions and philanthropists who assume that, without this supreme value, our civilization is doomed to disappear, at least in the way we know it.

And there is no doubt that **universal access to the Internet** turns out to be the only known way today to be able to take that education to all corners of the earth, through an initiative of civil society, concerned with ensuring that education and its values are available to all those who are the future of this planet.

The socioeconomic effects of the health crisis add to **structural inequalities** that already existed previously, deepening them and making more necessary than ever a **joint action** of all countries and organizations to face them.

The European Union is debating the formation of an **internal reconstruction fund and a rethink in development cooperation**, areas in which the Digital Agenda constitutes a preferred objective, within which universal access to the Internet appears as something inescapable. Similarly, the EU has long been proclaiming **the need to promote media competencies** (critical and creative) that allow the use of digital tools and the media.

Online healthcare also appears as absolutely necessary when we are faced with situations like the current one, in which movement is limited, when not impossible, and it is also shown as one of the keys to health guarantee in the times to come.

As a civil society, as academics, as people concerned about the future of humanity, whose supreme values include education and health, which are deeply linked to each other, we are committed to the idea that the next generations enjoy a world in which inequalities are less and less.

We envision a world in which all people can have access to the power of the Internet, and in which no one is deprived of the skills that its use requires thereby developing their full capacity to develop themselves as a person and a citizen, and thereby contributing to the intellectual, social, economic and health progress of humanity.

For all these reasons, the signatories consider that it is necessary to take decisive actions at the national and international levels in order to:

- Ensure that **all young people** in the world, regardless of sex or place of residence, **have close, easy and inexpensive access to a connection point with the world through the web**, and the hardware and software means necessary to achieve informational and media competencies to use the media and digital systems within their reach.
- Ensure that all the **teachers in the world**, the great forgotten, despite their heroic efforts to teach, **can gain access to a reasonable connection to the Internet**, digital tools and the necessary training to make the most of it.

To this end, we propose:

- That all **governments adopt specific regulatory measures** as a priority to bridge the digital and cognitive gap generated by the lack of Internet access, and that governments and international organizations undertake a determined policy of media and information literacy.
- That the **companies providing mobile telephone and data services** in the world **create specific instruments to provide universal and free access to the Internet** to all those who cannot afford it, due to their few or no resources, either individually or through national or international funds, including organized through an independent non-profit agency.
- That **manufacturing companies** around the world **form a fund managed by an international philanthropic institution** in which hardware and software equipment is transferred, and that these can be delivered to every person in the world, regardless of their age, who has no way of accessing them due to their economic constraints, through an international program with conditions clearly marked and established.
- That the **European Union places Internet access as a preferred destination for DIGITAL AGENDA funds** to be released to the Member States to face post-COVID-19 reconstruction and also include it as a preferential development factor in foreign cooperation provided for in the Treaties, reforming legislation and projects and action plans in whatever is necessary to do so effectively.
- That the United Nations, and its agencies, especially UNESCO, UNICEF and WHO, as well as institutions such as the World Bank, and associated international banks and the International Monetary Fund, declare clearly and without nuances in their directives, that **Internet access as INALIENABLE UNIVERSAL RIGHT** without any type of exception.

- That the necessary steps be taken for this right to be effectively implemented immediately due to its infinite possibilities of improving education and health on a world level and also, because that universal access will have a beneficial collateral effect with the possibility of offering educational programs free of charge to the end user along with prevention of health problems and health care programs with the advantages that this will derive.
- That 85% of the world's population has access to the internet and **that this objective is established internationally**, replicating (in process, schedule and ambition) the international method under the umbrella of the United Nations that was used to achieve the Paris Agreement against climate change.
- That, since it is from Europe where this initiative begins, the EU convenes an international donor conference to **establish immediately the basis for implementing the above measures and their effective execution.**

It is possible that history does not only judge us for having been largely the cause of the destruction of the planet thanks to global warming that we have contributed to causing, but also credits us with this initiative to declare access to the Internet as a universal human right, allowing the rights of all and for all be the backbone of this new era.

