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## Web 2.0 as a Social Movement

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### Abstract

*The current discussions on Web 2.0 development represent a significant development in the continuing interaction of technological developments and communications rights. In this paper the social movement for a right to communicate and the discourse surrounding Web 2.0 development are compared to demonstrate how Web 2.0 is a manifestation of an ongoing interaction between this human rights social movement and communication technology. The values associated with Web 2.0, especially the participative role of users, are congruent with those expressed in the movement to achieve a right to communicate. The paper concludes with a discussion on how a right to communicate serves as a conceptual framework for addressing a range of public policy issues arising out of the increasing use of the World Wide Web and as a framework for Web research and development.*

### Keywords

*Web 2.0 research and development; Right to communicate; Web 2.0 as social movement; Communication rights*

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### Introduction

An unanswered question currently confronting the Web research and development community is: "Does 'Web 2.0' mean anything?" ([Graham](#), 2005) Web 2.0 has been described as a state of mind, an attitude, a new business model, the next generation of Web-based software and services, a set of development principles, a revolution. This paper places Web 2.0 in the broader context of a social movement. Web 2.0 represents a continuing manifestation of a social movement arising out of the interaction between technological developments in communication and the expansion of communication rights, in particular, a basic human right to communicate for everyone.

The call for a right to communicate was initially enunciated in the late 1960s. For over three decades this social movement has coincided with the profound developments in information and communication technologies that have lead to the current global electronic networks. A right to communicate is considered a basic, universal human right entitling everyone to participate in the use and development of global communication. It is a recognition that the information freedoms arising out of the traditional social structures of the print and electronic mass media of vertical, top-down, passive one-way flow of

information must be redefined in the emerging environment of interpersonal, horizontal, multi-channel, interactive electronic communication.

The paper examines how the values propounded for the development of the Web are in accord with those enunciated in a right to communicate, in particular, the increased role given to user participation and collaboration in Web 2.0 development. The emergence of these values in the discourse on Web development can be seen as a further expression and development in the ability of individuals to exercise their right to communicate. The right to communicate movement is providing a conceptual framework within which to address a range of public policy issues relating to access to communication resources, participation in development, intellectual freedom, intellectual property rights, and cultural and linguistic identity that are arising out of the rapid development of global, interpersonal communication. This conceptual framework should also serve as a foundation for Web research and development.

The paper begins with an examination of the relationship between communication technologies and a right to communicate social movement and the constraints on and opposition to such a right. This will be followed by a comparison of the values of a right to communicate and of Web 2.0 development values and a discussion of their implications for policy development and Web research and development.

## Global Communication and Human Rights

Since the earliest development of technologies to enhance human communication there has been a continual interaction between the development of communication rights and technology ([McIver & Birdsall, 2004](#); [McIver, Birdsall & Rasmussen, 2005](#)). By the eighteenth century rights relating to freedom of speech and the press would be recognized in such seminal documents as the United States Bill of Rights and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. This interaction between communication and human rights accelerated with the rapid developments in the mass media and telecommunications in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Many of these rights were endorsed at the international level as universal rights with the adoption of the *United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) in 1948.

Of particular importance is Article 19 of the UDHR:

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 arose out of the immediate post-war concern about freedom of speech, the press, and the broadcasting media, all of which were tightly controlled within Germany by the Nazis. Consequently, Article 19 paid special attention to protecting what became known as the "free flow of information" through the mass media. In this respect, its orientation was to the past and the traditional structures of communication and the statements of communication freedoms associated with them such as Article 19 and the U.S. Bill of Rights.

However, even as the UDHR was being debated and adopted there were already developments that would soon challenge the traditional structures of communication and the rights and freedoms associated with them. In 1945, Arthur C. Clarke published his now famous article on "Extra-terrestrial Relays" in which he proposed launching space stations into orbit to be used for transmitting communication signals ([Clarke, 1945](#)). It was not until 1957, with the launch of the Sputnik satellite by the Soviet Union, that Clarke's vision was implemented. Soon the United States and Canada launched their own satellites.

By the late 1960s the potential of global direct broadcast satellites (DBS) was recognized, not only by governments and the research community, but also the general public through the popularization of such phrases as Marshall McLuhan's "global village." Consequently, many countries desired to participate in satellite communications. Developing countries, many of whom had only recently achieved independence from colonial rule and gained membership in the UN, were especially concerned about the unequal distribution of and access to communications resources and the potential of cultural domination by the developed countries. The uni-directional transmission of satellite broadcasting from developed to developing countries generated intense concerns among the new nations about the cultural rights of nations and individuals, a concern often characterized by them as cultural imperialism.

In light of these developments, the United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) initiated a number of conferences of experts and public officials on satellite communications in the 1960s. Arthur C. Clarke, who by this time was gaining a reputation as a science fiction writer and co-screenwriter of the movie *2001: A Space Odyssey*, was a prominent participant in these UNESCO conferences ([Clarke](#), 1968).

## A Right to Communicate

Among those participating in the meetings and discussions about international communications policy and technological developments was Jean d'Arcy, a pioneer in the development of French and European television in the 1950s. By the 1960s he was Director of the U.N. Radio and Visual Services Division and a colleague of Arthur Clarke and Marshall McLuhan. With his extensive experience in the communications sector and with international communications policy at the UN, he was knowledgeable about recent technological developments and their implications for economic, cultural, and personal rights ([Pierre](#), 2003; [McIver & Birdsall](#), 2004). The intense discussion about satellite direct broadcasting, in which d'Arcy was immersed, was from the perspective of the one-way flow of information through the mass media. However, d'Arcy foresaw that satellite communication would dramatically change the entire structure of global electronic communication and its relationship to human rights.

Direct satellite broadcasting would, according to d'Arcy, open up multiple channels of global, interactive, personal communication among individuals. This new communication environment challenged the communication structure developed with the mass print and electronic media during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This prevailing structure was a vertical, top-down, one-way flow of information dominated by major corporations. The new technologies would allow for personal, interactive, horizontal communication through global electronic networks. Thus, individuals would assume a position at the core of the communication process including the power to participate in its very development. Further technological developments in 1970s and 80s resulting in the convergence of satellites, computing, and telecommunications only reinforced d'Arcy's analysis ([d'Arcy](#), 1969; [d'Arcy](#), 1983).

Jean d'Arcy also recognized this dramatic change in the structure of electronic communication challenged traditional statements of information freedoms such as the UDHR Article 19. Writing as early as 1969, he stressed that:

"The time will come when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights will have to encompass a more extensive right than man's right to information, first laid down twenty-one years ago in Article 19. This is the right to communicate" ([d'Arcy](#), 1969).

While debate continues over a precise definition of a right to communicate ([Birdsall](#), 2006), as it does over many more traditional rights, it has been defined as at least being

"the right to inform and be informed, the right to active participation in the communication process, the right of equitable access to information resources and information, and the right of cultural and individual privacy from communication" ([Richstad & Anderson](#), 1981).

The right to communicate differs from earlier concepts of freedom of information in that the role of the individual changes from that of a passive receiver of information transmitted by distant global corporations to that of an active participant and collaborator in the development and use of modes of global communication. As d'Arcy noted, the one-way flow of information typical of the past is not communication; rather, communication is an *interactive* process. Thus, the right to communicate gives as much primacy to the process of communication as to content.

Of particular note for our consideration here is the "right to active participation in the communication process," an especially powerful concept ([McKenna](#), 2005). In sharp contrast to the information freedoms arising out of the social structures of the vertical, top-down, one-way flow of information typical of the corporate sector mass communication systems, a right to communicate is rooted in the recognition of the transformation to horizontal, two- or multiple-way, interactive, participative, personal communication emerging with the Internet and the World Wide Web. It is this formulation of such a right that is aligned with the current discussions on Web 2.0 research and development. However, before examining that alignment, it is important to recognize that there currently exist substantial constraints facing many citizens in exercising a right to communicate as well as powerful opposition to the concept itself.

## Constraints on and Opposition to a Right to Communicate

As d'Arcy and others foresaw, we are experiencing a dramatic increase in person to person communication via global electronic networks due to the convergence of satellite communication, the Internet, the World Wide Web, and the widespread use of the personal computer. According to one report, as of January 11, 2007, world Internet penetration totaled just over 1 billion users, a growth rate of about 142% since 2000 (<http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>). The availability of personal, interactive global electronic communication is increasingly enhanced with the development of various modes of communicating, obvious examples being email, listservs, blogs, podcasts, and such websites as YouTube.com and MySpace.com. These hardware and software developments make it possible for millions of people personally to communicate directly electronically and globally with other individuals and groups and increasingly directly participate in the development of the Web.

Despite these advances there are serious constraints on the ability of people to exercise their right to communicate. While Internet usage now exceeds one billion users, that is only about 17% of the world population. There are many parts of the world where people have limited or no access to even a telephone. So there remains the well-known phenomenon of the digital divide within and among nations ([Birdsall](#), 2005a; [Birdsall & Birdsall](#), 2005). Over 85% of Internet usage is in Asia, Europe, and North America, far exceeding usage in Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America (<http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>).

There are other forces inhibiting many from fully exercising a right to communicate. Since d'Arcy's analysis over thirty years ago the concentration of the corporate mass media and other modes of global communication has increased even more so. The time is not long between the introduction of a new innovation by entrepreneurs, such as MySpace or YouTube, and their acquisition by a major, dominating corporation such as Google or Microsoft. As well, governments and the private sector accelerate their efforts to control and monitor access and use of the Internet for their own political and economic ends. For

example, a report on the 40th annual Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas in January, 2007, observes that the development community is responding to pressures from content providers to develop products that "limit our freedom to use and share the music, movies and other content they are intended for" ([Jardin](#), 2007).

Indeed, major corporations are eager to capitalize on the trends to social networking and user-generated content ([Siklos](#), 2007, p. 3). And cable and telecommunications companies lobby the U. S. Congress to allow for a two-tier Internet providing faster access to those with the ability to pay. But, as Steve Anderson, Managing Editor of COAnews, points out, "Citizens have been empowered to produce, circulate and re-circulate media and are not about to give that control to corporate gatekeepers." He is correct in asserting that "At the core of the issue of Net Neutrality is our right to communicate. Once again citizens are showing that this is a right they are willing [to] fight for" ([Anderson](#), 2006).

In addition to these technical and political constraints, there has been since its conception strong opposition to a right to communicate within the mass media sector and their political allies. In the late 1970s UNESCO undertook an initiative to promote a right to communicate through a series of meetings of experts ([Fisher](#), 1982). However, at the same time there was also an initiative from the newer members of the UN to create a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) as part of their efforts to promote economic development. NWICO was perceived by the mass media and governments in the Western developed countries, in particular by the Ronald Reagan government in the United States and the Margaret Thatcher government in Great Britain, as an attempt by post-colonial authoritarian governments to stop the free flow of information.

As a result of these political power struggles the UNESCO right to communicate initiative became embroiled in the East-West cold war and North-South development politics of the early 1980s over NWICO ([Anawalt](#), 1985). Advocates of a right to communicate hoped such a right could provide an alternative compromise strategy that would attract both those opposed to and supportive of NWICO. However, critics of NWICO were especially concerned about the emphasis given by a right to communicate to greater participation of the mass media audience in communication processes. This emphasis was seen as an endorsement for dictatorial regimes in some developing nations to intervene in the communications sector in their countries in the supposed name of the people. At the time, there was some legitimacy to this concern, in particular as the Soviet Union, often backing one-party socialist style governments in developing nations, took the position that it was indeed the right of government to undertake state control on behalf of the people in the communication sphere. This implied that a right to communicate derived from the state rather than being an inherent fundamental human right.

The right to communicate initiative faded from the UNESCO agenda. However, the mass media sector continues to link a right to communicate as a cover for NWICO objectives ([Bullen](#), 2002). Organizations such as the World Press Freedom Committee warn that "NGO groups are mobilizing to urge revisiting discredited code-word proposals for restriction such as a 'right to communicate' and 'the contribution of communication to the democratization of society'" ([World Press Freedom Committee](#), n.d.)

Indeed, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) continue to keep the concept of a right to communicate alive, most recently pushing for its consideration at the recent UN World Summit on the Information Society. That effort elicited the traditional calls of opposition from the mass media sector, prompted in part by the unfortunate issuing of an overly legalistic and comprehensive draft definition of a right to communicate by some of its advocates. Thus, both sides of the issue seem locked in a debate freighted with historical baggage. Their concerns reflect more a "mass media mentality" identified by d'Arcy that



over-emphasizes the gate-keeping, one-way flow of information typical of the traditional mass media, than an over-riding concern for democracy.

However, the dynamic technological developments of the past decade and the serious issues they are raising regarding a citizen's right to communicate gives the recent debate the patina of a bygone era while confirming d'Arcy's call for a re-evaluation of traditional statements of communication rights. Meanwhile, the major broadcasting media attempt to play catch-up in attracting audience participation by eliciting from viewers responses to questions of the day, email opinions, and video clips of local news events while also reporting on the buzz on the blogs. However, these efforts lag behind the accelerating demand by people to directly participate in the development, use, and governance of global modes of communication.

## Right to Communicate Movement

One reason the pioneering efforts within UNESCO to promote a right to communicate collapsed in the face of opposition is that the movement was confined primarily to a small group of academic experts and policy analysis at the international level. There were no national grassroots movements for such a right. This is not surprising because at the time -- the late 1970s and early 1980s-- few people among the general public were aware of or had experience with the emerging technological developments and their implications for communication rights. Nonetheless, despite the constraints and opposition, a right to communicate movement continues to grow. In addition to communication activists (see <http://www.righttocommunicate.org>) others continue working to advance the movement for such a right through advocacy, research, and policy analysis.

Because communication is a fundamental human act and central to human social organization, a right to communicate attracts support from a wide range of social movements relating to, for example:

- media development (World Association of Christian Communication: <http://www.wacc.org.uk/>);
- linguistic rights (Universal Declaration of Linguistics Rights: <http://www.unesco.org/most/lnngo11.htm>);
- social development (Choike: a Portal on Southern Civil Societies: [http://www.choike.org/nuevo\\_eng/about/index.html](http://www.choike.org/nuevo_eng/about/index.html));
- community broadcasting (World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters: <http://wiki.amarc.org/>);
- women's rights (Women in Action: <http://www.isiswomen.org/pub/wia/wia202/rihgt2com.htm>);
- communication rights (CRIS- Communication Rights in the Information Society: <http://www.crisinfo.org/>);
- people with disabilities (TASH: <http://www.tash.org/resolutions/res02communicat.htm>);
- computing and social responsibilities (CPSR- Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility: <http://www.cpsr.org/>)

Furthermore, the right to communicate increasingly serves as a conceptual framework within which public policy issues such access to information and communication resources, intellectual freedom, intellectual property, cultural and linguistic identity, and privacy can be re-examined in the context of global, interpersonal communication. A right to communicate provides a basis upon which to address specific challenges of global communication including the digital divide ([Cunningham, 2005](#)), globalization ([Dakroury, 2004](#)), media concentration ([Dakroury, 2005](#)), cultural identity and collective rights

([Rasmussen](#), 2002), knowledge management ([Kuhlen](#), 2003) and government information public policy ([Birdsall](#), 2005b).

## Web 2.0

A common thread running through the efforts to describe Web 2.0 (and the derivative Library 2.0), is the increased participatory role given to users of the Web in its development and use. Tim O'Reilly, who is often given credit for coining the term Web 2.0, talks about development principles that include: "an architecture of participation;" "harnessing collective intelligence;" "rich user experience;" "trusting users as co-developers;" development in a state of "perpetual beta"; "the wisdom of crowds" ([O'Reilly](#), 2005). For Jack Maness the essential elements of Web 2.0 include user-centered participation in the creation of content and services; socially rich communication between users; communally innovative ([Maness](#), 2006). Paul Miller's principles of Web 2.0 include "freeing of data," "participative," "work for the user," "sharing," "communication and facilitating community," "trust" ([Miller](#), 2005; [Miller](#), 2006).

Paul Graham identifies two main elements of Web 2.0 "democracy" and "don't maltreat users." His assertion "don't maltreat users" is a call for greater respect for users of the Web and the contribution they can make to its development. He points out there are significant examples "to prove that amateurs can surpass professionals, when they have the right kind of system to channel their efforts." He uses Wikipedia as an example of the high quality of the content contributed by users ([Graham](#), 2005). As for Wikipedia, its co-founder, Jimmy Wales, now talks about having volunteers contribute to a Wiki based search engine. Like others he emphasizes the concept of building community by empowering users to directly participate in a transparent process of development and implementation ([Cohen](#), 2007).

The emerging presence of Web users has become so vivid that *Time* magazine choose for its 2006 person of the year "You," the millions of individuals who are loading content daily on such sites as YouTube, MySpace, and so forth. *Time* characterizes this dramatic change in the information age with the rhetoric articulated by Web 2.0 pundits: "community and collaboration," "power to the people," "seizing the reins of global media," "citizen to citizen, person to person," "massive social experiment" ([Time](#), 2007).

What is common among the characterizations of Web 2.0 can be encapsulated in such keywords as democratic; respect for users; user-orientated; community building; collaborative; interaction; participative; sharing; social networking. Since its conception by Tim Berners-Lee concepts of collaboration, decentralization, and universality have been part of the Web ethos. Berners-Lee correctly emphasized that the Web "is more a social creation than a technical one" ([Berners-Lee](#), 1999, p. 123). Nonetheless, discussions around Web 2.0 emphasize to a greater extent than previously the central role of the user community in the active participation in its development.

*Time* characterizes the emergence of the active user as a revolution. While these developments are dramatic, they are not a revolution but, rather, an evolution in the dialogue between communication technological development and the continual reformulation of communication rights. The Web 2.0 values regarding user participation, collaboration, community, and interaction are congruent with and central to those articulated as constituting a human right to communicate. Thus, recent developments in Web development are a significant phase in a social movement for advancing the increasing ability of individuals and groups to exercise their right to communicate. It is in this context of the increased tighter convergence of the values embodied in both a right to communicate and in Web development that Web 2.0 is a component in a larger social movement.

## Discussion

Web 2.0 research and development values coincide with those embodied in the right to communicate social movement. These congruent values include user participation in the development of communication media and services; interactive, horizontal communication among participants; the use of multi-media channels of communication; a non-hierarchical relationship through collaboration among users, developers, and service providers; a commitment to community building and to the needs of distinct communities; and a recognition that technological developments and communication rights are always in a state of "beta development."

A right to communicate provides a conceptual framework for addressing public policy issues relating to information and communication technologies and their national and international social, cultural, economic, and political implications. In addition, a right to communicate is a conceptual framework for Web research and development strategy that includes a participative collaboration in which Web users play a central role. A "build it and they will come" ethos is being replaced by one of "they will come and build it." As never before, technological developments such as the Internet, the World Wide Web, and the wide-spread use of the personal computer have reached the stage where citizens throughout the world, given the resources and skills, could directly participate in the use and development of global networks to further their own and their communities' economic, social, educational, and cultural development.

The alignment of right to communicate and Web 2.0 values has been delineated. But there is a critical distinction between the rights values and the Web 2.0 values. Much of the discussion about Web 2.0 development is centered on its application in the private sector and market place while promotion of a right to communicate is a human rights movement within civil society. However, this paper has attempted to demonstrate that both a right to communicate and Web 2.0 are part of a larger social movement arising out of interaction between the formulation of communication rights and technological development. Advocates of a right to communicate would assert that any Web research and development, whether in the public or private sector, should address the question: does it advance or constrain a citizen's right to communicate? In short, there must be an acknowledgement that Web development is not just a matter of technological innovation or new business models. The Web is not only a social creation, as Berners-Lee asserts, it is about power and politics. There is a political economy of the Web within which all Web development takes place.

## Conclusion

The values of a right to communicate - interactive communication, user participation, collaboration - collate with those of the current discussions surrounding Web 2.0. It is the extent to which the values embodied in a right to communicate are shared by those involved in the most recent research and development of the Web that it can be argued that Web 2.0 development can be seen as part of a larger human rights movement. In the dynamic environment of the Web we can anticipate the angst over the specific meaning of Web 2.0 will quickly dissipate or be resolved. However, the movement for a right to communicate will only gain in momentum. Therefore, it is critical the direction of Web development be within a framework enhancing a right to communicate.

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