

## **Internet Rights and Principles Coalition (IRPC)**

### **COVID-19 and the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights Online**

#### Substantive Paper for DCs Main Session

#### Representative in the Main Session: June Parris

The COVID-19 pandemic has created an unprecedented global health crisis, and countries around have come to a near standstill as governments and healthcare systems worldwide are fighting the outbreak.

As the world goes virtual, the enjoyment and full realisation of the fundamental rights and freedoms in the online environment is increasingly urgent. It is therefore vital to ensure that government responses to the crisis go hand-in-hand with international human rights and norms as to fulfil their obligations to promote and uphold fundamental rights and freedoms both offline and online.

Unfortunately, many governments have seen the outbreak as an opportunity to implement more repressive measures, from using Artificial Intelligence (AI) for increased surveillance and data collection, to restrictions on the freedom of expression and information, and discrimination online.

The Internet Rights and Principles Coalition (IRPC) has been following closely the recent developments, the impacts of the pandemic on human rights, and the challenges on those working to uphold human rights online.

The Coalition has been engaging with other Dynamic Coalitions, with NRIs, civil society representatives and the wider IGF community to support their work, to promote human rights in the online environment and to help achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

#### **Lessons learnt**

The IRPC's main document, the Charter of Human Rights and Principles for the Internet, which is fast-approaching its 10th anniversary, is increasingly more relevant and urgent. While the Coalition is currently focusing its work on the first four articles of the Charter (1 - Right to access to the Internet; 2 -Right to non-discrimination in Internet access, use, & governance; 3 - Right to liberty & security on the Internet; and 4 - Right to development through the Internet), the pandemic has also highlighted concerns on other rights and freedoms highlighted by the Charter such as Freedom of expression & information on the Internet, Right to privacy on the Internet, Right to digital data protection, Right to education on & about the Internet, Rights of children & the Internet, Right to work & the Internet, and Rights to health and social services on the Internet, among others.

#### **Internet accessibility and full enjoyment of basic human rights online**

Over the last few months, digital inequalities have been greatly exposed. The pandemic has shown that Internet access needs urgent attention, and that disadvantaged and vulnerable groups have been disproportionately affected. People limited or no access to the Internet have been isolated, missed crucial information on the outbreak, and often lack access to basic rights as the access to healthcare, education, and work. Women and children's rights have been impacted, and refugees and displaced people are at higher risk of being exposed to the virus.

#### **Environmental sustainability, digital transformation, and human rights**

As the pandemic moved the world online, it is even more urgent to address the environmental impact of digital technologies to ensure sustainable development and to find solutions to tackle the climate crisis. The Coalition is focusing on Article 4 of the Charter: "Right to Development Through the Internet" as a starting point for a meaningful discussion within the Internet governance community on the importance of working towards a rights-based and environmentally sustainable Internet, one that can effectively connect the next billion, by ensuring human development and environmental

protection for full realisation and enjoyment of human rights.

### **AI, surveillance and right to privacy and data protection**

The IRPC is concerned about plans to introduce immunity passports by governments around the world, as well as the wider use of AI for facial recognition and surveillance as a way to contain the pandemic through testing and contact tracing. The widespread use of these technologies for data collection raises security and privacy concerns, and the immunity passports can pave the way to discriminatory processes that undermine human rights laws and norms. With no guarantees that governments will be willing to scale down these extreme measures even after the pandemic is under control, the Coalition recommends 'low-tech' solutions should be used instead.

### **Freedom of Expression and safety of journalists and human rights defenders**

Recent attacks on journalists, bloggers and human rights defenders in light of the COVID-19 pandemic are worrisome at a time when responsible journalism is vital to combat widespread misinformation and disinformation online, to share vital information including information on the global health crisis, and to fulfil its responsibility to hold those in power accountable. Freedom of expression and the safety and protection of journalists and human rights defenders must be upheld at all times and more importantly in the COVID-19 crisis.

### **Recommendations**

The IRPC urges the Internet Governance (IG) community to work together to promote human rights online to ensure those rights fully protected in the online environment throughout the challenging times we live in and beyond.

More needs to be done within the IG community to address the digital divide and to ensure that no one is left behind.

National governments must respect, protect and fulfil their obligations to implement and uphold international human rights law and norms most crucially in times of crisis to ensure that everyone can fully enjoy the fundamental rights and freedoms enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards both offline and online.

### **Further Reading**

#### **Internet accessibility and full enjoyment of basic human rights online**

- [COVID-19 highlights life and death stakes for greater digital cooperation](#), United Nations News, 11 June 2020
- [Digital Divide a Matter of Life and Death amid COVID-19 Crisis, Secretary-General Warns Virtual Meeting, Stressing Universal Connectivity Key for Health, Development](#), United Nations Press Release, 11 June 2020
- [Coronavirus has exposed the digital divide like never before](#), [Douglas Broom](#), World Economic Forum, 22 April 2020,
- [Women's rights and the COVID-19 pandemic](#) Council of Europe,
- [The coronavirus backlash: how the pandemic is destroying women's rights](#) , The Guardian, 23 June 2020
- [UN Secretary-General's policy brief: The impact of COVID-19 on women](#), UN Women, 2020
- [Protection of Children during the Coronavirus Pandemic](#), UNICEF, 2020

- [Coronavirus Disease \(COVID-19\) and Its Implications for Protecting Children Online - A technical note from UNICEF and partners](#), UNICEF, 14 April 2020
- [OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#)
- [The impact of coronavirus \(COVID-19\) on forcibly displaced persons in developing countries](#), OECD, 15 June 2020

### **Environmental sustainability, digital transformation, and human rights**

- [Greening Internet governance – Environmental sustainability and digital transformation – EuroDIG 2020 - Plenary 04](#)
- [Digital Ecosystem for Earth](#), Session 184, WISIS Forum 2020, 25 June 2020
- [To Green the Internet, We Need RIPE](#), Michael Oghia, RIPE NCC, 29 Jun 2020
- [Digitization and the Environment: Opportunities, Risks and the Need for Action](#), Study on the impact of digitization on the environment, conducted by the Bern University of Applied Sciences on behalf of the Federal Office for the Environment (FOEN), April 2020
- [Environmental footprint of the digital world](#), GreenIT.fr 2019
- [Internet Futures and the Climate Crisis](#), Internet Rights and Principles Coalition Annual Meeting, IGF 2019, Berlin
- [TechUK Data Centre Energy Routemap](#)
- [TechUK: Attributing Carbon to Cloud](#)
- [ClimateAction.tech](#)
- [The Green Web Foundation](#)
- [Sustainable Futures: The Internet, Human Rights, and Environmental Issues](#), Internet Rights and Principles Coalition Annual Meeting, IGF 2018, Paris
- [EuroDIG 2017 WS 11: Drowning in data: Digital pollution, green IT, and sustainable access](#)

### **AI, surveillance and right to privacy and data protection**

- [Artificial intelligence and the control of COVID-19](#), Council of Europe
- [In the blink of AI: How facial recognition technology is capitalising on the COVID-19 crisis](#) | View, Keith Oliver, Amalia Neenan, Euronews, 14 May 2020
- [Use of surveillance to fight coronavirus raises concerns about government power after pandemic ends](#), Arjun Kharpal, CNBC, 30 March 2020
- [Russia: AI and hi-tech surveillance to fight the Covid-19 epidemic amidst fears of rights violations](#), Sofia Svensson, International Observatory of Human Rights, 30 March 2020
- [Pandemic Privacy Concerns Give Blockchain Its Day In The Sun](#), Chrissa McFarlane, Forbes, 26 June 2020
- [COVID-19, surveillance and the threat to your rights](#), Amnesty International, 3 April 2020
- [The coronavirus pandemic highlights the need for a surveillance debate beyond 'privacy'](#), David Lyon, The Conversation, 24 March 2020
- [Plans for coronavirus immunity passports should worry us all](#), NICOLE KOBIE, Wired, 8 June 2020
- [Are COVID-19 immunity passports a risk to human rights?](#) Ian Murphy, Enterprise Times, June 29, 2020

### **Freedom of Expression and safety of journalists and human rights defenders**

- [Joint Emergency Appeal for Journalism and Media Support](#), Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD)
- [Political fight grows over EU response to China disinformation](#), Mark Scott, Politico
- [Coronavirus: Impacts on freedom of expression](#), ARTICLE 19
- [EU condemns attacks on press freedom during COVID-19 crisis](#), Deutsche Welle (DW)
- [Safety of journalists amid COVID-19: A multifaceted challenge](#), UNESCO, 7 May 2020
- [#Tracker 19 - Live updates of Covid-19 impacts of press freedom](#), Reporters Without Borders

- Defending rights during a pandemic: Impact of Covid-19 on the safety and work of human rights defenders, Front Line Defenders, 20 April 2020
- Asia: Bachelet alarmed by clampdown on freedom of expression during COVID-19, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 3 June 2020
- Press freedom must not be undermined by measures to counter disinformation about COVID-19, Commissioner for Human Rights, Council of Europe, 3 April 2020
- How the free press worldwide is under threat, Gill Phillips, The Guardian, 28 May 2020