

25 YEARS

OF THE CONVENTION ON
THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD



**A call for the enhanced
engagement of children
in the digital rights
discourse**

by Urs Gasser

Cover:

In Maroantsetra, Madagascar, young people participating in a Voices of Youth Maps workshop capture a report about their environment. The report was uploaded to an online map using global positioning system (GPS) coordinates. Voices of Youth Maps is an online platform that utilizes digital mapping and media to engage and empower young people.

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TAKING CHILDREN SERIOUSLY:

A call for the enhanced engagement of children in the discourse on digital rights

by **URS GASSER**

This year, we celebrate the 25th anniversaries of two very different, but equally significant, events: the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child by the United Nations General Assembly² and the invention of the World Wide Web by Sir Tim Berners-Lee.³

The Convention made an extraordinary promise to children by setting out their civil, political, economic, social, health and cultural rights,⁴ and millions of children around the world have since benefited. The release of the code for the Web to the public marked the inception of the Web as we know it, and today there are close to 3 billion users worldwide.⁵ While largely unrelated back in 1989, the Convention and the Web share important challenges and opportunities in 2014.

Both the Convention as a social innovation and the Web as a technical innovation have had transformative impacts and made the world a better place. The Convention has served as a blueprint for legislation to ensure that children have the opportunity to develop to their fullest potential, and a powerful advocacy tool for organizations that promote the health and well-being of all children. For its part, the Web has connected and helped to empower children around the world, offering them novel opportunities for self-expression, creativity, learning and civic engagement.⁶

At the same time, the promises of the two jubilaires equally remain works in progress. In the case of the Convention, disparities still persist in children's rights to survive and thrive.⁷ And the Web struggles to overcome digital divides and skill gaps,⁸ as large parts of the world's population remain unconnected,⁹ all while the promise of a free and open Web – a foundational aspect of any robust democracy – is coming under threat. At this critical junction, the Convention and the Web need a renewed and redoubled commitment by all of us that ultimately translates into globally coordinated action and collaboration among all relevant groups and stakeholders. Addressing the gaps, divides, disparities and risks that children face both online and offline is not only a moral imperative and responsibility, but also a social and even economic necessity.

The promise of and the need for a renewed commitment are not the only connection points between the Convention and the Web as we celebrate their 25th anniversaries. In 2014, they are more deeply interconnected than ever before. The Web – an information-sharing model built on top of the Internet – has become the main technology through which children with access, skills and agency exercise the information and communication rights protected under the Convention. Children use the Web to seek and engage with information and knowledge, to share important moments in their lives, and to build and maintain relationships across borders. They also use the Web for creative expression, to participate in their communities and, as they grow up, to contribute to the digital economy.¹⁰

As the Web becomes an important part of many children's lives, and as government and business leaders, civil society actors and other stakeholders engage in global conversations and take increasingly coordinated action to bring the millions of unconnected people onto the Web, we must take the 25th anniversary of the Convention as an opportunity to think carefully, but open-mindedly, about the interplay between children's rights and information and communication technology.¹¹ We need to create a vision and road map of how to use both the law and technology to overcome the gaps, divides and disparities in children's enjoyment of fundamental rights in the digital age. It is equally important that we include children in these discussions, just as young people around the world are currently contributing to the Web We Want initiative¹² as part of the Web's 25th anniversary.

It is encouraging to see that such conversations have begun taking place this year, most prominently at the recent Day of General Discussion of the Committee on the Rights of the Child.¹³ At this event, leading scholars and

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Children use a computer at a home in the south-eastern city of Rustavi, Georgia.



Students learn to play with a painting software on a computer at a school in Rangamati, Bangladesh.

practitioners shared research data about children’s digital experiences and discussed possible changes to the Convention to make it fit for the digitally connected environment in which many of our children are increasingly growing up.¹⁴ However, we can and must take the engagement of children a step further as we explore and shape their rights for a digital future. I propose a broader, more strategic and globally networked approach to the involvement of children and youth in the ongoing conversations about their digital rights.

The proposed approach seeks to engage young people across all relevant phases of contemporary debates on digital rights, including research, action and education, and evaluation. It leverages the Web, strengthens cross-generational collaborations and can build upon the lessons learned from youth-oriented initiatives around the world. Youth and Media¹⁵ at the Berkman Center for Internet & Society,¹⁶ for example, is a project that models how young people can inform global research efforts aimed at better understanding the digitally connected lives of children, and help interpret findings from such research. A recent report submitted by the Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre on the Day of General Discussion of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, reflecting the views of 148 children from 16 countries, shows how much insight children can contribute as we consider their digital rights.¹⁷ And recent work by the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention (CJCP) and UNICEF in South Africa, illustrates the importance of working with young people and peer groups as we seek to turn policies into successful on-the-ground interventions and experiences.¹⁸

As these and many other experiences in the field have taught us, an enhanced strategy for children’s engagement across all phases of the evolving digital rights discourse, at both national and international levels, requires proper training of all actors involved. Educators have to be trained so that they are not only effective teachers, but good mentors who engage creatively as well

“ I propose a broader, more strategic and globally networked approach to the involvement of children and youth in the ongoing conversations about their digital rights. ”

as responsibly with children, using the Web and other digital technologies. Adequate support and oversight structures need to ensure that the risks associated with the use of the Web in connected spaces of learning and engagement of children are properly addressed and the opportunities maximized. Serious work with children on the digital rights agenda also requires financial resources – for instance, to enable access and foster digital skill-building – and time commitments by caregivers, educators and, ultimately, policymakers. Above all, efforts require a strong collective commitment to take children and young people seriously as we seek to close digital gaps and overcome disparities, and to hear their views on matters that affect them, as the Convention demands.

Whether in the context of the Convention on the Rights of the Child or the World Wide Web, concerted and global efforts must engage children more extensively in conversations about their future. If we fail to do so, we run the risk during the next 25 years of formulating treaties, laws and policies on digital rights that are disconnected from the realities of an increasingly digitally connected generation of young people, and won't succeed in making the world a better place, especially for the most vulnerable and marginalized children.



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Minneh, 14, and friends read a text on a mobile phone in Cura village, 20 km from central Nairobi, Kenya.

NOTES

- ¹ <<http://hls.harvard.edu/faculty/directory/10298/Gasser>>.
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- ³ World Wide Web Foundation, <<http://webfoundation.org/about/sir-tim-berners-lee/>>.
- ⁴ See the Convention on the Rights of the Child, available at <www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CRC.aspx>.
- ⁵ International Telecommunication Union (ITU). Key 2005–2014 (Excel). <www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx> (see Excel spreadsheet; for example cells K39, U39).
- ⁶ Palfrey, John, and Urs Gasser, *Born Digital: Understanding the first generation of digital natives*, Basic Books, New York, 2008.
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- ⁹ International Telecommunication Union (ITU). Key 2005–2014 (Excel). <www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx> (see Excel spreadsheet; cell K40); and ITU, *Measuring the Information Society*, ITU, Geneva, 2013, pp. 127–158, <www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/publications/mis2013/MIS2013_without_Annex_4.pdf>.
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- ¹² <<https://webwewant.org>>.
- ¹³ For more information, see <www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/CRC/Pages/Discussion2014.aspx>.
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