

Web inventor: Closing digital divide must be top priority

12 June 2020, by Edith M. Lederer



In this March 12, 2019, file photo, English computer scientist Tim Berners-Lee, best known as the inventor of the World Wide Web, delivers a speech during an event at the CERN in Meyrin near Geneva, Switzerland, marking 30 years of World Wide Web. Berners-Lee said Thursday, June 11, 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates "the gross inequality" of a world where almost half the population is unable to connect, telling a high-level U.N. meeting "our number one focus must be to close the digital divide." (Fabrice Coffrini/Pool, Keystone via AP, File)

World Wide Web inventor Tim Berners-Lee said Thursday the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates "the gross inequality" of a world where almost half the population is unable to connect to the internet.

He told a high-level U.N. meeting "our number one focus must be to close the [digital divide](#)."

Some 3.5 billion people have missed out on the "lifeline" the internet has provided during the coronavirus crisis that has enabled work, education and social connections online, Berners-Lee said.

"This inequality is a barrier to wider equality, and we know it most affects those who are already marginalized—people in developing countries,

those on low incomes, and of course, women and girls, he said. "Men remain 21 percent more likely than women to be online, and 52 percent more likely in the least developing countries."

He spoke at the online launch of U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres' Roadmap for Digital Cooperation.

A first step is to develop new financial models to provide affordable connectivity to the Internet for everyone by 2030.

Tackling inequality requires raising the bar from basic access to ensuring that people have "meaningful connectivity" to the Internet "that must include data and devices to use the full power of it," Berners-Lee said.

When people do get online, they must also find that it is safe, participants said.

The [digital world](#) has many benefits, but also has been "gravely misused," Guterres said.

"Hate speech, discrimination and abuse are on the march in digital spaces," the U.N. chief said. "Misinformation campaigns put health and lives at risk. ... Life-threatening [cyber attacks](#) on hospital systems threaten to disrupt lifesaving care."

The Roadmap for Digital Cooperation aims "to connect, respect, and protect people in the digital age" by promoting [open data](#), open artificial intelligence and financing models and open source software, Guterres said.

It also calls for expanded training, data protection and privacy, and offers the U.N. as a platform for cooperation to ensure that artificial intelligence is trustworthy, respects [human rights](#) and promotes peace.

"Unless we address digital instability and inequality,

they will continue to exacerbate physical instability and inequality," Guterres said, warning that digital divides risk becoming "the new face of insecurity and conflict."

The World Wide Web Foundation, co-founded by Berners-Lee, helped develop the Roadmap. Last year it launched the "Contract for the Web," a global action plan for governments, companies and civil society to counter growing anti-democratic activity on the internet and keep knowledge freely available.

The contract has 1,300 endorsements and the foundation is developing ways for governments and companies to show how they're living up to commitments to achieve a "safe and empowering web, connecting the unconnected, respecting privacy (and) fighting misinformation," Berners-Lee said.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, internet usage has jumped 70 percent, the use of communication apps has grown by 300 percent and virtual collaboration tools by 600 percent. Some video streaming services have grown 20-fold, said Klaus Schwab, executive chairman of the World Economic Forum.

But he said only about half of the world has internet access. Of the 25 least connected countries, 21 are in Africa.

The World Economic Forum has worked with the industry partners, the International Telecommunication Union, the World Bank and GSM—which represents the interests of mobile operators worldwide—and others to develop plans for private-public collaboration on expanding digital connectivity.

"This has already been shared with 170 countries and is in active use," he said. "This fast track partnership is deeply encouraging."

Schwab called for "ambitious" action on digital access and investment in innovative financing models. He noted only 1% of funding from global development banks goes to digital infrastructure.

Redefining rules for cyberspace is just as important as building digital infrastructure, said Ajay Banga, incoming chair of the International Chamber of Commerce and the president and CEO of Mastercard.

"Now is the time to focus on protecting the entire digital ecosystem and a global population of users rather than discreet parts of the system," Banga said.

"We must rebuild better, more resilient, more inclusive," Vodafone CEO Nick Read told the forum. "The (U.N.) roadmap is crucial for this."

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