

Techno-equality calls for cheaper access not lavish entitlement

09 November 2016 - 06:09 AM

Once upon a time, people knew what human rights were. It was beautifully straightforward. Your rights were violated when someone did something to you or your property without your consent. Legislation was more about procedural and institutional protection than control. Simple "common law" principles were enforced by police and courts to protect civilians from personal and property rights violations. The idea that "ignorance of the law is no excuse" made sense because there was essentially one law: do no harm.

Gradually, rights morphed into their opposite, obligations, as reflected in Indra de Lanerolle's (Journalism and Media Programme, Wits university) view that internet access is a new human right. Increasingly, people were obliged not merely to refrain from violating rights, but to confer privileges. "Second generation" rights obliged X to give what was X's to Y. Since X had no idea who Y was or what to give Y, governments became coercive intermediaries. In a centenarian's lifetime, governments grew tenfold from about 5% of a free society's employment and wealth to roughly 50%.

Millions of controls replaced simple principles to the point where it was impossible for anyone to know their rights and obligations.

Generous people and governments gave indigent people "basic welfare" until compassion was hijacked by a "culture of entitlement", whereby everyone is entitled to everything at everyone else's expense. This is the context in which students, data users and others demand benefits at someone else's expense.

"Equality" meant equal freedom; it now means equal entitlement. At least in theory. There is no equality when huge sums are diverted to students instead of "the poor", or to data users instead of people without smartphones.

People who invested time, money and skill to invent information communications technology (ICT) and offered it in mutually volitional transactions to eager consumers are being villainised instead of canonised. Previously, information was acquired from teachers, parents, colleagues, newspapers, books or libraries. Rich people made "trunk calls" via manual "switchboards" on "party lines". The poor "posted" long-forgotten things called "letters".

Now, virtually everyone on the planet carries the world's information in their pockets and teleconferences with anyone anywhere. There are more active cellphones than people.

Yet Tbo Touch and Gareth Cliff pulled off an amazing coup by getting widespread support for their selfish business interests. They did so by popularising disinformation to the effect that data

charges relative to cost are excessive and by launching their spectacular #DataMustFall campaign. Project Isizwe runs an online petition demanding "free WiFi in public spaces". What people who demand "free" or "cheap" stuff have in common is the pretence the benefits they demand are not at the expense of society, and that society is not primarily poor people.

ICT is one of humanity's greatest accomplishments. Access to it is a fabulous privilege, not a right.

The best way to keep up with the technology explosion and extend cheap access to all communities is to reinstate traditional human rights, slash network licence fees, allow free competition, release wasted "spectrum", have the Treasury, not consumers, fund free internet for schools and encourage investment by discontinuing the nationalisation threat. In short, government is the problem, not the solution.

• *Louw is executive director of the Free Market Foundation.*