Annual Letter to the World Wide Web Foundation

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Tim Berners-Lee and Rosemary Leith

As the World Wide Web turns 32, Web inventor Sir Tim Berners-Lee and Web Foundation Co-founder Rosemary Leith reflect on its power to catalyse change, and celebrate the young people stepping up to tackle the world's urgent challenges.

Last year, we marked the web's birthday just one day after the World Health Organization declared the Covid-19 crisis a pandemic. In the 12 months since, the web — like so many of us — has been tested like never before. Today, as the web turns 32, it has proven to be a lifeline that allows us to adapt and carry on.

Now, as we repair and rebuild, we have an opportunity to reimagine our world and create something better. The web's power to catalyse change can and must help shape the world we want.

Across the globe, young people in particular are leading by example, using the web to create a better, fairer future. These young leaders see the web as a tool to fight for justice, expand opportunities, and find solutions to pressing problems.

This year, to mark the web's birthday, we are celebrating by shining a light on the work of nine young people whose work demonstrates this incredible potential. Their stories show how, in the hands of this generation, the web can help to overcome some of humanity's great challenges.

Arda Awais, Savena Surana, Avi Schiffmann, Chelsea Slater, Froilan Grate, Hera Hussain, Ian Mangenga
Peter Okwoko, Salvador Camacho Hernández

For example, in Uganda, Peter Okwoko used the web to gather the expertise needed to transform plastic waste into PPE urgently needed to treat Covid-19 patients.

From her home in the UK, Hera Hussain built the online network CHAYN, which has connected 380,000 women, nonbinary people, and other at-risk individuals in Pakistan, India, and beyond with resources to combat abuse and violence.

18-year-old Avi Schiffmann set out to improve Covid-19 information sharing and untie statistics from political interference and distortion. In doing so, he created a resource so accurate that epidemiologists themselves were relying on his information to develop their models.

The influence of these young people is felt across their communities and online networks. But today we're seeing just a fraction of what's possible. Because while we talk about a generation of 'digital natives', far too many young people remain excluded and unable to use the web to share their talents and ideas.

A third of young people have no internet access at all. Many more lack the data, devices, and reliable connection they need to make the most of the web. In fact, only the top third of under-25s have a home internet connection, according to UNICEF, leaving 2.2 billion young people without the stable access they need to learn online, which has helped so many others continue their education during the pandemic.

When young people do get online, too often they are confronted with abuse, misinformation, and other dangerous content, which threatens their participation and can force them from platforms altogether. This is especially true for those disproportionately targeted on the basis of their race, religion, sexuality, abilities, and gender.

The consequences of this exclusion affect everyone. How many brilliant young minds fall on the wrong side of the digital divide? How many voices of would-be leaders are being silenced by a toxic internet?

Every young person who can't connect represents a lost opportunity for new ideas and innovations that could serve humanity. Imagine how many more people like Hera, Peter, and Avi could tackle critical challenges if they could access a safe and empowering web.

As we did with electricity last century, we must recognise internet access as a basic right and we must work to make sure all young people can connect to a web that gives them the power to shape their world. Here's what we must do.

Invest to bring all young people online

Delivering internet access to all young people is well within our reach. Through funding for network infrastructure, subsidies, and support for community networks, we can get the web into the hands of every young person on earth.

To do so, leaders must rapidly scale investment to make sure everyone, everywhere is within reach of a meaningful internet connection, with the speeds, data, and devices they need to make the most of the web. An all-out push to connect the world will make sure that young people do not fall through the cracks.

We know what it would take. The Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI), an initiative of the Web Foundation, has calculated that $428 billion of additional investment over ten years would provide everyone a quality broadband connection. To put this in perspective, that amounts to the equivalent of just $116 per person for the 3.7 billion people who remain offline today.

By giving billions more people tools to learn, earn, and create, this down payment for future generations would deliver incredible returns in the form of economic growth and social empowerment. It's estimated that a 10% increase in the number of people online translates to a 2% lift in an economy's GDP, and new analysis finds that achieving universal broadband in the developing world by 2030 would deliver around $8.7 trillion in direct economic benefits. We can't afford not to do it.

Make technology empowering by design

While we work to get all young people connected, we must also make sure technology is helpful, not harmful; inclusive, not exclusive.

How products and services are designed helps determine whether or not young people can use them safely and effectively. But too often, the development and design of tech fails to make users' rights and wellbeing a top priority.

Tech companies must understand the unique experiences and needs of young people and work with them to co-create products and services that respect their rights. And governments need to pass effective laws that govern technology and hold companies to account for creating responsible products and services.

To help shape more responsible technology, the Web Foundation is establishing a Tech Policy Design Lab that will start by tackling online gender-based violence and abuse against women, in particular young women. In this pilot programme we are bringing together tech companies and women's rights groups to shape policy and product solutions to curb online harassment, so that all young women can use the web without fear of abuse and violence.

From here the Lab will continue to develop solutions to some of the hardest tech problems of our times as we work to make real the vision for a better online world, as set out in the Contract for the Web.

The young leaders we're celebrating today are the web's greatest strength and the reason we believe that, despite its challenges, the web is overwhelmingly a force for good. From tackling environmental challenges to ensuring that issues of identity and digital privacy are considered at the inception of product design, their work illustrates just a few of the ways that young people are stepping up to tackle the challenges we face.

It is time to commit to delivering the web we want for the world we want — for this generation of young people and for those yet to come. We hope you'll join us.

Rosemary Leith and Tim Berners-Lee
Co-founders World Wide Web Foundation