



SOUTHERN VOICE



Tech for Democracy



DEMOCRATIZING THE DIGITAL SPACE

Harnessing Technology to Amplify
Participation in Governance
Processes in the Global South





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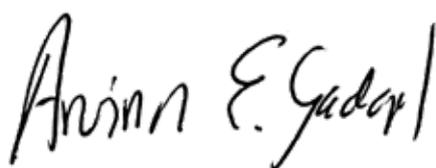
Foreword

This report explores how the digital world has impacted the Global South, putting the rights of users and their participation in governance processes at the centre of the conversation. Digital platforms are increasingly playing a key role in the political participation of citizens in Global South countries.

A particularly notable example of a politically influential digital platform is Twitter. This relatively young 16-year-old company has been at the forefront of ushering in the social media age. From December 2010 onwards, when people took to the streets in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria and Bahrain, it provided an avenue for those living under autocratic regimes to circumvent state-media operated media channels. It helped them to connect, rise and find a voice like never before.

The rapid increase of users on social media platforms has shifted political debates and communication channels between citizens and states. While a decade ago governments may have tried to connect to citizens through their own platforms, now, many do so through social media. But what has been created? A deepening or widening of democracy? Or maybe just an illusion of democracy? States have quickly learnt how to monitor, influence and even weaponize digital platforms. As the world fell into an increased digital reliance with the onset of COVID-19 in 2020, it became clear that while digitalization can connect people, expand businesses and provide services to those geographically out of reach, it can also polarise communities, spread misinformation and incite violence. The manipulation of digital technologies for various political motivations is continually reinforcing the lesson that innovation in itself has no value; its value comes instead from how people use it.

We can't roll back time or innovation, but we can work towards a world where it works for democracy and human rights, and not against them. Doing so requires focusing on the impacts of technology, their adoption, and international and national regulatory frameworks, while ensuring the equitable representation of the people and interests of the Global South.



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Democratizing the Digital Space:

Harnessing Technology to Amplify Participation in Governance Processes in the Global South

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Executive Summary

This background paper explores the intersection of digitalization and democracy in the Global South. It illustrates the impact this interaction has had on people's lives and elevates these distinct perspectives and lessons to a global conversation. The use of technology in the Global South has the potential to transform the nature of the state for the better by streamlining governance administration and operations, facilitating democratization, ensuring government accountability and promoting transparency. However, to reap the benefits of digitalization it is essential to address the lack of knowledge and capacity along with inadequate regulatory frameworks. Rapidly changing technologies from social media to digital infrastructure have had wide-ranging and understudied. Harnessing the potential of technology to support democracy and human rights instead of working against them is one of the key challenges the world now faces. However, as long as sizable discrepancies in access, usage and regulation across the globe continue to exist, this process will be incomplete. In this context, it is important to recognize that digitalization is not a policy goal in itself, but rather a process to improve democracy, governance and citizen engagement. Harnessing the power of digital technologies to amplify meaningful participation is not only linked to life online, but also contributes to citizen engagement offline. Apart from bettering inclusion, access, infrastructure and digital architecture, states and businesses need to recognize the right of citizens, especially those from marginalized communities, to feel safe online and to be represented in decision-making.

Overview

The document is divided into five inter-related themes with a key takeaway from each:

1) New media and governance

Explores the emerging new media sphere, including social media platforms as well as digital news media outlets and their impact on governance and democracy in the Global South

These technologies provide an opportunity for increased engagement and avenues for better governance and democratic deepening in the Global South. However, their implementation in countries with institutional weaknesses and democratic deficits also has the potential to legitimize majoritarianism through the mobilization of social media

2) **State capacity, decentralization and citizen engagement**

Explores state capacity and decentralization through digital technologies and problematizes the narrative of digital governance as a one-stop solution for weak states

The increasing presence of digital governance infrastructure at the local level has seen the erosion of traditional local institutions of the state. This has increased the inaccessibility of the state to citizens and brought with it the danger of exclusion for already marginalized populations.

3) **Non-state governance**

Explores the role played by non-state actors in the digital governance process

Open and publicly accessible data frameworks allow for non-state governance by enabling checks and balances against possible corruption, malpractice and ill-informed decision-making.

4) **Architecture of technologies of governance**

Explores the architecture of governance technologies, the design and construction of the technologies, and their social, legal and normative implications

Where states are simultaneously building and outsourcing their digital infrastructure, an exploration of the impact of digital architecture is critically needed. A discussion on new technologies and their role in shaping digital governance would allow for the creation of more equitable, inclusive and accountable policy frameworks.

5) **Regulating governance of the digital: The existing paradigms**

Explores existing regulatory frameworks, with a specific focus on extractive relations between the Global North and the South

International cooperation needs to create and strengthen inclusive discussions surrounding the Internet and digital governance. A multi-stakeholder approach is required to advance discussions on how to best regulate the Internet with indigenous models, without infringing on democratic rights and innovation.

Recommendations

Building on the issues and opportunities identified in this document, we propose the following

1) **National governments**

- » Conduct long-term evaluations of adopted technologies, especially in the context of their social, environmental and political implications. This includes evaluating their design as well as usage and post-usage periods.
- » Establish a regime for technology replacement that is both environmentally and financially sustainable.
- » Engage with civil society groups and researchers to design policy on technology usage in governance that originates from a rights-based framework.
- » Develop open-data frameworks that prioritize public access to government data without compromising the privacy of citizens and users.
- » Promote partnerships with private players to ensure technological inclusion and accessibility for marginalized groups.

- » Strengthen recognition that technology cannot replace state capacity but is only a tool to strengthen it. Local institutions are still important pillars of citizen engagement with the state, and technological centralization cannot solve issues related to accountability and everyday state-citizen interactions.

2) Private sector

- » Ensure strong content regulation policies in countries of the Global South, at par with those deployed in the North, aimed at reducing online hate, harassment and radicalization. Instituting strong protection for marginalized populations.
- » Provide accessible and inclusive digital technologies and infrastructure and assist Less Development Countries in onboarding their populations.
- » End extractive data usage policies in countries with weak regulation capacity and develop equitable and sustainable data use and privacy policies at par with those in the Global North.
- » Adhere to a rights-based framework when dealing with user information, tech development and private innovation.
- » Make private data available for publicly beneficial research without compromising user rights.

3) International actors

- » Amplify the engagement of regional organizations and multilateral partnerships to help manage complex challenges related to tech regulation, digital governance and innovation, especially in areas where states alone cannot do this.
- » Increase regulatory capacity and information for Global South countries through stakeholder discussion between civil society, government and the private sector, as well as funding research in the Global South.
- » Create a Global South platform to discuss and coordinate governance technologies
- » Actively involve perspectives from the Global South in any future international technology frameworks and agendas by engaging with governments, civil society and researchers.
- » Facilitate and advocate for the transfer of technology and capacity from countries in the Global North to the Global South to ensure access and expertise across the globe.

4) Researchers

- » Conduct further research on the social, technological, and economic impacts of technological innovation in the Global South and the complex realities of social vulnerability being occluded by these developments.
- » Develop indigenous models or frameworks to inform understanding of digital governance in the Global South.
- » Increase research on human-computer interactions, especially around Artificial Intelligence (AI) to identify and eliminate biases and create representative, non-problematic datasets in the Global South.



Introduction

In the Global South, technological innovations have been increasingly leveraged to provide improved avenues of service delivery and to create sites of governance that extend beyond physical infrastructures.¹ The digitalization of governance processes has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, as more countries in the Global South turned to the Internet as physical political processes were closed down due to quarantine measures. While the greater use of technology has its advantages, it has also raised serious concerns. These include both the additional threat of exclusion of the most marginalized populations due to their lack of Internet access as well as increasing state control and monitoring through the digital infrastructure. The significance of these concerns necessitates urgent civil society and academic interventions in the field of digital governance, as well as policy engagements by national governments, the private sector and international institutions.

However, our knowledge regarding these developments is very limited besides a few localized studies focusing either on everyday citizen-state interactions through emerging governance technologies, or social media driven misinformation, with a few studies on government adoption of digital and technological infrastructure (Solhjell, 2020; Rao & Nair, 2019; Masiero, 2017). Research examining the social, political and economic impacts of technological innovation in the Global South and the complex realities of social vulnerability this induces thus remains very thin (Khan, Jhanjhi, Humayun & Ahmad, 2020; Hamid, Jhanjhi & Humayun, 2020; Kumar, Sambhav & Vinod, 2018; Kumar, & Joshi, 2017; Holzer & Manoharan, 2016). There also exists a lack of critical understanding related to how increasing digitalization affects everyday interactions between the state and the citizenry. Even when such literature exists, there continues to be a lack of indigenous models or frameworks from the Global South to understand digital governance, and a near absence of studies on decentralized and socially driven forms of digital governance practices.

There is also insufficient literature on citizen-to-citizen engagement in the absence of the state's capacity or presence. This is concerning, because a one-sided focus on the state fosters an inability to appreciate the Internet as a forum for citizen engagement and activism. In addition, the absence of a Global South network or platform studying digital governance has placed limitations on the ability to create unique academic and policy interventions, and instead has furthered a Western-centric notion of governance in the digital space (Kwet, 2019).

To attempt to address these challenges and foster new conversations around digital governance, the Centre for Policy Research (CPR) in association with Southern Voice and the United Nations Development Program Oslo Governance Centre (UNDP) hosted two international roundtables with experts focusing on digital governance in the Global South.

This document is a compilation of insights both from the roundtable discussions, which took place on 18 October 2021, and from existing literature around digital governance.

¹ For the purpose of this document, we define the Global South largely along the lines of the Brandt Commission report (1983) titled "North South: A programme for survival; report of the Independent Commission on International Development Issues," and its 2001 updated version by James Quilligan titled "The Brandt Equation".

New media and governance

New media, in the context of this brief, refers to social media and digital media platforms. Social media platforms refer to a collection of popular social networking sites such as Twitter, Facebook, Weibo or Instagram. They act as forums for social interactions, functioning through networks of individual users, including citizens, government departments and units, businesses, civil society organizations and non-citizens, amongst others. Digital media includes digital news media outlets that use the Internet as a means of reporting, outreach or platforming, and which are not bound by traditional systems or regulations of news media engagement (Bruns, Enli, Skogerbø, Olof & Christensen, 2016).

Social media and digital media platforms have come to function as important mechanisms of access to information and freedom of expression. They also serve as avenues for governance accountability, grievance redressal and policy feedback. Further, they empower users to interact with the state away from the traditional and often hierarchical spaces of the physical state infrastructure. Previous physical interactions were constrained by time and capital costs, both social and economic, and placed access restrictions on citizens (Kumar, Kumar, & Sambhav, 2018).

In the Global South, new media organizations have in many ways deepened democracy by providing citizens access to the discursive and informational space previously occupied by a smaller civil society and traditional media. Citizens can now engage with the state as direct users, by tagging state agencies and publicising their interactions through their profiles on social media, to demand better terms of engagement and thereby increase accountability.

These platforms have been serving as a source of information for citizens' decision-making, particularly at the point of the COVID-19 outbreak when they proved to become a major source of information on the virus. Similarly, digital media outlets act as public spheres and mediators between citizens and governments, as they are largely uninhibited by regulations or geographic and financial limitations. The increasing influence of digital media news outlets is illustrated in Kenya, where the 2020 digital news report published by the Reuters Institute indicated that online media outlets have the highest levels of reader trust (Newman, Fletcher, Schulz, Andi & Kleis, 2020). Similarly, in South Africa and Tunisia, digital news media organizations have built up their popularity through intensive investigative journalism, which has uncovered and highlighted cases of corruption and misgovernance in the country (Price & Harbisher, 2021).

The greater presence of new media in governance and the public sphere has initiated social and economic transformations and strengthened accountability. However, the growing distrust of traditional media in the Global South, and the platforming of more diverse opinions, has led to an increase in misinformation and heightened polarization (Newman et al, 2020). While some reports have documented a decline in trust in information from social media in Bangladesh, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa, the impact of misinformation in the Global South continues to be harmful (Ali, Hassan, Hossain & Haque, 2020; Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019). In India, a rise in lynchings and hate crimes since 2017 has been linked to misinformation disseminated through Facebook and WhatsApp (Banaji, & Bhat 2019). Viral and often fake videos of alleged cases of blasphemy in Pakistan, circulated through social media, have fuelled anti-minority sentiments and violence (Cheema, Chacko & Gul, 2019).

The mediatization of everyday life in the Global South through technology also has socio-cultural implications for democratic institutions.² Here, the institutionalization of popular sovereignty can be

² For the purpose of this document, we will be using Hjarvard's (2008) definition of mediatization as "a social process whereby the society is saturated and inundated by the media to the extent that the media cannot longer be thought of as separated from other institutions within the society".

easily transplanted through social media instead of through the deepening of governance and democracy locally.³ The institutional weakness of democracies in the Global South coupled with the erosion of global discourses around governance and development in favour of identity politics has the potential to legitimize majoritarianism through the mobilization of social media. Importantly, social media can convey the illusion of democracy, the perceived connection to a person or institution, but this is really not an alternative for structured governance spaces (Centre for Poverty Analysis [CEPA], 2021).

In this context, social media's role in influencing extreme political views is unsettling. This raises the dilemma of how the state can strengthen cyber security while maintaining the right of citizens to online freedom and anonymity, which is a key determinant is citizen's trust. Overall, the impact of new media in the Global South is mixed. While there is cause for optimism in the platforming of diverse opinions and the lower transaction costs of democratic mobilization, concerns around fake news, majoritarianism and hate speech continue to exist.



3 At its very fundamental, popular sovereignty is the principle that the authority of a state and its government are created and sustained by the consent of its people, through elected representatives. This popular consent is the source of all power. See Chatterjee (2020) for more information.

State Capacity, decentralization and citizen engagement

Many observers had predicted that the Internet boom at the turn of the 21st Century would lead to an eventual weakening of the state (Shirky, 2008; Owen, 2015). However, over the past few years, rather than state power waning, in many cases it has grown stronger through the use of digital technology.

State power has been enhanced by control over citizens' data on the one hand and by the reduction in the transaction costs associated with maintaining a sizable digital state apparatus on the other. From surveillance to welfare provision, the rise of digital governance models has allowed for the creation of a virtually omnipresent state. This phenomenon can be analysed from two perspectives.

One centres on an understanding of the everyday citizen-state interaction in a digital context with regards to the state's welfare schemes, focusing on how citizens both interact with the state and understand governance through unique digital agents, platforms and services (Rao & Nair, 2019; Masiero, 2017; Gelb, Mukherjee & Navis, 2018).

The second seeks to understand the changing nature of the state itself. The focus here is around the centralization or decentralization of the state, marked by both direct citizen engagement and service delivery, and the reduction in the importance of traditional local institutions and sites of governance.

The danger associated with of the increasing erosion of local state institutions in favour of a digital governance infrastructure also brings with it the danger of exclusion for already marginalized populations (Kapur, 2021). This danger is greatest for people who have no access to digital infrastructure and are thus excluded from the digital state, for instance in the form of welfare exclusion. The case of Aadhar in India, which developed the world's largest biometric database, illustrates the dual-natured implications of digital governance (Nair, 2018). The Aadhar government imagined a one-stop digital unique ID system to integrate social programmes and user identities to help the Indian government transfer welfare payments to user accounts directly, integrate multiple bank accounts using a single ID, match the provision of rations to families, and, during the COVID-19 pandemic, provide the option to link unique IDs to vaccinations and testing.⁴ This in turn has allowed for reduced leakages by way of governmental corruption and it has incentivized workers entering the formal economy, increased state welfare capacity and reduced transaction costs.

However, the architectural set-up of the system, where funds and welfare schemes are centralized, has meant that avenues of interaction with the state, already limited for marginalized populations, have become scarcer. There are also various issues with the programmatic set-up of the system itself. The provision of welfare services is now encoded through exclusions, which are arrived at based on a universal threshold for the poverty line, instead of through an inclusive set-up open to all users in need. What this means is that, if you earn even slightly more than the poverty line, you will be deemed ineligible for poverty alleviation schemes by a process of automated exclusion. In addition to these challenges, there have been problems around implementation, and in particular Aadhar has been challenged in the courts due to its data collection procedures, which were said to violate privacy norms, and issues with data leakages (Banerjee & Sharma 2019; Whittaker, 2019).

Centralisation of welfare schemes through digital technologies, in this context, not only has the potential to digitally entrench the inaccessibility of the state, but also to remove incentives for its localisation, and in turn, limit its capacity. Centralisation also risks reducing the state's direct accountability, and local capacity to reform (Masiero, 2021).

4 See <https://www.cowin.gov.in/faq> for more information.

The problem of the exclusion of marginalized populations was also demonstrated in the North-West Province of South Africa, one of the poorer regions in the country, during the COVID-19 pandemic, where various attempts were made to use digital technologies to dispense state services and welfare schemes owing to lockdown restrictions (Özler, 2007). These initiatives led to the exclusion of a number of low-income families, particularly those headed by women, many of whom did not have smartphones and had to rely on a male relative to access any digitally-based service (Dutschke, 2021). Thus, while digital governance can be used as an important tool in the Global South, its use as an alternative to institutions of governance and local systems has the potential to cloak the shortcomings of state functions within the digital framework (Morris, Coles-Kemp & Jones, 2020).

This is not to say that the introduction of digital technologies in citizen-state engagement has yielded only negative results. Indeed, the case of some African countries, where emerging technologies have allowed for better citizen-state interaction through a variety of means, shows their potential. In Uganda, *Ask Your Government Uganda*, a platform built to help members of the public get the information they want from 106 public agencies, has streamlined information and service delivery (Bainomugisha, n.d.). To resolve issues around mobility and ensure the delivery of emergency services, Rwanda has used drones to deliver products, including medicines and blood donations, to rural hospitals (Bainomugisha, n.d.). In South America, Paraguay is promoting greater access to public information. As part of the support provided by international initiatives such as Open Government, the Paraguayan parliament approved in 2015 Law No. 5282, "Free citizen access to public information and government transparency" (Vazquez Aranda, n.d.).

Non-state governance

In their work on open urban governance in an information age, Meijer, Lips and Chen (2019) refer to the creation of emergent "ad hoc" organizations of a variety of individual, organizational and institutional actors using social media and digital platforms during major crises (Meijer, Lips & Chen, 2019). An early example of this ad-hoc formation was seen during the 2014 Ebola outbreak in Africa, where citizen journalists in South Africa and Zimbabwe provided key pieces of information not covered by traditional media outlets (Mano & Milton, 2016). This phenomenon was also witnessed in India, over two separate lockdowns from March 2020 to June 2021, as citizens mobilized resources and acted as governance mediators. They rallied to connect other citizens to hospitals, to mobilize private resources, to use open access government data to make public interventions, and to accumulate and distribute resources (Bhargava, 2021). These two cases are examples of ways in which non-state governance can be carried out and facilitated through digital media. In understanding digital governance, especially in the Global South, it is thus important to acknowledge the role played by non-state actors, including citizens, NGOs, civil society organizations and businesses, in service provision, resource mobilization and community governance.

The role of data in making these interventions must be underscored. Ad-hoc crisis response formations by non-state actors are largely possible due to open-data frameworks wherein information is made public and citizen participation in using the data is incentivized. In both the cases outlined above, data played an important part in government and citizen response. Daily updates from the state on the availability of hospital beds, vaccination sites and ration availability allowed non-state actors like civil society organizations, businesses, media and citizen alliances to coordinate resource distribution and healthcare provision in the absence of state capacity. Where the state did not have a coherent centralized dataset, citizens created trackers, websites and programmes to bring data together. Apart from crisis response, open-data frameworks also allow for non-state governance by enabling checks and balances against possible corruption, malpractice and ill-informed decision-making. In this way, non-state governance can ensure better governance delivery from the state. In the context of the Global South, this does not mean that social relations and governmental welfare should be more datafied, but rather that data pertaining to

governance should be made more accessible. Open-data organizations like Iniciativa Latinoamericana por los Datos Abiertos (ILDA) in Uruguay and Africa Freedom of Information Centre (AFIC) work to achieve the delicate balance between ensuring government accountability through open-data campaigns to counter data opaqueness and ensuring the right to privacy and citizen protection (Scrollini, 2021).

Beyond open data, civil society organizations have also played an important role in the facilitation of critical technological infrastructure and in support to marginalized populations in the Global South. The Empowering Communities Through ICT programme led by Africa ICT Right in Ghana has been an important provider of digital technologies to people in the country who could not afford them. Similarly, the NextGen Girls in Technology programme led by The Shilpa Sayura Foundation in Sri Lanka has helped expand girls' and women's participation in emerging technology by training thousands of girls and teachers on in-demand industry skills.



Architecture of technologies of governance

Digital technologies can serve as a means to empower citizens to engage with the state and hold it accountable, but also as an instrument through which the state can strengthen its own power and control over the citizenry. The architecture of governance technologies here refers to the design and construction of the technologies and their social, legal and normative implications.

The penetration of digital technologies in the Global South has occurred without well-functioning regulatory monitoring mechanisms or broader public policy frameworks (Nagelhus, 2018). Moreover, with the rapid changes brought about by Artificial Intelligence (AI), wherein key decisions can be automated without any algorithmic or scope-related oversight, the ethical and regulatory challenges to long-term strategic growth that are both responsible and beneficial are increasing.

This has led to a growing call for the factors that influence algorithmic capabilities and decisions to be publicized to ensure algorithmic transparency (Berendt & Preibusch, 2012; Berendt & Preibusch, 2014). In the Global North, there has recently been a recognition of inbuilt algorithmic discrimination in machine learning programs wherein studies have found inbuilt racism in decision-making systems for American healthcare providers and policing (Ledford, 2019; Heaven, 2020). With the uptake of AI in governance in countries of the Global South, these challenges remain under-researched and under-analysed. Some countries are developing principles and strategies for their use of AI. Brazil has adopted six objectives as part of its AI strategy. These include: develop ethical principles that guide responsible use of AI; remove barriers to innovation; improve collaboration between government, the private sector and researchers; develop AI skills; promote investment in technologies; and advance Brazilian tech overseas. Similarly, in India, the government has identified five sectors for AI innovation — healthcare, agriculture, education, smart cities and smart mobility (NITI Aayog, 2018). It remains to be seen whether these broad promises and objectives can be translated into successful systems and processes. However, there are growing concerns about the impact of machine learning on job displacement. Given that most machine learning happens through datasets, the significant digital divides in terms of access (between rural and urban areas, genders, religions, classes) makes the process of converting existing data to equitable and responsible AI models difficult.

The digital state in many countries operates through a variety of platforms, applications, accounts and software. While there have been influential studies mapping the governance state, there is scant literature on the architecture of the digital state apparatus. Less studied as well is its impact not only on service delivery, but also on broader social and institutional paradigms.

The way state agencies construct and design applications and use a variety of other software and services has had a significant impact on the understanding of the state, as well as on democratic norms (Sassen, 2000). On the one hand, digital governance is capable of boosting efficiency and deepening democracy and governance. On the other, it has the potential to promote the weakening of democratic norms and institutions, and, more alarmingly, infringe on citizen rights to privacy and freedoms by linking welfare benefits to enrolment. This is not to diminish the role of technology in processes of democratization and accountability. Indeed, the digital landscape can enable freedom of expression and public participation in decision-making. It can be a leveller where access to information can bypass elite groups who have monopolized information (government budgets, contracts, central data). Access to information increases trust, thereby pressuring governments to respond effectively to their constituencies' demands, to uphold regulations and to have two-way communication with citizens. However, much as in the non-digital world, these technologies require a dialogue between citizens and power holders around principles and the acceptable limits to rights and freedoms in exchange for technology.

In the case of the Global South, where states are simultaneously building and outsourcing their digital infrastructure, a similar exploration of the impact of digital architecture is much needed (Kwet, 2019). Such a discussion on new technologies and their role in shaping digital governance would allow for the creation of more equitable and specific policy frameworks. This would help to inform policy around technology transfer and replacement in the Global South, where digital architecture is being rapidly set up without sufficiently evaluating its impact on the environment or considering future ideas for technology replacement.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has heightened the importance of this conversation around the digitising state and its architecture. While concerns around equitable access to technology have been long-standing, the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 crisis in terms of access to education, health and governance services have led to a visceral demonstration of the digital divide in the Global South. On the one hand, technology is driving a new era in which citizens are able to participate in democratic and governance processes in new and engaging ways. On the other hand, this development is highly skewed in favour of metropolitan areas. Marginalized communities, both economically and geographically, face a number of obstacles related to accessibility, inclusion and participation in the digital democratic space. According to a 2021 report by the International Telecommunication Union, 37% of the world's population continues to be offline. This includes 67% of Africa and approximately 2 billion people in the Asia-Pacific. This inequality of access is especially marked in the Least Developed Countries (LDCs), where 73% of the population is offline. Overall, four-fifths of the world's offline population are in Africa and the Asia-Pacific (ITU, 2017; 2021). Already disadvantaged and marginalized groups are over-represented in the offline population, which is disproportionately female, rural, poor, older and/or with limited education and low literacy. The United Nations notes that factors such as location, income, age, sex, ethnicity and disability are significant predictors of access to ICTs and the Internet (United Nations, [UN] 2021). As digital governance and technological upscaling in the Global South moves forward, it is important to take note of these vulnerable sections of the population.

Beyond welfare, technologies of governance in various states of the Global South are also being used to undermine democratic norms related to surveillance and transparency—already under threat given the global democratic backsliding (V Dem Institute, 2021). Herein, the alleged use of spyware technologies like Pegasus (Srivastava & Agarwal, 2021), digital monitoring of opposition parties (Human Rights Watch, 2018) and alleged surveillance of political activists in Indonesia (Privacy International, 2019) are all examples of the mounting threat to democracy.

Furthermore, apart from the infrastructure and architecture of this technology, the opacity and lack of public discussion around the design, composition and code of these technologies, in the way that would take place around legislation, is creating dangerous circumstances where the state can evade accountability.

Governing the digital: Regulation and governance paradigms

Approximately 36 of the largest 50 Internet companies according to market capitalization and revenue are based in the US and Europe, with the other 14 being based in China, Japan and South Korea. With the move towards digitalization and the enthusiastic adoption of digital technologies amongst young people, the countries of the Global South are projected to account for a majority of Internet users over the next few years (Arora, 2019). India already has the largest population of WhatsApp users worldwide. Kwet (2019) and Singh (2017) amongst others have pointed out the current hegemonic control of large-scale

Internet institutions, from businesses to foundations, by countries in the Global North, and specifically the United States.

This phenomenon is visible not only in the geographical concentration of these institutions, but also in the discourse around regulation. Thus, even though the Global South continues to have some of the largest markets and some of the biggest problems due to digital platforms, conversations around models of regulation continue to be dominated by those in the Global North. In his work on the geopolitics of Internet regulation, Singh has argued that countries of the Global South must build lasting and deep alliances that would allow them to take the lead in deciding the global digital governance framework for the next few decades (Singh, 2017). This will be imperative so as to not repeat the mistakes of the trade, investment and intellectual property regimes, which were written largely by the countries of the North, and thus are heavily inclined in their favour (Singh, 2017). In a similar vein, using a case study of South Africa, Kwet has shown how, in the absence of any citizen-oriented frameworks or regulations, corporations from the Global North have engaged in extractive and economic activities by using Big Data from the Global South (Kwet, 2019). Any global regulatory framework around data protection and privacy thus needs to take into account these issues and lead efforts to ensure an increase in the regulatory capacity and information inputs for Global South countries.

Governments also urgently need to adjust their definitions of social media organizations to facilitate proper digital regulation. The existing framework that recognizes platforms as intermediaries, a product of early attempts by the US Congress to regulate online content, does not adequately address current challenges (Gillespie, 2018). Unlike the status of intermediaries, which removes the liability of platforms for user content, newer laws have imagined these organizations as gatekeepers, or sought to add conditions to their intermediary status to force better moderation (Kathuria, 2021). This shift has largely been prompted by the inability or failure of these platforms to self-moderate and to remove violent, hateful or false content. This shortcoming has been most visible in the Global South, where various reports have documented the wide gap that exists in content moderation between the Global South and Global North (Arjomand, 2021). The impact of such moderative oversight in the Global South can directly be linked to harmful events such as the anti-Muslim riots in India or the violence in Ethiopia (Purnell & Horwitz, 2021; Mackintosh, 2021).

Overall, the dearth of research around various aspects of the digital arena in the Global South contributes to a lack of the knowledge capacity that is required to create regulatory frameworks both internally and externally. Over the past few years, the countries of the Global South have faced challenges related not only to digital governance, but also to the governance of the digital. Herein, there is a need for a broader debate on the best way forward. This future must include international cooperation to create and strengthen global regimes surrounding the Internet and digital governance, as well as multi-stakeholder discussions on how best to regulate the Internet and its diverse components without infringing on democratic rights or hindering innovation. There is a danger also in pursuing a regulatory set-up without concern for freedoms and the institutionalization of rights for the sake of an alternative approach. India's new social media rules, for instance, have been criticized by various civil society and rights organizations as being undemocratic and arbitrary for mandating bureaucratic bodies with content oversight (The Hindu, 2021).

Conclusion

Beyond states and governments, civil society, the private sector and citizens can play an important role in harnessing technology. Various organizations in the Global South have already helped in setting national and local agendas around tech usage and its linkages to democracy. Going forward, it is important to not only recognize their roles as mediators in the push to ensure responsible tech usage, but also to actively empower these groups in agenda setting and policy making.

There is a need for more localized research and studies in the countries of the Global South to understand how technology is impacting state-citizen relationships and democratic norms, as well as ways in which to regulate these technologies responsibly. Over the next few years, as more and more users from the South join in, and as the state becomes more digitalized, it is imperative that the Global South is recognized and treated as an equal and important stakeholder.

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