

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2021-2022

Digital futures for a post-pandemic world



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC)
AND SWEDISH INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION AGENCY (SIDA)

Global Information Society Watch 2021-2022

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Preface

Valeria Betancourt (APC)

Several of the fundamental notions we took for granted as civil society activists have been transformed by the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the most profound, for me, is our sense of time. It has changed substantially, and we now live oscillating between the dizzying sense of it passing rapidly and having to contend with the feeling that it has been suspended. What impact does this have on the pace of the social changes that we, as civil society organisations and networks, want to be part of?

The pandemic, which hit us in different ways in both the online and offline spheres, has also brought us face to face with the tensions between the connected and the unconnected, the individual and the collective, between the contingent and the predictable, between the rigid and the flexible, between the continuous and the conjunctural, the ephemeral and the permanent, and between the local and the global.

The impacts of digitalisation on the dynamics of our contexts have become more palpable, as well as the ways those impacts relate to old and emerging structural challenges. The weight of physical boundaries and awareness of the limits of the physical space we inhabit were heightened. We were connected in a digital space but were demobilised and disconnected on other levels, a tension tearing at the social tissue that we took for granted.

The relationship between the local and the global, which has historically driven and guided the work of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC), has taken on even greater significance. But if that is the case, what does it mean for our advocacy at both local and global levels? What does this mean for us as a network, as an actor seeking to produce substantial transformations at all levels? Did other forms of collaboration and connection emerge in the peripheries during the pandemic?

These changes have been exacerbated by current overlapping global crises: setbacks in democratic values; the weakening of democratic institutions; the multiplication of anti-rights forces; the rise of authoritarianism; the flourishing of stigmatising narratives; the deterioration of the role of states in the provision of public services; the deprioritisation of sustainable development objectives; and, in general, the shrinking of the civic space.

What does this all imply for strengthening our advocacy in the midst of an intensified sense of fragility and volatility when, paradoxically, everything we do and don't do will have a decisive bearing on the future? What does this mean in terms of collective action, of activism, of the movements we work with and are part of and the way in which we set goals?

There are no simple answers to these questions.

The pandemic made inequality, discrimination, exclusion and structural inequity more palpable, and rather than stagnating in indignation, it reactivated a sense of rebellion and contestation. The strength and sharpness with which we connect social justice, gender justice, environmental justice, economic justice and racial justice with the potentials and limitations of digital technologies is undeniable. Using this intersectional lens, we need to document and build our own narratives about the challenges that we face related to the impacts of the pandemic and reflect on how our advocacy priorities as well as the ways we do advocacy are changing and keep being modified and adjusted.

At APC we have strengthened capacity to design and implement collective and contextual community responses to the multiple challenges and crises that we face, while having a greater awareness of the kind of global responses that should be prioritised, based on shared but differentiated responsibilities.

We are in a tremendously complex historical moment in which, possibly, the most important anchor of meaning continues to

be, for our network and organisation, and for social movements, the commitment to a common horizon of dignity and justice – a horizon in which digital technologies and an open, decentralised, free internet allow us to sustain other ways of life that are compatible with the collective well-being and well-being of our planet.

GISWatch 2021-2022 focuses on responses to some of the fundamental questions brought by the pandemic to inform civil society's advocacy around digital technology issues and their potential to shape future horizons. As illustrated on our cover, a sustained struggle will be necessary in the years ahead, but not only in the public spaces. A nuanced approach to advocacy will be essential to open multiple ways to bring about positive change.

We hope that this edition ignites renewed energy to reshape the sense of “us” going forward towards reinventing the social contract, recognising and embracing our diversity, our multi-referential identities, our complementarities; and contributes to finding effective ways to think and act beyond all the crises and contingencies that surround us at the moment as actors of change in the digital environment.

DIGITAL FUTURES FOR A POST-PANDEMIC WORLD

Through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic, this edition of Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) highlights the different and complex ways in which democracy and human rights are at risk across the globe, and illustrates how fundamental meaningful internet access is to sustainable development.

It includes a series of thematic reports, dealing with, among others, emerging issues in advocacy for access, platformisation, tech colonisation and the dominance of the private sector, internet regulation and governance, privacy and data, new trends in funding internet advocacy, and building a post-pandemic feminist agenda. Alongside these, 36 country and regional reports, the majority from the global South, all offer some indication of how we can begin mapping a shifted terrain.

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