Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) 2021-2022 Report

Call for proposals

Terms of reference (TOR) for country reports
Theme: COVID-19: Changes to digital rights priorities and strategies

Deadline for proposals: 22 November 2021

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Introduction
This edition of Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch) aims to address two key questions:

a. How has the COVID-19 pandemic changed or shaped the ways in which civil society organisations do their advocacy work around digital technology-related issues, including digital rights?

b. How have digital technology and digital rights advocacy priorities shifted due to the pandemic?

The edition is being published at an intermediate and uncertain time. While new and more virulent strains of the COVID-19 virus evolve and continue to place health systems under duress, vaccine roll-out across the world has proceeded at an uneven pace, with wealthier countries predominantly more vaccine-ready than poorer nations. Many countries now face the challenge of vaccine hesitancy, driven by a complex cocktail of fear, misinformation, cultural norms, political and ideological rifts, and a distrust of government and the pharmaceutical industry.
Politics have been interwoven with responses and reactions to the pandemic from the start, exacerbating already existing fault lines, and in a number of countries used as an excuse to intensify totalitarian measures with negative impacts on human rights.

The real economic shock to most countries as a result of the pandemic is still to be felt. Some sectors and many businesses are unlikely to recover, and unemployment is set to strike new lows. The International Labour Organisation forecasts that global unemployment will reach 205 million people in 2022, compared to 187 million in 2019. It says efforts to eradicate “working poverty” – or people who are employed but live in poverty – has been set back five years.[1] Global migration – whether for economic or personal reasons, or due to the need to escape persecution and conflict – has been severely limited by the pandemic, with the reasons given for restrictions often questionable. Meanwhile the massive extraction and collection of data have reached unprecedented levels, whether through government initiatives in response to the pandemic, or by the private sector through the intensified use of the internet globally.

Over the past year and a half, APC and its network have documented the evolving impact of the pandemic on internet or digital rights. These are discussed in Appendix 2 to this call. It is with these perspectives and experiences as background and with the awareness of the importance of building alternative narratives that talk about the different ways in which advocacy and priority issues in the digital technology and digital rights areas have been impacted by the pandemic that this edition of GISWatch would like to explore the two inter-related questions:

a. How has the COVID-19 pandemic changed or shaped the ways in which civil society organisations do their advocacy work around digital technology-related issues, including digital rights?

Prior to the pandemic, civil society organisations would typically rely on different ways to co-ordinate and collaborate, to set advocacy agendas, build networks, engage with processes at different levels, and to push for change. These might have involved a mix of activities, including attending face-to-face meetings, convenings, conferences and break-away strategy sessions, or regional or national forums, such as the Internet Governance Forum and RightsCon. Forms of protest might have ranged from street protests, to holding music festivals. Others may have placed a lot of emphasis on being present at the Human Rights Council, amongst other avenues to promote issues and causes.

Each of these have implications for the formation of advocacy relationships as well as for the impact that civil society advocacy has, and imply different ways of learning, knowing and being, particularly in relation to power.
How has the pandemic changed this? And are there longer-term consequences of these changes that civil society organisations need to surface and understand?

Here we are interested in the methods or ways of engaging in advocacy, and community and network building, and the likely longer-term impact of any changes in the way civil society organisations now go about this, including shifting power relations amongst stakeholders.

b. How have digital technology and digital rights advocacy priorities shifted due to the pandemic?

While many of the government and civil society responses to the pandemic in different countries have been documented by APC and its network, what is less clear is the longer-term impact of the pandemic on internet rights and related advocacy priorities. This might involve a range of issues, from privacy rights to surveillance, to local access, to disinformation. We are interested in nuanced analyses of any shifts or changes, and how these are likely to continue into the future.

For example, is online gender-based violence a priority for more organisations now? Or for those who have worked on eradicating online gender-based violence, has the terrain shifted in any way, and are there new issues that need to be confronted? What are the new ways in which online gender-based violence is expressed in the context of accelerated digitalisation?

Another example might be in the area of privacy rights. Before the pandemic, UN experts and human rights advocates pushed for the prohibition of the use of surveillance technology that is used without adhering to international human rights standards and the immediate moratorium on the sale and use of technologies that carry a high risk of human rights contraventions until adequate safeguards are in place. How has this terrain shifted? Are there new, longer-term consequences for privacy rights of which advocacy organisations need to take cognisance? Have new privacy laws or decrees with different implications for rights generally been introduced? Have the stakeholders shifted, and new ones grown in prominence and importance from an advocacy perspective?

These shifts in the priorities for advocacy and in the advocacy terrain itself may impact any field of internet rights advocacy, and they may be substantial, or subtle yet important. Amongst other things, they may imply a shift in the focus of advocacy work, a change in how challenges are articulated, or how the lived-experiences of activists are articulated.

How to participate in this call

- Read the “Potential framing issues for imaging future challenges for digital rights activists” (Appendix 1).
• Read the “Potential starting points for your report” (Appendix 2). These might provide background on the issue you would like to discuss.

• Read the instructions for submitting a proposal below, and if you wish to participate, send your proposal before the deadline to GISWatch production coordinator Maja Romano (maja@apc.org) and editor Alan Finlay (editor@giswatch.org).

Instructions for submitting a proposal
The proposal, which should be written in English, should reach us by **22 November 2021** at the latest, and include the following information (no more than 400 words):

a. Name(s), organisation(s), country
b. Email address(es) - please include an email address for each co-author
c. Outline of the issue or topic you will write about. We need to know:
   i. Are you going to respond to question a) or b) discussed above?
   ii. What specific changes are you going to explore, or do you expect to find?
   iii. How do you think that the COVID-19 pandemic brought about these changes?
   iv. How will you go about collecting evidence to support your analysis? For example, these may be through interviews, collaborative discussions with civil society organisations, or other forms of data collection.
   v. How will you ensure that your advocacy recommendations for your report will be reflective broadly of civil society perspectives and positions?

Selection of authors
The authors will be selected by middle of December. If you are selected you will have to two months to write and submit your report by 14 February 2022.

Amongst the criteria used for selection are:

• The relevance of the proposal to the GISWatch topic.
• The clarity of the proposal (has it been thought through properly?)
• The uniqueness of the topic and the country: does it raise new and important issues?
• The extent to which the country report author will engage other civil society organisations working in the field.
• How many country report proposals are received for same country (we can’t publish too many reports from the same country).

Please note that the aim of GISWatch is to encourage local participation in rights-based issues. Because of this, for this edition it is critical that lead authors or organisations have residence in the country they are writing about. We also expect lead authors to consult widely with other civil society organisations when writing their report so that their views and perspectives can be reflected in the report.

Under certain circumstances we may accept proposals from lead authors who are not residents in a country they wish to write about, such as proposals from displaced persons, or authors who have strong first-hand experience in a country. Lead authors may also wish to coordinate co-authors for the report and those co-authors may not necessarily need to be based in the same country.

**What happens if my proposal is selected?**

1) If your proposal is selected, the report you write on your chosen topic must be written in English and have a maximum length of 2,300 words. For consistency, the report should be developed using a template that will be provided to authors. APC will provide you with background readings, offer an online session to help orientate you to the topic, and support you during the writing process. A mailing list will be set up where you will be able to share your questions, ideas and resources with other country report authors contributing to this edition.

2) Once submitted, your report will be edited by the GISWatch editor, and returned to you for clarifications or to respond to editorial comments. In order to ensure consistency in the quality of reports published, editorial comments are often substantial, so proper time needs to be allocated by the authors to respond to the necessary questions and changes. Once finalised, the report is sent for proofreading. This process will take place from April 2022 until June 2022.

3) Once the final report has been accepted, organisations will receive a payment in support of writing of 700 USD (seven hundred US dollars).

If you have questions do not hesitate to contact us:

• GISWatch: Maja Romano (GISWatch production coordinator, maja@apc.org), cc'ing Alan Finlay (editor@giswatch.org).

• Website: [www.giswatch.org](http://www.giswatch.org)

For more information on GISWatch and the writing process, please visit our About page.

**We look forward to your report proposal! Remember the deadline is 22 November!**
Timeline summary
Deadline for proposals: 22 November 2021
Authors informed of accepted proposals: 13 December 2021
Authors to prepare country chapter: 13 December 2021 - 14 February 2022
Deadline for country chapter: 14 February 2022
Editing process: 14 February - 11 April 2022
Deadline for final country report: 11 April 2022
Appendix 1 - Potential framing issues that could shape internet rights advocacy in the future

Several key issues can be highlighted in what we might call a “post-shock” period of the pandemic, including:

**A new kind of “development divide”:**

Are we facing a new kind of development divide? While the pandemic is likely to have exacerbated economic inequalities across the world, and between regions, it is unlikely that in the short-term, resource-starved government budgets in developing countries will be able to properly cope with their own country’s development needs.

As has been noted, the Sustainable Development Goals have been set back by years.[2] Economies will take time to rebuild, and those that were already fragile will take longer to restart. Incompetence, corruption and abuse of power around vaccine deployment, the anti-vaccine movement lobby and vaccine hesitancy and difficulties in accessing vaccines in many developing countries is potentially creating a “vaccine divide”.

Restrictions on travel on people in the global South to developed countries if they are not vaccinated with approved vaccines are already in force, exacerbating limitations already in place on countries which are deemed to be the originators or carriers of strains of viruses (the latter impacting on south-south travel too). These restrictions have multiple effects on economic migration as well as the rights of migrant communities in destination countries, with some governments arguably seeing an opportunity to enforce new barriers to the politically troubling “problem” of migration under the guise of national public health concerns.

These rifts are likely to be strengthened, rather than lessened, through the impacts of climate change being felt across the globe, and the concomitant threats of new pandemics. There is a risk that COVID-19, rather than being addressed as a global challenge, starts to be identified as part of an ongoing developing country problem, with it more-or-less contained in developed nations, much like the HIV/AIDS virus. This perspective is likely to be accentuated by more conservative, and anti-immigration governments gaining a foothold in wealthier countries that seek to rebuild themselves for themselves.

**More people online, more often:**

The surge in internet demand is unlikely to abate, and the trend of more people being online more often is likely to continue. This will be supported by businesses opting for mixed office-home work models,[3] and education institutions adopting
blended learning models, and an increase in online schooling options being offered.[4]

Tech companies that are market leaders are likely to continue to reap the benefits. With this will come an intensification of the extractive logic of platform capitalism, including data mining and data harvesting, and the multiple use of artificial intelligence (AI) to market products and services and create new needs. The strengthening and expansion of these data extractive business models are also likely to continue to threaten privacy, freedom of expression, and the right to access information in new ways.

With more citizens online more often, many governments are likely to explore the possibilities of taking their public services online with more determination. This will have negative implications for those who do not have good internet access.[5] These e-government initiatives are also often in collaboration with private actors, and can be dependent on global tech companies for the delivery of those services, strengthening government dependency on tech monopolies for the delivery of services – the same global monopolies which they seek to regulate. Privacy concerns regarding the extraction and use of private data are likely to increase.[6]

**An exacerbated digital divide between the digital haves and have nots:**

Access infrastructure is likely to be placed under strain, and the capacity of small service providers pushed to the limit.[7] Only some countries will be able to afford the infrastructure upgrade needed to meet the new digital demand, with access to infrastructure and infrastructure policy once again becoming an advocacy flashpoint.

Data costs will need to be lowered, or data arrangements and deals made with service providers for essential services. The likely result is an increase investment in infrastructure in developed countries, and lagging and increasingly outdated infrastructure in poor nations.

At the same time, while more people are likely to be online more often, the downward push in household budgets will mean that more households will not be able to afford access devices that can be used to properly access services or conduct business, and data costs will become increasingly prohibitive. The overall result is that the pandemic is likely to catalyse the already existing divide between digitally affluent economies and communities, and digitally impoverished economies and communities. An increase and intensification of poverty can be expected, with profound shifts in social classes.

**Political and social insecurity:**
Dramatic shifts in poverty and social class can be anticipated in the future, and the “new normal” in terms of marginalised and other groups in financial distress is likely to increase. At the same time, uncertainty will be deepened by the threats of climate change. The youth are expected to be particularly affected by this new age of anxiety and uncertainty.[8] A culture of fear can translate into political fearmongering and conservatism and could have implications for global politics.

**Weakening collective civil society agendas:**

A weakening of collective civil society agendas in key areas such as privacy, freedom of expression, digital rights and harms, migration, intellectual property, are likely to be exacerbated by a deepening of the digital and social divides. The pressure will be felt for a new collective model of civil society engagement, but a new way of engaging will have to be created for this to coalesce.
Appendix 2 - Potential starting points for your report

The need to protect the internet as a public good:

The internet can be considered an essential part of the “emerging resilience” of communities and societies in the face of the pandemic. Because of this it needs to be protected as a public good, and human rights need to be protected online in any response to the pandemic.[9]

Are there any new emerging digital rights priorities in this regard?

Privacy and surveillance:

While the application of technology can support public health policies, coupled with emergency regulations, it can also be used restrict freedom of movement, and curtail human rights generally.[10] Often surveillance technologies are implemented without any assessment of their impact on human rights.[11]

The pandemic has raised widespread concerns around privacy rights in particular. For example, in some countries the excessive collection and disclosure of personal data in the process of epidemiological investigation, and contact tracing of people with COVID-19 has resulted in the infringement of personal privacy and digital rights.[12] So-called “vaccine passports”, which are increasingly being implemented (e.g. in France, Canada, etc.) to give people access to public spaces, also pose privacy risks.

A general experience has been that privacy rights do not seem to apply under emergency regulations (or it is unclear to what extent they do apply),[13] and a common attitude is that privacy rights are less important compared to the greater good of fighting the pandemic.

Are these trends set to continue? What are the future implications for digital rights advocacy?

Access to information and freedom of expression:

Misinformation, disinformation and fake news have been called an “infodemic”, and while it is not a new phenomenon, it has had a particular effect during the pandemic, a time of scientific and social confusion and uncertainty.

Government responses have included the rapid enactment of social media laws, and new regulations to curb the spread of disinformation. Research has however shown how these laws tend to inhibit freedom of expression,[14] and are applied in a politically partisan way. At the same time, the attempts by social media platforms to limit misinformation using AI have been stepped up during the pandemic, with questionable results (e.g. the censoring of informed debate about Ivermectin on Facebook).
By limiting transparent debate, overt censorship, whether from the state or private sector, has the inverse effect of seeding further misinformation and disinformation rather than curbing it. Direct censorship and control of information about the pandemic has been seen in China and Japan.[15]

What does the move to censor the internet during the pandemic imply for the future of freedom of expression and access to information online?

**The need for media information literacy:**

Research has suggested that rather than censorship, a much more effective strategy to combat misinformation and disinformation is through media information literacy training, including at school level. This perspective has resulted in donors and the private sector (e.g. Facebook) funding the development of media and information literacy curricula across different regions such as Africa and Asia. Several APC members have been involved in media literacy training and curriculum development.[16]

Has media and information literacy become a new priority in your country? How is it being implemented, and who are the stakeholders? What perspectives do training curricula promote? Are there any concerns?

**Hate speech:**

The pandemic has resulted in an increase of hate speech online directed towards those who have contracted the virus, as well as in online xenophobia. Health surveillance technology has also led to those who have contracted the virus being exposed, stigmatised and becoming the target of hate speech.[17]

Have any new trends in online hate speech emerged, and what is likely to stay?

**Digital safety and security online:**

The need for digital safety and security training has increased as more people move online, with a rise in gender-based online violence reported.[18]

Are new ways necessary for civil society to respond to the scale of this emerging need? Are there new vulnerabilities that need attention?

**Online gender violence:**

The social distancing imposed by the pandemic and the consequent virtualisation of social and professional dynamics has revealed the extent and seriousness of online gender violence. There has been an increase of coordinated online attacks against specific groups of women aimed at intimidating them, silencing them and preventing or neutralising their organisation and collective action.

What new trends are discernible? What action needs to be taken? How?

**Access to education:**
Education has been dramatically affected by the pandemic. In most countries schools and universities have been closed, with some stopping all educational activity (e.g. Ethiopia) due to the impact online education will have on those who do not have internet access. Many countries have adopted a hybrid model of teaching online, with schools and sometimes universities re-opened when virus transmission is low.

Early responses to the pandemic have included special arrangements between institutions and mobile service providers on subsidised data costs for students (e.g. South Africa), and some academic-related websites being zero-rated. The digital divide has however produced a stark divide in the right to education, with poorer communities suffering from a lack of access (although there have been government programmes to address this in countries like Argentina).[19]

Even for those that have access, ill-prepared teachers and a lack of experience in online teaching methods have hampered the quality of education.[20] It has been common that in global South countries, private educational platforms and tools are the primary ones used by both public and private education institutions, deepening technological dependency on the private sector and feeding business models based on the massive extraction and processing of data.

What future rights challenges can be predicted in this emerging model of mass, virtual education?

**Access to health and the positive benefits of technology:**

While the pandemic has laid bare the limitations of country’s health services, several innovations have been seen in virtual community services,[21] the development of health chatbots,[22] or other forms of emergency and remote services. While not all of these can be considered innovative, they show new partnerships between governments and tech service providers such as WhatsApp. Governments have also made health advisories and information available online, regulated that websites link to their information services (including social media platforms), used technology for contact tracing and public alerts to people who have come into contact with others who are ill, and used technology for vaccine registration in often unprecedented enactments of the right to health.

Consultations with care experts, including psychologists and psychiatrists, in many instances have gone online.

Are there any new dangers in an over-reliance on e-health? What about the risk of governments relying on businesses as service providers in the provision of e-health?

**Access to work:**
The impact of the pandemic has been felt differently by economic sectors, with physical labour-based employment, both formal and informal, most affected. The internet has allowed for unprecedented levels of remote work, a trend that looks set to continue in some countries and sectors. Home environments are however not always conducive to work, with internet connectivity and home care duties, including the care of children, affecting an individual’s right to work and their performance.[23] More recently, reports emerged that Google would be decreasing the take-home pay of some employees that chose to work from home.

Are there new policy frameworks necessary to address the likelihood of an increase in remote working in the future? Are there any shifts in our understanding of the "gig" economy?

**Intellectual property, open government and transparency:**

The development of proprietary vaccines for the pandemic has raised the spectre of intellectual property rights, and the impact of these on poverty and access to human rights generally. COVID-19 has reinvigorated the need for a recommitment to movements pushing for transparency in all fields of activity, including open government, open data and open science.[24] These debates as strongly linked to rights issues related to open versus proprietary software, and to environmental causes such as the right repair movement.

Has the open knowledge and open government movement been reinvigorated by the COVID-19 pandemic? Are there new alliances that need to be explored? Do new capacities need to be developed amongst internet rights activists?

**Access to culture and cultural expression:**

This has been profoundly impacted by the pandemic, including, as the Special Rapporteur on Culture recently pointed out, in government budget allocations to culture. While cultural preservation and production is under threat, sectors such as the entertainment industry has collapsed in many countries, and the livelihoods of artists severely impacted. New online cultural expressions and ways of working have also emerged, including online music performances, exhibitions, and even entire arts and music festivals, which have been hosted online.

What are the possibilities and challenges of cultural “substitution”? What kind of support is necessary from governments and businesses? What, politically, is lost when cultural venues are closed down, or move online? What are the new real-life challenges that you, as a cultural activist or artists face?

**E-democracy and access to justice:**

While e-government programmes have been strengthened, particularly with respect to health information and management, parliaments have used tech platforms and services to function, and courts have convened online to ensure the
continuity of the judicial systems. Some online participatory democracy initiatives have been developed by civil society.[25]

To what extent is e-justice a good thing, and is it likely to become a normative model for accessing justice in countries? Can democracy be online, and to what extent will it become a norm for democratic activity to be transacted or shaped online in the future? What are the rights implications of this?

**Internet access:**

While a lack of internet access for marginalised communities has impacted negatively on their ability to access their rights (such as to education and work), small internet service providers such as GreenNet and guifi.net have been thrown into crisis situations due to the unprecedented demand on their services. Internet infrastructure in some areas (e.g. Australia) have not been able to keep up with demand. Community networks[26] have responded to the crises at the grassroots level, and are seen as an essential component of COVID recovery programmes. [27]

While substitution, lockdowns and limitations to travel have had a positive impact on the environment, the impact of the increased demand for technology and global bandwidth on the environment has not yet been properly measured.

**Internet governance:**

Face-to-face internet governance processes have moved online, with uncertain impact.[28] New governance challenges have emerged, including the problem of disinformation, new forms of cybercrime (as more people went online),[29] and the need to balance track and tracing digital systems with individual and collective rights, raising pressing issues of data protection and discussion on digital identity.[30] A challenge that civil society has faced is fewer opportunities for participation in relevant global internet policies and human rights processes. To what extent have the global imitations on travel and in-person meetings shaped and impacted internet rights advocacy? Have the means of engagement changed? Have the power-relations within the internet governance ecosystem changed?

**Notes**


[3] Surveys of business in Argentina, for example, are already suggesting this is the case.
In South Africa a private school has launched a completely online education offering, and a university has started an online only high school.

For example, having to register online for a vaccination appointment.

As was the case with GovChat in South Africa, which was launched in partnership with a private company using WhatsApp as a channel. It expanded its services to several government departments before WhatsApp tried to prevent it from offering multiple government services on one WhatsApp channel. It was prevented from doing this by the regulator. The private company’s privacy policy was also not disclosed.

Internet infrastructure even in countries such as Australia have been reported not to be able to keep up with demand during the early stages of the pandemic.

It is clear that COVID-19 has exacerbated the global mental health crises, and many have pointed to stark deficiencies in government allocations to mental health in their national budgets.

APC members such as Rudi and Jinbonet amongst others have also produced responses to the impact of the pandemic on internet rights and freedoms.

According to members, GDPR and other privacy protections may not apply in the outbreak.

In Japan, under emergency declarations, all news outlets in the country were under the direction of the government, and freedom of expression and assembly at the citizen level, such as demonstrations and gatherings, leaflets and flyers, was expected to be limited.

See work by VOICE, DEF, WOUGNET, Intervozes, Zenzeleni.
In South Korea, the infectious disease protection act allowed people to be tracked if they were suspected of being infected with the virus. This is reported to include data on their travelling patterns, credit card records, and through CCTV camera recordings. While personal data was not disclosed, the data was in some cases allowed people to identify an infected person, leading to cases of hate speech and harassment online and offline.

APC and its partners and members such have WOUGNET have responded to the increase in gender-based violence in various ways.

Several members (e.g. Nupef) have been addressing these issues through their work on community networks.

APC members CITAD, Pangea and Guifi.net have been working in this field during COVID-19.

[22] https://www.apc.org/en/blog/hardworking-and-resilient-women-engage-health-information-chatbot-pamoja-net; WhatsApp Partners with Uganda to Launch COVID-19 Helpline (busiweek.com); GovChat comes to WhatsApp | ITWeb; iEDA - A digital solution to save children's lives | Terre des hommes (tdh.ch); health centres in Burkina Faso

[25] Grassroot

APC perspective shared by Chat Garcia Ramilo at the IGF 2020.

[27] https://www.apc.org/en/node/37522/

In Romania people have had to have printed authorisation in order to leave their home. There are cases of data fishing and scams which request personal data under the promise of helping with permission documents.