



Digital Citizen Summit 2016

Date: 11th November 2016

Digital Citizen Summit 2016 tries to generate actionable policy-based recommendations and lay down steps forward to promoting human right online.

INTRODUCTION

The world has been progressing towards becoming a connected, information society. India and other South-Asian countries have leapfrogged technologically to adapt to digital lifestyles. The increasing ubiquity of digital tools and services renders it imperative to discuss what would be our lives in the digital world and how would the definition and context of being a digital citizen evolve in the future.

It with this intention that the Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF) in association with The Friedrich Naumann Stiftung für die Freiheit (FNF) had organised the Digital Citizen Summit on the 11th November 2016 at the Hotel Royal Orchid in Bangalore.

The summit focused specifically on the topics access, privacy, violence against women, communication blackouts etc. with the objective to facilitate the exchange of information and ideas, and create a blueprint for future understanding of the concept of individual digital rights. The summit intended to be organised at a time where the narrative surrounding online rights is rising in significance.

The key vision of the summit was to generate actionable policy-based recommendations and lay down steps forward to promoting human right online.

The Summit was designed to have six parallel sessions on the designated themes. It witnessed the participation of various stakeholders such as lawyers, academicians, civil society actors, tech companies and entrepreneurs as well as independent experts and activists.

A series of parallel sessions followed related to the various subthemes of the summit:

- Access
- Privacy
- Communication Blackouts
- Digital Literacy & Empowerment
- Freedom of Expression
- Online Violence against Women

INAUGURAL SESSION

The inaugural session was kicked off with an introduction by Mr. Osama Manzar, Founder-Director, Digital Empowerment Foundation, and a keynote address by Ms. Usha Ramanathan, followed by a panel discussion.

This session was moderated by Mr Nikhil Pahwa from SaveTheInternet campaign on net neutrality in India. The speakers included Ms Usha Ramanathan, Anja Kovacs, Rajnesh Singh, Aakar Patel, Helani Galpaya and Asif Saleh. Discussions in this session ranged from global to South Asian perspectives on digital rights and digital citizenship, role of civil society and citizens on how to strengthen our systems as well as how take responsibility to make the digital space a more equitable one along with advocating or demanding for human rights online.

Highlights and Recommendations

1. When we talk about rights, we must not forget the responsibilities that come with them. It's our collective responsibility to fight injustice as well as work towards making the internet an inclusive, equal and safe space for all.
2. The government cannot suddenly transform entire operations online without giving the citizens enough time to adapt as well as simultaneously provide trainings.

3. Civil society, domestically as well regionally should collaborate and ask difficult immediate questions to the governments, we should not get comfortable in our own areas and forget intersectionality in our advocacy initiatives.



SESSION 1 – ACCESS

This session focused on discussions around affordability; accessibility; infrastructure; usability, last mile connectivity; network discrimination and providing low-cost solutions that enable uniform access. The panellists here included Anita Gurumurthy, Founding Member & Executive Director, IT for Change, Dipendra Manocha, President, Daisy Forum, India, Osama Manzar, Founder-Director, DEF, Shadrach, Asia Coordinator, Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI).

This session was moderated by Mr Rajnesh Singh, Regional Director of the Asia-Pacific Regional Bureau, Internet Society (ISOC). The session concluded with observations such as Access must be structurally analyzed, and network architectures must be critically examined. Digital environment is a huge enabler for persons with disabilities. Further, there have been efforts to build schools, libraries, books for the blind; however, the mainstream building of these infrastructures has been kept wholly separate. This segregation from the mainstream has led to further marginalisation of persons with disabilities. Thus, it is important both the mainstream and the persons with disabilities develop standards concurrently and in consultation with each other. From this process each can learn much from the other. For example, the blind were the first users of digital technology for books, digital books for the mainstream were introduced only much later.

Highlights and Recommendations

1. Wireless connectivity is a best practice model that can enable communities themselves to fill the gap that commercial providers have left in providing connectivity infrastructure.
2. At this point in time policy makers just do not know how to, or have the capacity to deliver access to all communities, and that policy makers and regulators must learn to be more responsive and inclusive. Knee jerk, reactionary policies will ultimately fail in the long term.
3. National Optic Fiber Network is a great project but is not being implemented correctly despite adequate funding. Accountable usage of assigned funding is important. Simple technologies can be used, and the whole sector must be opened up just like community radio was opened up. Additionally, institutional spaces like schools, hospitals, railway stations should be public spaces of connectivity.
4. It's paramount to factor in diversity in last mile politics. A cardinal area that the e-Accessibility Policy for Persons with Disabilities ignores is how to implement electronic accessibility. There is also no mention of standards that promote universality and inclusivity.



SESSION 2 – PRIVACY

This session focused on right to privacy; big data; encryption; digital attacks; data mining, cyber security; anonymity and surveillance. This session witnessed the speakers from South Asia as well as South East Asia and Germany including Jimmy Schulz, ICANN ALAC Member, Deputy Chairman ISOC Germany, Prasanth Sugathan, Lawyer and Counsel, SFLC, Saikat Datta, Lead Researcher – Cyber security, Arthit Suriyawangkool, Thai Netizen Network, Anja Kovacs, Internet Democracy Project, Deepak Maheshwari, Government Affairs, India & ASEAN Region, Symantec. Discussion here was moderated by Ruben Dieckhoff, The Friedrich Naumann Stiftung für die Freiheit, (FNF).

Points on the politics and contradictions of Big Data were pointed out. On one hand we want conveniences for which data will be collected and retained and on the other hand we want privacy. Now, even the government is building databases to provide conveniences like JAM. The question to be asked is then how do we balance these competing needs. The framework of democratic rights behoves us to think of proper rights. If the government makes digital is a default then access is to be a right.

Highlights and Recommendations

1. It's important to remember that surveillance shapes and changes behaviours. Most of the times when surveillance is executed, it might not be have the intention to shape behaviours but at the same time, the individuals that are subjected to it have no power to not participate in this; and it does result in manipulation of behaviour and sets a dangerous precedent for society.
2. The governments often say that if we do data retention, and everyone is a suspect, even if they are not, the population will have a feeling of being observed and this will change the behaviour of the people and we can make them act in a certain way, finally working towards better law and order and national security.
3. We have to start looking at the issue of surveillance as North – South divide, maybe ICANN can look into it, because most the technologies are more advanced in developed countries and they start or set the trends which then comes to South Asia or South East Asia, so the battle has to be fought there, in the global North.
4. We are coming to a situation where surveillance and big data are legitimising the role of non-state actors in conjunction with the State to conduct surveillance on us and take our data because the networks and technologies are owned by non-state actors. This is mainly profit driven.



SESSION 3 – COMMUNICATION BLACKOUTS: THREAT TO CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS

This session was exclusively on network disruptions. It started with discussions on disconnecting digital communication channels, primarily taking examples from India and Pakistan and then taking it to a larger extent and what are trends in other countries. The breakout session mapped out challenges and issues and how it is affecting economic and social rights of citizens, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and freedom of association. Panellists here included Deepali Liberhan, South Asia Public Policy Manager, Facebook, Nikhil Pahwa, Save the Internet, Helani Galpaya, CEO, LIRNEasia, Parul Sharma, Research Analyst, Center for Communication Governance

The session was moderated by Gayatri Khandhadai, Project Coordinator – IMPACT, Association for Progressive Communications. The session concluded on working out many solutions for effective, collaborative advocacy and lobby with governments against virtual curfews. The many suggestions included stressing on importance of comprehensive and extensive research and documentation of cases, stories and on ground reality to build a stronger and effective case against the shutdowns, primarily focusing on economic and emotional cost of shutdowns.

Highlights and Recommendations

1. We do not have substantial empirical evidence available on aforementioned concerns except a recent research conducted by Brookings Institutions. As a way forward, the importance of collaborative effort, not only by the civil society but also other stakeholders such as businesses was suggested.
2. The most important and reiterated recommendation was that we need a comprehensive and continued research for documenting cases of Internet shutdowns so that the economic costs and costs of emotional and social distress can be documented with quantitative data, which can be used for effective advocacy with the government.
3. There was consensus that lack of information and awareness around the issue of Internet shutdowns is a challenge in itself and invites further problems, which supports the idea that we need better documentation to be able to do something about it.



SESSION 4 – DIGITAL LITERACY AND EMPOWERMENT

This session focused on advancing literacy through ICT, the internet economy, youth engagement and enhancing accessibility for persons with disabilities. Panellists for this session included Asif Saleh, Senior Director & Head of Innovation, BRAC, Bangladesh, Jamyang Tashi, Managing Partner of QED Consulting Group, Bhutan, George Abraham, CEO, SCORE Foundation, India, Amelia Andrews, Director of Communication, CREA, Rajen Varada, Co-Founder and Director, Technology for the People, Mansoor Ahmed, Founder and Director, Winged World.

The session on Digital Literacy and empowerment was moderated by Mr Madan Mohan Rao, Director Research, YourStory. It was discussed that women's experience online is also exclusionary. She illustrated this by referring to Microsoft's experiment with a bot online Microsoft ran an experiment using artificial intelligence, it developed a bot that was modelled as a 19 year old American girl built on a repeat after me technology that could learn from its surroundings upon interacting with other humans online. The bot had to be pulled down after a mere 16 hours online because it developed into a racist misogynist.

The challenge is in answering 'what is in it for me?' while designing and developing programmes including those for digital literacy. Even though we want people to use technology there is a severe absence of content in local languages. For local content creation, there must be training at school itself. When the school curriculum is analyzed we realize that even though ICT is included in the curriculum there is lack of access to the resource.

Highlights and Recommendations

1. Because women are not involved in design their needs are not reflected in the products that are built. If women's needs were taken into account then cars would have more boot space, women's clothing would have functional pockets and cameras would be lighter.
2. Computer training must be given to persons with disabilities so that they may substitute a scribe for a computer enabled written test. Persons with disabilities must be facilitated to work and think on their own. Technology has potential for inclusivity and persons with disabilities depend on policy makers to take full advantage of this.
3. Government needs to re-look at how to understand skilling. We need to focus on farmers and empower them with skill to help them become better farmers. One must understand the difference between literacy, education and life skills.



SESSION 5 – FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

This session focused on free speech; multi-stakeholder cooperation; interconnection and price regulation, violence against women, dangerous speech and freedom of expression, association & assembly online. Panellist for this session included Nikhil Pahwa, Save the Internet, Parul Sharma, Center for Communication Governance, Helani Galpaya, LIRNEasia, Deepali Liberhan, South Asia Public Policy Manager, Facebook.

Moderated by Gayatri Khandhadai, Project Coordinator – IMPACT, Association for Progressive Communications (APC), this session went into deeper deliberations on status of freedom of expression in India and South Asia in the present context. Various laws that are being used to curtail FOE and strategies for advocating against them at the national and international level were discussed along with analysing how these laws are different being used on different sections of the society, specifically on women, LGBT people and human rights defenders.

Highlights and Recommendations

1. The problem with laws in this country is that they are enforced arbitrarily; we have to develop awareness among the citizens so that instead of just being digital citizens, they become active citizens and judiciary has a role to play in it. More importantly, we need to push back immediately whenever we feel that our free speech is threatened.
2. Apart from the establishment of laws and strong independent judiciary, we have to start having conversations with people at the very young age regarding free speech and plurality. When institutions are not strong, people need to be strong.
3. The excessive powers that the governments can exercise, in terms of controlling especially issues such as surveillance are a major threat to free speech in the country.



SESSION 6 – ONLINE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

This panel explored how gender-based violence online affects the participation of women and marginalized genders and sexualities in online spaces, what counter-strategies are being developed, and what are the possibilities of cross-expertise collaboration to ensure a safe online environment for women and marginalized genders and sexualities.

Panellists in this session included Ms Usha Ramanathan, Legal Researcher, Nayantara Ranganathan, Internet Democracy Project, Rachita, Campaigner, Jhatkaa. Moderated by Ms Japleen Pasricha of Feminism in India, this session unpacked various aspects of what is perceived as violence by different women and different stakeholders. Case studies and personal experiences of victims of trolling, counter-trolling and harassment were discussed.



A WAY FORWARD

This session discussed the outcome culled out from the Summit and will set out recommendations. Moderator from each session was asked to present set of recommendation points that need to be carried out. The final session was moderated by Dr. Ronald Meinardus, Regional Director South Asia, The Friedrich Naumann Stiftung für die Freiheit. Way forward and suggestions and feedback for the summit

were discussed. It was decided that this will be an annual event. The teams involved will work out the number of days, time of the year, locations and how the summit will be conducted creatively such as number of sessions or various other ideas related to and not limited to panel discussions.

