

Digital Citizen Summit 2023

An initiative by the Digital Empowerment Foundation (DEF)
and the Centre for Development Policy and Practice (CDPP)

Digital Citizen Summit: Commoning the Internet for a Vibrant Democracy

*Exploring pathways to shape internet access, use and governance
to contribute to a vibrant digital democracy*

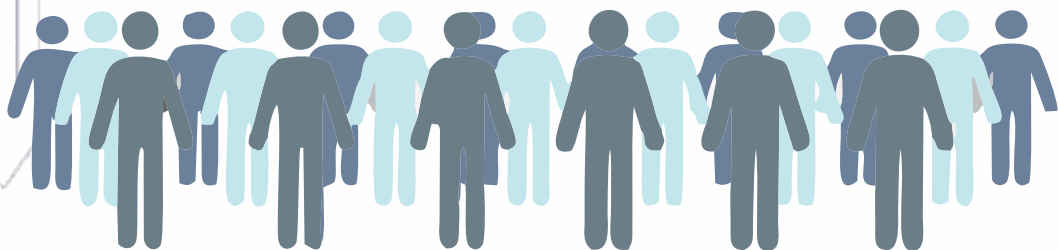
Date: 2, 3, 4 November, 2023

Location: Hyderabad



Background

India is riding high on the wave of digitalization with a 200% increase in the rural internet subscriptions and a 158% increase in the urban internet subscriptions between 2015 and 2021 as per the Economic Survey 2023. The Economic Survey 2023 also states that in the financial year 2021-22 alone, 8840 crores worth of digital financial transactions were carried out of which the share of UPI (Unified Payment Interface) was 52%. Delivery of citizen services are also getting increasingly digitalized, and more and more Indians are becoming social media users. However, if we look at the overall picture of digitalization in India from the perspective of a citizen's ability to have a digital presence, to be able to exercise their digital rights, access digital services and engage in digital finance, many bottlenecks remain.



Facets of Digitalization



Access

Access is among the most essential components to achieve digital citizenship. However, only 31% of the rural population uses internet compared to 67% of the urban population, according to 'Inequality Report 2022' by Oxfam. The report also states that the richest 60% is more than four times likely to make a digital payment than the poorest 40%.



Critical Digital Literacy

In addition to access, critical digital literacy, the ability to produce, consume and disseminate digital content critically is a crucial aspect. According to a study published by Oxford University Press (OUP), 54% of the surveyed audience in India obtained news via social media and 87% of them were assured of the truthfulness of the news. Unfortunately, this trust appears misplaced considering India's severe misinformation and disinformation problem that has a disastrous impact on lives, livelihood, public health, social harmony, and democracy. The impact of the internet on democracies is evident in the elections, which are fought using social media propaganda and other means of internet communication. Internet and digital tools are also used to manipulate voters' opinion, as evidenced by Cambridge Analytica and the recent Team Jorge disinformation operations.



Safe and Secure Internet

Safe and secure internet is essential for citizens, especially those from the historically marginalized communities to engage in online public spaces. However, according to the Microsoft Digital Civility Report 2021, India's digital civility index is 71%, which is higher than the global average (lower rank means less exposure to

incivility and risks) with 54% of the women experiencing risks online. Similarly, India still has a long way to go with regard to the legislations on data protection and privacy, which are particularly needed in the light of Cambridge Analytica controversy and the alleged use of Pegasus software by the Central Government. The newly proposed Digital Data Protection Act, 2022, however, has been critiqued for granting disproportionate powers to the Central Government authorities.



Freedom of Speech Online

Freedom of speech online is another critical component required for citizens to assert digital rights and effectively participate in digital governance. While there is a need to curb fake news and misinformation, the regulations must be balanced so that the state does not misuse these regulations to suppress dissent. When it comes to digital platforms such as ride-sharing, food-delivery and e-commerce platforms, the platform regulations should also ensure that they do not exploit labour or lead to the creation of monopolies. Considering that many of these platforms now perform the role of public goods, there must be provisions for citizen participation in the governance of these spaces.



E-governance

When it comes to e-governance, while the use of a public digital identity may have facilitated streamlining the access to benefits in certain areas, it has led to considerable exclusions. For example, there have been instances where people without Aadhaar were denied healthcare, ration, and other essential services. A revamp in the approach is much needed to ensure that nobody is left behind either due to lack of access to devices, connectivity, capacity, or digital identity. As the Oxfam Inequality report points out, tech-based solutions need not always be the best ones, and the government and policymakers should be ready to consider innovative low-tech or no-tech solutions as well. Unfortunately, all the start-up incubation centres, including the government-supported ones, incubate mostly digital technology start-ups discouraging innovation in other spheres.



AI for Decision-making

Another aspect of digital governance where we must particularly be careful about is the use of AI for decision-making. If we look at the example of National Register of Citizens (NRC) in Assam, the family tree algorithm failed to take into account limited textual literacy and the subsequent mistakes arising from these, leading to real life costs for citizenry on the ground. At the same time, in a resource-constrained country like India, questions arise as to how do we develop a participatory framework for AI for social good?

These are questions faced not just by India, but other countries worldwide. We are simultaneously witnessing increased concentration of power with a few private players and state governments' rise in surveillance and curb on digital freedoms. In this moment of flux, the movement for digital commons is gaining popularity at global and national venues. For us, the pressing question then would be – how do we envisage a digital commons framework, whereby the use, access and governance of digital resources and spaces become democratic, equitable, inclusive, and sustainable? This is especially relevant as operations of executive, judiciary and legislature are also getting digitalized along with the broader society.

In light of the discussion surrounding accessibility and inclusivity, the proposed summit will look at enabling digital citizenship through the digital commons' framework, by commoning the access, use and governance of the digital spaces and resources. It will broadly dwell into the themes of access, use, and governance, and how can we work towards commoning them. In this context, the term "digital commons" encompasses various categories such as hardware, software, infrastructure, information, AI, and platforms. With this in mind, we suggest examining the present situation and proposing methods to accomplish the objectives for each category: Use, Access and Governance.



Access

- Inclusive Access
- Equitable Access
- Sustainable Access



Uses

- Safe Use
- Secure Use
- Responsible Use



Governance

- Democratic Governance
- Transparent Governance
- Accountable Governance

The purpose of this suggested summit is to gather professionals such as researchers, experts, government officials, and impacted communities to assess the current condition of digital resources and environments. The goal is to examine these perspectives and seek joint approaches to change them into digital spaces that are inclusive, democratic, fair, and sustainable. The summit will include various activities, such as workshops, panel discussions, and paper presentations.

What and Why of the Summit

The Digital Citizen Summit 2023 will provide a forum for diverse groups, including academics, experts, civil society organizations, and government officials, to gather and contribute by presenting research papers, attending sessions, conducting workshops and demonstrations. While maintaining its main topics of internet accessibility, use, and governance, this year's summit (2023 edition) will fulfil the following objectives and themes:

Objectives:

- To deliberate and arrive at a roadmap for enhancing digital democracy that anchors on digital commons
- To define and provide solutions that ensure digital human rights
- To promote and ensure the digital empowerment and development through use of digital and internet technologies
- To bring out the best practices around the globe related to digital governance
- To construct a common platform for India to deliberate and draft policy frameworks, make new cohorts that work on digital inclusion, internet governance, and related works

Themes (not limited to):

Internet as a Digital Common

Privacy, Data, and Internet: An Evolving Debate

Methods of Investigation - Internet and Society

The Status of Frontier Technologies in India

Participatory Governance in the Age of Internet

Digital Governance

Regulation of Digital Technologies

Open-Source Technologies as Public Goods