

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2021-2022

Digital futures for a post-pandemic world



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC)
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A feminist backpack for crises: Care-fullness, messiness and responsive knowledge

Nyx McLean, in conversation with Jennifer Radloff, Namita Aavruti and Smita V.

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Introduction

“The world is suddenly and radically changed,”¹ the Association for Progressive Communications Women’s Rights Programme (APC WRP) wrote in April 2020 in an open letter to their friends and partners. COVID-19 and responses to the pandemic asked that people move online, and with this came an intensification around issues that had already had the attention of feminists and digital rights activists. Some of these issues included online gender-based violence, other forms of online violence, data extraction and surveillance.

This conversation with APC WRP team members Jennifer Radloff, Namita Aavruti and Smita V.² is supplemented by observations from the Feminist Internet Research Network (FIRN) meta-research project³ that APC coordinated, and is only a glance at their experience of the pandemic, new concerns and priorities that emerged, the lessons they learned from the pandemic, and what they would like to take forward in a feminist backpack for future work and moments of crisis.

Online versus offline

The move to online had an impact on organising, network building, how we think about community and belonging, our sense of embodiment, how we think about participation, and how we think about and activate care. Some projects had to be put on hold as

a result of the pandemic, while others which had primarily been offline had to do a hard pivot to online.

Smita, who had joined the APC WRP in March 2021, spoke about how they had started work on a new project, and the impact the pandemic had on initiating this project. For instance, they shared that it took longer to establish relationships online in contrast to “the connection that physical space builds.” Online connection, Smita said, “is very different,” and the absence of physical space can “cause very subtle delays and impacts in building networks.” It is “knowledge that you can only gain when you experience it for yourself and when your body experiences it.” Embodiment is a challenge to movement building in the digital age or during moments of crisis when movements must move online.

The embodiment of space continued to emerge in our conversation as critical to establishing connections. Namita shared her experience of how the move from offline to online “worked really well with groups that were connected beforehand because [...] ‘We’ve met you, and I’ve seen you in a physical space, I have a connection with you,’” whereas “with new people, I was never quite sure it was working.” Here this is speaking to how the online appeared to work better with people who had already established a connection offline in face-to-face meetings because of what an embodied physical space provides, whereas for those who had not met previously, the move to online created a challenge.⁴

The offline-online binary also had an impact on teaching people how to use technology. Smita flagged how when one is working with people “who are very new to technology [...] there is a very strong value-add that happens when you teach them how to use [it] in person.” There is a link between teaching in person, and “the confidence they get in how they relate to the devices, and this takes more time online,” they explained.

1 APC Women’s Rights Programme. (2020, 23 April). An open letter to friends and partners. *GenderIT.org*. <https://genderit.org/resources/open-letter-friends-and-partners>

2 The WRP team members will be referred to by their first names throughout this report.

3 McLean, N. (2022a). *Feminist Internet Research Network: Meta-research project report*. Association for Progressive Communications. <https://www.apc.org/en/node/38022>

4 This is supported by research work such as, for example: Dijkstra, K., & Post, L. (2015). Mechanisms of embodiment. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 6. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.01525>

“Any delay which happens in building this confidence around technology directly means that certain communities get left behind,” they added. This is another challenge to address when people are expected to move online during moments of crisis.⁵

The means to connect was not available to everyone due to the enormous digital and resource divides in the world, which continue to disadvantage and grow worse in the global South.⁶ Not everyone had the means to connect online, but some donors responded to the pandemic by expanding the budget to include covering tech needs such as “infrastructure, devices and access,” as Jennifer shared. One response was to “build packages of laptops and devices to send [to people struggling to get online] so they could participate fully,” she explained. “The reality of what COVID and the lockdown were showing is that you can’t participate if you don’t have devices,” Jennifer stressed. Here we see the emergence of another priority: the need to understand tech and infrastructure needs in order to ensure greater participation online.

Access and barriers to use

Many people were excluded and left out with the move to online. As Smita put it, “Anything and everything related to COVID [was] suddenly online.” Even though there were expectations that people move online, “there were [few] provisions made for actually allowing for free internet, free data,” they added.

Another example of barriers to use came from Jennifer, who shared how she noticed that older people were “completely helpless without a smartphone and completely locked out of systems,” such as when they wanted to get vaccinated. Health care workers such as nurses also “couldn’t work the software that they needed to use in order to track everything.” This raised concerns around technology and intergenerational conversations, and how the technology used and adopted without training harmed those who were “really good” at their jobs.

This barrier to access, especially for those with little to no knowledge of technologies, showed an absence of care in response to the pandemic, and

this is something that is needed in response to future moments of crisis – care-full⁷ consideration around technology that is used, access to technology, and training for better use of the technology. This is also a call for greater reflexivity and consideration about our privilege, positionality and power when we propose solutions to moments of crisis.

Surveillance

COVID-19 saw an increase the development of apps in response to the pandemic and in attempts to contain its spread. Many of these apps were flagged for issues around “data collection, transparency of the data collected and the data stored,” Smita shared. There was also “no actual evidence of any of these apps actually working in controlling the infection rate,” they said. What these apps did do was raise concerns around surveillance and how data is being used.⁸ The APC WRP in their open letter drew attention to “surveillance and [the] expansion of state power” during the pandemic.⁹

Namita spoke of an “uptick in surveillance generally,” how apartments and gated communities were using “complex software that tracks people,” and how access to homes and places of work “was so much more controlled” during the pandemic. Because of the pandemic, she said, there were “new pieces of software that were floated around as solutions, all of which, frankly, look bad.” An increase in surveillance during a moment of crisis may not see surveillance levels return to pre-crisis levels.¹⁰ We need to be critical of increases in surveillance and question how data extracted during a crisis like COVID-19 is being stored and used, and how the data will be destroyed afterwards, if at all.

Feminist infrastructures

In addition to questioning how our data gets used, we need to question the kind of technology we use, and to challenge our preconceptions of this technology.¹¹ Jennifer was critical of what she called “the ownership and control of the existing northern male,

5 Research has documented this in relation to online learning and shown that in-person availability of a trainer removed many of the barriers to learning such as timely feedback, support services, understanding instructions. See, for example: Marcial, D. E., Caballero, R. D. B., Rendal, J. B., & Patrimonio, G. A. (2015). “I am offline”: measuring barriers to open online learning in the Philippines. *Інформаційні технології і засоби навчання*, 45, 1, 28-41.

6 Power, T. (2020). *The gender digital divide and COVID-19: Towards feminist internet regulations in southern Africa*. APC. <https://www.apc.org/en/node/36718>; Ragnedda, M., & Gladkova, A. (2020). *Digital Inequalities in the Global South*. Springer International Publishing; United Nations. (2021, 27 April). With Almost Half of World’s Population Still Offline, Digital Divide Risks Becoming ‘New Face of Inequality’, Deputy Secretary-General Warns General Assembly. <https://press.un.org/en/2021/dsgsm1579.doc.htm>

7 A deliberate choice to write as “care-full” instead of “careful”.

8 van Zyl, I., & McLean, N. (2021). The Ethical Implications of Digital Contact Tracing For LGBTQIA+ Communities. *Proceedings of the 1st Virtual Conference on Implications of Information and Digital Technologies for Development*. <https://www.mn.uio.no/ifi/english/research/groups/is/ifip-94/proceedings-virtual-conference-2021/all-papers/zylmclean.pdf>

9 APC Women’s Rights Programme. (2020, 23 April). Op. cit.

10 van Zyl, I., & McLean, N. (2021). Op. cit.

11 Lim, S. (2022, 7 March). Misogyny as a commodity in digital spaces. *GenderIT.org*. <https://genderit.org/articles/misogyny-commodity-digital-spaces>; Sanjuan Mejia, L. (2020, 12 November). Feminists are building their own technology to organise but where are funders? *GenderIT.org*. <https://www.genderit.org/feminist-talk/feminists-are-building-their-own-technology-organise-where-are-funders-0>

white infrastructure.” She proposed that we look to “alternative structures” like “feminist infrastructures” instead of relying on the Googles and Zooms of the world. During the pandemic there were instances of violence experienced in spaces such as Zoom. Namita said that the pandemic was “definitely a turning point [...] in the sense of taking [online violence] far more seriously.” Jennifer shared that in response to instances of violence, APC shaped their approaches by focusing on online digital safety training, and more awareness of data extraction, of surveillance, and of misinformation and disinformation. In addition to this, Jennifer said that it was important to “question the systems and the politics and the power and the privilege underneath it.” It is critical that we continue to critique, challenge and interrogate the power that informs the technologies we use.

There is a need for feminist infrastructures which are “shareable with partners and comrades,” Smita said. It is important, they said, to give consideration to “how accessible the software is, especially when working with partners who have low connectivity [or] restrictions on data.” Care is something that emerged from our conversation, as well as in the FIRN project. Care needs to be prioritised going forward, whether in moments of crisis or not. Namita shared that care needs to be extended beyond the self and there “needs to be a movement to collective forms of care in a more serious way.”

From these lessons we gave consideration to a feminist backpack for future work and future moments of crisis.

A feminist backpack for future work and moments of crisis

In concluding our conversation, Jennifer, Namita, Smita and I imagined what we would need to carry with us from our experience of the pandemic, and the work in APC WRP and on FIRN, that could serve our future work and help us respond to moments of crisis. We decided to think of it as a backpack in which to carry the tools, resources and values with us. In this backpack we have placed: care – self and collective; digital safety; listening and exchange of experiences; embracing messiness; responsive knowledge; and reflexivity.

Care – self and collective

Care emerged as a central theme. We see this in multiple responses from APC and partners.¹² As Namita

discussed earlier, it is important that we give consideration not only to care as it relates to the individual self, but also to what it means for the collective. As Jennifer shared, it is also important to “reimagin[e] what it looks like when it is an online space.”

Digital safety

We all added digital safety to our backpack, because it was apparent in our discussions around online violence and its consequences for vulnerable groups that there is a need for better digital safety and training in this area. Previous conversations with FIRN partners saw digital safety as an aspect of care for ourselves as digital rights defenders, activists and researchers, as well as for our research partners, project participants and communities.

Listening and exchange of experiences

Jennifer added “storytelling and listening” to our backpack. She shared that during the pandemic she found that it “was really important being part of APC and listening to what people were going through in different contexts,” and that it was critical to find “ways of exchange, of understanding, of knowledge, of strategies, of tactics.”

Embracing messiness

What we called “messiness” emerged from this conversation and also conversations with partners¹³ during the FIRN project. Messiness asks that we learn, as Jennifer shared, “to sit with discomfort, face it, confront it, and even if you don’t have the words, just to try.” Smita added that messiness was about letting go of rigid ways of doing things, and to “allow for fluidity and dynamicness in movement building, in digital security, in workshops.”

Responsive knowledge

Responsive knowledge building, and “making” and “sharing”, was added to our backpack. GenderIT.org¹⁴ was given as an example of “responsive knowledge” because, as Jennifer said, it produces “that kind of knowledge from contextual knowledge that comes out quickly and can be discussed and archived and made real.” Namita referred to this approach of knowledge building, making and sharing as “knowledge that is not straightjacketed.” It is important that the knowledge we produce and share is responsive and accessible to as many as possible.

12 APC Women’s Rights Programme. (2020, 23 April). Op. cit.; Association for Progressive Communications. (2020). *Closer than ever: Keeping our movements connected and inclusive – APC’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic*. https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/closerthanever_pp.pdf; Transfeminist Network of Digital Care. (2022). *Digital care for feminist activists*. APC. <https://www.apc.org/en/digital-care-feminist-activists>;

13 McLean, N. (2022a). Op. cit.; McLean, N. (2022b). Feminist internet research is messy. In Aavriti, N., Hussen, T. S., & Fossatti, M. (Eds), *Feminist by Design: APRIA Journal Issue 4*. <https://apria.artez.nl/feminist-internet-research-is-messy>

14 <https://genderit.org>

Reflexivity

The final item to be added to our backpack was that of reflexivity. Reflexivity emerged out of this conversation and the conversations with FIRN partners. Reflexivity creates space for us to consider our current contexts, our experiences, and how we can imagine things differently. It is exceptionally useful as a way forward in terms of movement building, creating safe spaces and holding space. It is a useful tool for learning and adapting to moments of change and crisis.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic was a moment of crisis that asked a great deal of all of us. It was a moment

of learning, of leaning into the uncomfortable, and hopefully rethinking and reimagining the way that we work, live and respond to each other and ourselves. The conversation above is in no way exhaustive – but it is a glimpse into new challenges, concerns, priorities, lessons learned and approaches, such as those found in the feminist backpack. We live in a world that faces numerous challenges such as structural inequalities, moments of crisis, and those ongoing, such as the climate crisis. We need to give consideration to the work we do, the tools we use, and how we can be responsive from a space of care and safety that ensures that nobody is left out.

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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