

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

Digital futures for a post-pandemic world

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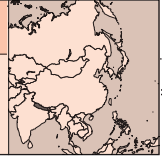
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Body & Data and APC

hvale vale and the Body & Data team: Rita Baramu, Kabita Rai, Youba Rai, Shubha Kayastha, Neha Gauchan, Sapana Sanjeevani, Shripa Pradhan, Anuska Sthapit, Mahima Pradhan, Prasun Subedi, Pramila Shrestha and SJ
<https://bodyanddata.org>

Body & Data, a sexual and gender rights organisation based in Nepal, had a conversation with APC's hvale vale to reflect on how the COVID-19 pandemic changed or shaped the ways in which they do their advocacy work around digital technology-related issues. The conversation was held on BigBlueButton, recorded and transcribed.

Introduction

It takes time to learn and it takes more time to structure learning, transforming fragments of individual and collective experience into something that can resemble a practice, a change in behaviour. For activists and civil society actors, this means a “change” in the “how” we go about advocacy and the “what” we advocate for.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic we followed our intuition, trusted our relationships and moved from traditional in-person office work and in-person conferences to virtual rooms, webinars and massive online conferences, where we learned to become embodied avatars of our social justice feminist causes.

Over two and a half years after that change that was imposed on us, it is important to reflect on what remains beyond our immediate, reactive responses to stay connected. We need to explore if and how our responses have evolved, evaporated or stayed with us, and if they have become an integral part of the work we do and of the way we do it.

Advocacy and advocates lived in a distributed, precarious dependency during the pandemic, mediated by digital technologies. Going online meant that advocacy could be augmented, discarded, attacked or criminalised through the very digital technologies that mediate their interactions.

And since technology is never neutral, and all new and less new virtual spaces and platforms are owned and intrinsically intertwined with the politics and positionality of their owners and maintainers, platforms

are, at the same time, a pre-condition for advocacy and, somehow, an advocacy issue in themselves.

Digital rights advocacy includes advocating for accessible, meaningful, affordable and open infrastructures, which entails the intersection of hardware, software, knowledge and relationships. The “how” and the “what” conflate.

Traditionally, people marched and occupied squares, reclaiming access to physical decision-making rooms. In the digital era of strategic fragmentation and algorithm-managed realities, our advocacy is equally about and is equally happening through and via the very same spaces whose politics impact, threaten and frame the digital or internet rights we advocate for.

In this scenario, meaningful access to platforms becomes advocacy. The question is how to use the online and now hybrid spaces not as episodic bridges to stay connected, but as integral, continuous, permanent spaces where advocacy can thrive.

It is important to look at and name how organisations, collectives and activists have moved or can move from the emergency of the moment to a strategic use and understanding of commercial as well as autonomous infrastructure that can enable their advocacy, and that they can advocate for.

This report captures some of the experiences of Body & Data, a Nepali-based organisation, and their trajectory as a feminist digital rights organisation. It tries to capture not only the changes that the organisation made, but how their new digital spaces influenced and intertwined with what they advocated for.

The story

A couple of days after we started working virtually, I was thinking like, “What do I use at home?”, because I have this table in my room that is like ages old, from when we used those desktop computers, a computer bought in my college days, right, and it's not really comfortable and I used one of my dining chairs to work. I'm glad I had that table in my room, that I didn't have to go rushing, buying things to start with.

Shubha, Body and Data team member

Grounded and locked into our own local realities, homes and rooms. Separated by one another, local and global collectives and organisations had to step up or reinvent ways of strengthening and supporting collective and individual memory, re-creating and

sustaining a shared sense of mission, imagining daily online working practices as tactile and embodied. With online experiences being as diverse, fragile and precarious as the many locations and positionalities of the advocates, this was not easy or possible for everyone.

Advocacy counted on bodies and physical spaces! Intervention in local or global venues, press conferences, workshops. The material distribution of printed text and posters. One or many of these would offer unavoidable intersections, opportunities to share evidence and build alliances. All of this froze!

The hidden costs of being online for work with a strong, reliable and stable connection or with access to tools that would guarantee one's privacy and safety became visible, and issues of affordability and meaningful connectivity became evident, contributing to the sense of precariousness and dependency:

Technology was really helpful because during lockdown it was the only thing on which I relied to talk to other people, friends, colleagues and family. At the same time there were issues [...] the electricity was up and down, on and off – it would be really difficult when the meeting was happening and the electricity goes down. [...] And it was not only electricity. I used Wi-Fi from my mobile network and it was expensive and it impacted our work and advocacy quite directly.

Rita, Body & Data team member

It was a sudden realisation for many that all interactions would have to be mediated by technology. The longer the time, the higher the alienation – and the realisation that technology was as necessary as water, air, land, food.

As a feminist digital rights organisation, Body & Data already had a wealth of experience to draw on in this area. Meaningful access, the right to association online, the internet as public good, were and are part of their digital rights advocacy agenda. But where they found themselves was in a no-humans-land, entrapped inside and by the machine; and they knew that if they wanted to thrive, they could not rely on what they knew or solely on what was available – they had to create their own alternatives:

One of the main concerns we had around our activities was creating a safe space, making people comfortable coming to us, that was our concern. [...] When we started we had multiple calls and suggestions from many people [...] that helped us through, and now we have this alternative that we can always go to.

Kabita, Body and Data team member

Paradoxes cannot be solved; once acknowledged it takes a leap in the void, an act of magic to move through them and beyond them.

Closer than ever: What was it and how did it work?

APC's "Closer than ever" statement was [...] warm and at the same time [was] giving lots of hope. We really felt okay. It was, is, really closer than ever in multiple senses, and I think that was something to really remember and carry on in our further activities as well.

Kabita, Body & Data team member

APC's "Closer than ever" approach supported Body & Data. During weekly meet-ups, several aspects of working from a distance were discussed, such as so-called "productivity" and internal communication tools, but also care, digital fatigue, and so on. The weekly "calls and guidance" helped the organisation "through the transitioning process, to move the work virtually." As they put it, "[t]he team felt supported and held during the difficult time."²

Besides this, the Body & Data team invested in and engaged in multiple sessions on media management and organisational technical infrastructures, enhancing their skills on managing their own infrastructure in order to be independent:

I remember our first storytelling workshop online, we were really scared and nervous as to how to create a safe space while being apart physically. We were able to use our Nextcloud space for the participants to send their works, share their ideas and work amongst themselves. Personally, for me, that was one of the moments that truly hold the essence of how closer we are virtually.

Shripa, Body & Data team member

Humans adapt and change. Building these new online collective selves was an act of hope, trust and hard work. Their happening and fluidity informed both the issues being advocated for, and the way of working, giving digital rights advocacy access to both familiar and new, larger audiences, and investing these interactions with nuances born by the everyday use and experience of technology that they did not have access or proximity to before.

There were lots of changes and uncertainty whether to go with our already set plan. [...] Thinking through the plan again, redesigning things. So if we were planning something we were paying attention to what would be the different aspects in the now, and that was really like helpful to our work. [...] A lot of the work did not stop somewhere [...]. It was tampered with, obviously, but there was something different – we would see [new things] as possibility.

Kabita, Body & Data team member

- 1 APC. (2020). *Closer than ever: Keeping our movements connected and inclusive – The Association for Progressive Communications' response to the COVID-19 pandemic*. <https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/closer-ever-keeping-our-movements-connected-and-inclusive-association-progressive>
- 2 Expanding the EROTICS Network in South Asia: Body & Data final narrative report.

But, as Kabita and Neha explain, they were not used to working remotely, so they took this on as a collective responsibility. Some of the change that occurred during 2020 became a kind of established new reality as a second lockdown was introduced in Nepal. The Body & Data team and their new team member could use the infrastructures as well as the policies built as a response to the first emergency:

We really did lots of communications looking for mutual understanding of the things like checking in or planning for any activities, and really giving more time and energy and attention. That was very much an important thing we did. [...] We built guidelines to work from home or working from distance and on what you're working too. [...] The process was collective and most of the activities we do in this and that policy are things we formalised which guides our whole work. [...] All of that was based on our day-to-day experience. So when we had to go back again to virtual work [...] we had something we could use so it was an easier transition.

Kabita, Body & Data team member

Body & Data's relationship with technology deepened and became more complex. As an organisation they used technological tools and platforms such as email, a website and social media accounts as part of their standard communication. They already had specific advocacy and capacity practices with their core communities such as digital storytelling. But what they developed and where they landed in their use and advocacy is described as more cohesive and complex:

Working with the organisation's tech infrastructure while not being a techy, was a fascinating and rewarding experience. It could have been a daunting task, but with support from other feminist techies as well as the values that guide us on what kind of tech we want to use (open source, encrypted and safe), the journey become more exploratory. It opened new horizons for how tech can be used for advocacy for us as an organisation.

One of the important steps in advocacy is how we communicate with each other within the team; that was a highlight as well as a challenge during remote working. During the first two years of the pandemic, we got to manage and have more autonomy over our own server space, bringing applications and resources that were useful to us – Nextcloud, Riseup, calendars, etc.; finding collaborative spaces, as well as strategies so that we weren't left alone in our boxes of the screen.

We set up weekly meetings through Zoom or Jitsi to have space for check-ins with each other because we missed informal conversations during lunch hours. The spirit of check-ins during meetings still stays with us.

Collaborative working spaces like Riseup, or etherpads that were used for minutes, showed how online collaboration works beyond Google services. We are still exploring how to integrate collaborative open source software with our servers.

We had made decisions about which communication channels to use for what specific purposes. We set up a tech infrastructure guideline – that guided new team members as well as old team members on how to effectively use the tech resources. All of these small examples helped us navigate the pandemic and also strengthen our internal communications.

Shripa, Body & Data team member

Today they work seamlessly in person and remotely using a mash-up of tools and platforms. Some they own, such as their Nextcloud repository and website, which they manage independently; some they routinely access and use because of their partner and membership relationship with APC; and some are commercial services they are subscribed to:

At the beginning as a team we used to talk on Signal [...] When we started using Mattermost then I realised oh, it's so much easier to talk over Mattermost because you have so many channels. [...] That was one of the shifts that we had, [...] APC providing us Mattermost, for free on the APC server. It's a support we still feel.

Shubha, Body & Data team member

Using commercial services was quite different. Accessing Zoom required international bank cards and Nepal did not allow this until very recently. So Body & Data had to create their own system for sending money outside the country. A friend living abroad in India would purchase and pay for the Body & Data Zoom account, and then get reimbursed via her Nepali bank account.

However, by using this mixed infrastructure, drawing on what was available, and what could be relied on, a safe space for interactions was created, as Sapana, a new team member, explains:

When I started at Body & Data [...] I joined the office physically for 20 days or something and then the second lockdown happened and it was really the first time I was working virtually using official spaces, such as Mattermost or Nextcloud. [...] The space was not intimidating at all, and was really reassuring that the communication within this channel had lesser risk or no risk of like my information, whatever I share, would get like leaked or something. [...] That safer environment and safer space helped me. [...] If you would tell me one year or one and a half years before that like official work is possible, like all of it through a virtual space, I would not have believed you. And I would not have participated, most likely.

Sapana, Body & Data team member

Sapana knows that doing work in a physical space brings another joy. A joy that during 2022 and 2021 was missed. Still she recognised that working online, though different, does not necessary diminish the quality of interaction, but that this also depended on

the Body & Data team actively using the technology to create a meaningful and supportive space online:

It gives us space to be, unlike my previous working spaces, vulnerable, and to accept that is okay; if I'm not getting this thing, ask for help and there is always someone to listen to you and address it as much as possible.

Sapana, Body & Data team member

Advocacy: The “how” and the “what”

Body & Data is a “digital rights organisation focused on creating a free, open and just internet that respects autonomy of individuals and upholds their dignity.”³

Under the umbrella of public health, the Nepali government, like many others, introduced contact tracing systems to prevent the spread of the virus by tracking potential virus carriers. However, it not only raised many issues around privacy, consent and security, but compromised and threatened the psycho-social security of people.

Personal information like passport numbers and phone numbers were shared online, resulting in hate speech, death threats and social exclusion as well as psychological harm against people that tested positive. People that were particularly discriminated against, such as foreign workers, migrants and people of certain castes or religions (like Muslims), found themselves without protection or recourse to justice because the government did not anticipate and understand the implications of their decisions, and had no mechanisms to address these issues:

We started monitoring media, documenting digital rights issues relating to privacy, violence, digital ID, freedom of expression, and we started internet freedom conversations in our native speech. We did that event monthly. [...] That was also new. While working virtually we explored those advocacies.⁴

Neha, Body & Data team member

As a response to the problem of misinformation, for example, Body & Data organised a campaign around online gender-based violence and misinformation, reaching 150 people through its webinars.

As the team suggests, even simple changes to their online advocacy approach had an important effect:

I felt that going into virtual space gave more; like we kind of explored new interventions of advocacy. Before we were doing social media and posting [to support] our campaign. We would post like videos; but then in 2021 we started having a newsletter [...] that was also a way of our advocacy.

Neha, Body & Data team member

By producing different advocacy outputs online, the work of doing advocacy had to change too:

The things we started producing, such as organisational statements regarding incidents that were happening and were very problematic, were important to raise voices. We started that and we are continuing doing it. [It was] because of the particular situations that we got introduced to those issues, those problems and needs, and we had to keep our eyes on them. [...] I think we were considering the situation and [...] how things like misinformation were happening. That was not only giving us issues to consider in our work, but also the way we work.

Kabita, Body & Data team member

However, they also found that even offline, when the first lockdown ended, their way of thinking about organising advocacy had changed:

When we were planning for even small gatherings, [approaching] people we wanted to work with or planning for our activities, any campaign, or any workshop, any webinars, we were thinking on the nuances; for example, how the masks will be integrated, how that's gonna impact in a different way. That was I think given more attention and time.

Kabita, Body & Data team member

The Body & Data team feel that participating online in national and international events was important and helped broaden their knowledge. It helped to “accelerate advocacy as well as contributed to developing strategies for further activities in a more effective way. It [was] also very important to occupy spaces, intervene and increase visibility.”⁵ Body & data occupied different platforms, expanding their advocacy and focusing on the emerging intersections between digital rights, internet freedom and the impact of COVID-19 on the rights of marginalised people in Nepal. While they were already advocating against the stigmatisation of women and marginalised groups such as Muslims, Dalits, etc., they expanded their outreach and understanding from “everyday sexism, Islamophobia, classicism, casteism” to misinformation online:

Beyond the tech infrastructure work, looking at remote working, my definition of what working and advocacy could look like has broadened. It has made me question how things were running and how things are running and who we are excluding in the work. The remote working environment has been advocated by the disability community for years. Going to specific places for advocacy and activism has implicit privileges – who has the access to go to these places for advocating their issues.

3 Expanding the EROTICS network in South Asia: Body and Data final narrative report.

4 Body & Data team members engaged in the Boju Bojai podcast about feminist internet, privacy and freedom of expression, the queer movement, language and visibility in the Nepalese context.

5 Expanding the EROTICS network in South Asia: Body and Data final narrative report.

There were limitations of working virtually – missing the hugs, the subtle glances and understanding nods, the non-verbal ways of affection, etc.

But it also opened new horizons into how to do things – to be more open and say what one feels. It brought a new language for care – emojis, personal DMs reminding to drink water, lurking behind with specific people after the meeting so we could just talk about how our day went, setting deadlines for decisions and feedbacks [in a way that] we don't misinterpret them as not taking time caring, and being able to experiment with tech, while not being a techy.

Shripa, Body & Data team member

But as many organisations across the world have found, online advocacy has both its limits and its possibilities:

I guess one of the things we were not able to do after the COVID was travel across the country and also internationally. That affected our capacity as a team because otherwise members of the team would have gotten the opportunity to travel, be in international spaces where they would meet other activists, and feel like okay, we're not alone in this. So I guess that is something that was missed out.

In terms of the digital rights spaces, like RightsCon and APRIGF [Asia Pacific Regional Internet Governance Forum] and stuff like that, I don't think it would be possible for us to join if it was not for virtual. [There would] either be travel funding or a visa issue, or one or the other. But that space got opened up. [...] It used to be one person from Body & Data [who could attend] but now, you know, all of us could go. It is advocacy spaces, but it is not exactly advocacy spaces, but yeah, it opened up.

The funny thing is we started getting invitations to speak in platforms where it's mostly like, you know, men – not even digital rights, basically IT-related men working – and it was kind of interesting. We got invitations to speak in a couple of things, but I always felt out of space whenever I was in those forums, because I could not feel if people were listening. [It was as if] they just did events to do events.

Shubha, Body & Data team member

Being online all the time produced a kind of existential exhaustion, and, after two years, a new energy was needed:

Because during the lockdown phase everything was online, people realised that online events are really important and online advocacy was important at the time; but it is not the same sentiment right now, because they just want to go to the normal, physical spaces.

We are tired of our online presence. We also want to go to the physical spaces and have that interaction with people. Still I think both online and physical spaces advocacies are going on. We are trying to do mixed advocacy here.

Rita, Body & Data team member

Action steps

What can we learn from the Body & Data experience during COVID-19?

- Tech infrastructure is not a luxury. Funders need to provide civil society organisations, collectives and activists with unrestricted funds to build and maintain their own autonomous infrastructure.
- Working only online produces new approaches to advocacy, and can result in discovering new areas of advocacy that need attention – the “how” can influence the “what”.
- Working online only increases the ability for civil society activists to participate, and introduces them to new spaces, even if the value of some of these spaces can be uncertain.
- It is critical to create safe spaces for interaction online, which can be achieved using mixed commercial and open-source infrastructures if necessary.
- Working online only produces its own kind of existential exhaustion – there is a need to reinvigorate ourselves through human contact.
- There is a need to continue using and engaging with online and in-person advocacy spaces and strategies. The benefits of one does not mean the benefits of the other cannot be realised.
- Reach the ones who are not connected through internet using creative means and strategies.
- Remember to celebrate and adapt to thrive in difficult times, and to nurture collective memories.

I am grateful for the possibility of this conversation. It not only created a space for a collective reflection, it also became a nurturing memory, a place of the heart to go to when things return and become difficult again – a collective yet personal resource of how we can adapt, thrive and weave our actions and advocacy with our emerging realities.

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.

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH
2021-2022 Report
www.GISWatch.org