Leading in the Digital Age: Promoting a Safe and Inclusive Digital World

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Issue

Canada is uniquely positioned to advance digital inclusion through targeted and strategic initiatives relating to issues of availability, access, civic participation, and trust, specifically in the areas of Internet Communications Technology (ICT) access, digital libraries, technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV), and digital trust for refugees.

Background

A digital divide persists globally in several areas that hinder digital inclusion and, if left unanswered, will persist as an insurmountable barrier to the equitable realization of human rights in the digital age. Barriers to access and availability of digital infrastructure still exist in several regions of the world, especially along gendered and racial lines. But as more individuals gain access, new concerns are emerging, specifically concerns relating to human rights, civic participation, trust and safety online.

While the internet has been recognized as a critical enabler of human rights and as a space in which human rights can be realized, considerable pressure is being placed on the international human rights framework to affirm the rights of individuals within digital spaces. With the growing application of artificial intelligence (AI) and big data technologies, there is an immediate need to develop mechanisms capable of responding to technology-enabled human rights abuses. Much of the power to protect human rights is in the domain of private technology companies who own and operate the platforms through which global citizens interact. Although there has been little appetite to regulate these companies, recent issues surrounding misinformation, disinformation, and civil society movements have created a policy window for which Canada can take advantage.

Through targeted and strategic interventions, Canada has an opportunity to advance innovations that both safeguard human rights online and align with its interests as they relate to international development, the strengthening of the rules-based international order, the promotion of democracy, and, last but not least, a feminist foreign policy agenda. Moreover, Canada is in a strong position to advance the global effort for digital inclusion as outlined in the United Nations Roadmap for Digital Cooperation, and to lead in four key areas: addressing problems of access to ICT in the Global South, specifically in Sub-Saharan Africa; enhancing digital civic participation; confronting technology-facilitated gender-based violence; and securing digital trust for refugees.

Access to Internet Communications Technology and the SMART Africa Strategic Vision

In 2019, close to 87 percent of people living in developed countries used the internet, compared to only 19 percent in the least-developed countries (particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa) (International Telecommunications Unions, 2019), a disparity that persists despite the theoretical access to ICT and mobile connections available in nearly every region. Moreover, the hesitancy for private companies to invest in these regions is exacerbated by the lacklustre market environment and lower purchasing power in the

least-developed countries (UNGA, 2020). This creates the need to incentivize companies and establish baselines for future development projects.

With this in mind, the advent of new technology creates new possibilities for establishing ICT within Sub-Saharan Africa, such as low-earth orbit satellites, which have been shown to provide competitive or better service than existing rural options in the United States and Canada (McKetta, 2021). When enabling the region, it is essential to examine power dynamics at play within negotiations over infrastructure investment, a potentially tenuous situation evidenced in the 60 million dollar investment by Huawei into a technology park in Angola (Lusa, 2020).

As Canada works to support the COVID-19 economic recovery in developing countries and promotes greater access and availability of ICT, project design needs to achieve these aims beyond the initiatives that GAC currently supports, namely videlicet La Francophonie and those in the supplementary mandate letter of the Minister of International Development. One option is the SMART Africa Strategic Vision, which aims to bring affordable Broadband internet to the continent. Canadian financial and technical assistance would help the participating African states become players in the knowledge economy and would do so in a way that does not infringe on their sovereignty or interfere with their development priorities.

Enabling Civic Participation through Digital Libraries

Digital citizenship - the ability to participate in society online - increases as individuals gain access to ICTs. A higher percentage of individuals, especially young people, who face barriers to civic participation through traditional political spaces now have the opportunity to engage civically online. However, there are barriers in the online world that impair the fulfilment of digital citizenship (Byrne et al., 2020). Through digital civic engagement, individuals find themselves targeted by bots and specific groups of people that seek to hurt them (Byrne et al., 2020). This harassment and violence can come in many forms and is particularly harmful to young females online. Additionally, misinformation and disinformation can create distrust of online civic spaces and create greater distrust and polarization within communities.

One method of combating these barriers and increasing access and trust is through local libraries. Libraries

have historically served as information advocates to encourage individuals to share knowledge (Johnson, 2017). Libraries provide access to information and technology, especially in rural communities, while fostering trust in information and resources by using local staff and infrastructure (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, n.d.). The Global Libraries initiative by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation made strides towards strengthening public libraries and providing more technology access and digital literacy resources globally. The Gates Foundations transnational network and experience in working across governments makes them a notable organization to collaborate with. Moreover, Canada already has an existing relationship with them via the Global Canada Initiative.

Additionally, investments in capacity-building for civic actors, such as journalists, to provide them with tools to safely and competently report on civic issues can help build community trust and protect civil society actors online. For example, the NGO Tactical Tech initiative aims to increase digital literacy by providing civil society actors with tools for safer and more informed technology use. This organization has done significant work globally to combat online harassment, violence, and focus on digital trust and literacy for citizens and civil society actors. Tactical Tech's existing transnational network, experience working with different regions in a culturally sensitive manner, and collaboration with the European Union makes it a strong collaborative partner.

Through the Digital Charter Implementation Act of 2020, Canada has already affirmed that accessible, reliable, and diverse information is essential to strengthening and sustaining democratic practices and institutions. In aligning with Canadian support abroad for democracy, human rights, international law and freedom of the press, it is vital that Canada invest in partnerships with international non-profit organizations and initiatives such as Tactical Tech to continue the work of the Global Libraries initiative to work towards safer, more accessible, and more trustworthy online spaces for civic participation.

Tackling Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence through the Freedom Online Coalition

Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) is a problem that affected one-third of women prior to the pandemic (Dhrodia, 2017). With COVID-19 accelerating activity online, the instances and severity of TFGBV have

increased, with harassment up 40 percent since lockdowns began (Burrell & Ruxton, 2020, 25). This violence affects racialized and 2SLGBTQ+ individuals at a higher rate than gender normative or non-racialized populations (Plan International, 2020, 21). Most attacks are perpetrated by individuals unknown to the victim and occur on social media platforms (Dunn, 2020, 7). TFGBV negatively impacts individuals by contributing to social isolation and loss of income, as women adapt their online participation after encountering TFGBV (Amnesty International, 2018). Impacts are of particular concern in developing nations (Dunn, 2020, 22-23). Civic participation is diminished as victims exclude themselves from digital environments, thereby losing trust in the reporting mechanisms of social media companies due to inaction and a lack of transparency (Amnesty International, 2018).

To date, little progress has been made in addressing TFGBV as reporting mechanisms, and protections for victims are largely in the hands of private social media companies. There has been little desire to regulate or pressure companies to address moderation standards. However, attention drawn to content moderation through media reporting on misinformation, disinformation and civil society movements has facilitated a policy window and improved interest on the part of social media companies to address TFGBV. Barriers to success continue to be the international and anonymous nature of the internet.

Multilateral networks like the Freedom Online Coalition (FOC) provide an opportunity for Canada to engage with a multitude of stakeholders in addressing reporting mechanisms and protections for victims while meeting previous international commitments. These include the Group of Seven (G7) commitment to preventing online violence against women and girls (Global Affairs Canada, 2018, 5) and the *Human Rights Council Resolution on Accelerating efforts to eliminate violence against women and girls: preventing and responding to violence against women and girls in digital contexts*. Enhanced engagement through the FOC on issues of TFGBV would also be a demonstration of Canada's commitment to a feminist foreign policy agenda.

Securing Digital Trust for Refugees through the UNHCR Executive Committee

As the international human rights framework evolves to contend with emerging issues in the digital age, the rights of refugees in digital spaces are being neglected and violated. A prevailing desire to advance innovations for the application of AI technologies and identity digitization in refugee support efforts has outpaced the establishment of safeguards to protect their rights, which, if left unchecked, could compromise their safety and security. While limited access and availability of digital infrastructure still pose challenges for this vulnerable group, violations of data subject rights and the right to privacy severely undermine trust and therefore preclude the realization of digital inclusion for refugees. Moreover, the absence of specific protections undermines the objectives of the UN Roadmap for Digital Cooperation, particularly in the areas of Digital Inclusion, Digital Trust, and Digital Human Rights, as well as the Global Compact on Refugees, which establishes a principle of international solidarity for protecting and assisting refugees.

In June 2021, the Human Rights Watch published a report detailing a violation of the rights of approximately 830,000 Rohingya refugees whose biometric data was collected by the UNCHR and Government of Bangladesh seemingly for access to support services, and yet was shared with the Government of Myanmar to facilitate involuntary repatriation (HRW 2021). The required exchange of refugee identity and biometric data for resources and protections means that free and informed consent for data collection is not meaningfully achieved and constitutes a loss of privacy (Data & Society 2019).

In addition to undermining trust, inconsistent data governance practices and unclear data subject accountability mechanisms in organizations experimenting with AI and identity digitization puts the safety and security of refugees at risk and adds another layer of vulnerability to their lives, especially for those who identify as women and/or members of sexual, ethnic, and religious minority groups (Gilliland and Carbone 2020). These outcomes are not aligned with the spirit of the international human rights framework, the rules-based international order, or with Canadian values; therefore, there is a need to develop global norms around refugee digital rights as well as consistent and transparent data governance standards to uphold these rights.

Canada has a long history of global leadership in the international refugee support regime, and the strides made in the last several years have further increased our influence in the Executive Committee of the UNHCR (Rae 2020). As a result, Canada is uniquely poised to take leadership

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on this critical area of digital inclusion by leveraging our convening power and recognized authority to drive action in the most vital multilateral fora in the international refugee support regime. Undertaking meaningful action in this area will advance our feminist foreign policy agenda, as well as our commitments to human rights and to strengthening the rules-based international order.

Recommendations

1. **1. Canada should seek to broaden its ties with SMART Africa and La Francophonie members.** It should provide strategic planning, monitoring, and evaluation to ongoing local initiatives. Specifically, by supporting the development of Internet Exchange Points across Africa which are enabling countries to establish deep-sea fibre optic connections that reduce latency and transit costs, availability and access of ICT are improved across the continent. Canada could demonstrate that it is serious about improving access and doing so will reduce the role insufficient ICT plays in perpetuating inequality.

2. **2. Canada should invest in partnerships with INGOs and initiatives such as Tactical Tech and invest in continuing the work of the Global Libraries initiative of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to advance towards safer, more accessible, and more trustworthy online spaces for civic participation**. By investing in organizations like Tactical Tech that support civil society actors internationally, Canada can work to meet its commitment to support democracy and freedom of the press. The Global Libraries initiative demonstrated that investing in public libraries can create greater and more equitable access to technology while increasing digital literacy and fighting misinformation at a community level. This would align with Canada's commitment to build a foundation of trust and create more access to technology globally.

3. **3. Canada should leverage its position as a member of the Freedom Online Coalition to establish a Working Group on TFGBV.** Canada should strike a new working group with the support of a likeminded co-chair like the United Kingdom to address the topic of TFGBV through an intersectional lens with the goal of issuing a joint statement   aimed at strengthening reporting and removal mechanisms

for perpetrators and providing support mechanisms for victims. Recommendations should examine actions stakeholders can take and incorporate recommendations of previous FOC working groups such as the utilization of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights in corporate strategy regarding TFGBV and terms of service enforcement (Freedom Online Coalition, 2017, 23).

4. **4. At the upcoming 72nd meeting of the Executive Committee of the UNHCR, Canada should institute a call for the development of global norms on refugee digital rights and global standards for refugee data governance.** Canada should leverage its comparative expertise in intersectional policy development to lead the development of norms and standards to affirm and protect the digital rights of refugees. In the process, Canada should press the UNHCR to strengthen its own refugee Data Protection Policy. This effort will be in the best interest of Canada's profile as a leader in the international refugee support regime, our feminist foreign policy agenda, and our commitment to strengthening the rules-based international order.

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