



APC POSITION PAPER

CLOSER THAN EVER: KEEPING OUR MOVEMENTS CONNECTED AND INCLUSIVE

THE ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS'
RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

SUMMARY

Access to the internet is vital for an informed, cooperative and people-centred global response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It plays a crucial role in enabling a flow of information and sustaining communities in times of crisis, and is integral to any disaster management plan. While devastating structural inequalities across the world are being laid bare by the virus, a sense of community and collective resilience are acquiring new meaning and

importance. The internet is part of this emerging resilience. Because of this, it needs to be protected as a public good, and human rights must be upheld online in any response to the crisis.

This briefing paper outlines the Association for Progressive Communications' (APC) current thinking on the pandemic. It identifies several key, interrelated issues that require attention by governments, the private sector and civil society.

DIGITAL EXCLUSION MAKES THE VULNERABLE MORE VULNERABLE

People who have been historically marginalised and subjected to conditions of poverty and structural exclusion are the most adversely impacted by the pandemic. It has been highlighted that inequality severely limits the opportunities and ability of people to have access to the necessary means to ensure their well-being, particularly affordable and effective healthcare.

This is particularly true for anyone whose lived experience sits at the intersections of multiple forms of discrimination and exclusion, including those related to sexuality and gender. Abusive and restrictive cultural and social norms are disproportionality augmented by lockdowns and restriction of movement. In many countries, there is already recognition that there are growing instances of domestic violence against women and girls,¹ as well as violence within the family against people of diverse sexualities and genders. Women and people of diverse sexualities and genders are going to experience the burden of multitasking between their professional work and the invisibilised and unpaid labour that they do in domestic and private spaces, including care work, especially care for children and the elderly. Thus, we urge donors and civil society organisations to implement an intentional strategy that minimises the anxiety that emerges from the need to perform at a certain level of competence.

Power imbalances are made more evident and stark, disproportionately affecting groups that suffer multiple, intersectional forms of discrimination. Communities without access to the internet or with limited connectivity are more isolated and vulnerable, and are unable to readily access the public health information and services they need. This will result in deepened social and economic inequalities in the future. A lack of internet access can also exacerbate an already repressive, harmful and unequal context for women and people of diverse genders and sexualities.

Equitable, affordable and reliable internet connectivity is paramount in accessing relevant information and effective online health assistance which can make the difference between life and death. It is essential to stay connected to families, friends and loved ones, and for psychological and psycho-social support. The continuation of education for

children and adults, whether at schools, colleges or universities, has now also become dependent on reliable connectivity and devices. The internet allows us to sustain economies through remote work; and, just as importantly, to strengthen responses from communities and social movements, including to ensure that human rights are upheld by authorities. As has been shown across the world, as artists take their work online, it has also given us new ways of accessing cultural production in a time of social isolation.

Concerted efforts to bring the benefits of meaningful internet access to all people are necessary in the current circumstances. In the immediate and short term, barriers related to costs and data capacity should be addressed. Establishing fee waivers for key disadvantaged groups, reducing the costs of internet-enabled devices (smartphones) and data packages, and eliminating data caps or at least increasing mobile data allowances are practices that can be easily adopted and implemented by internet providers to ensure people can access the internet while under lockdown. Governments should include subsidised data packages and laptops as part of measures related to social protection strategies for low-income populations and health workers to assist them in the crisis. They should also acknowledge the importance of free public access facilities and hotspots by putting them back on the connectivity agenda and investing in those solutions. It will clearly take a longer time for developing countries to universalise household connectivity. Because of this, public access is an important step in mitigating the social and economic effects of the crisis.

In the longer term, it is critical that attention be urgently given to affordable and appropriate internet access for communities. A radical change of policy, logic and strategy is necessary to address the needs of the billions² of people in developing countries who still suffer from digital exclusion. The first step is to provide alternatives for infrastructure deployment, expanding coverage and addressing affordability. Governments should create enabling ecosystems to allow small-scale networks and locally owned telecommunications infrastructure to emerge and expand. Decentralised community-built and owned networks are the most effective way to overcome digital exclusion in areas that are still isolated from the social and economic dynamics of the digital era. The experience of existing community network movements in different regions and related regulatory developments in some countries are key pillars to build on. Many examples of these are described in APC's research report on connecting the unconnected.³

1 Neuman, S. (2020, 6 April). Global Lockdowns Resulting In 'Horrible Surge' In Domestic Violence, U.N. Warns. *NPR*. <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/04/06/827908402/global-lockdowns-resulting-in-horrifying-surge-in-domestic-violence-u-n-warns>

2 <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>

3 Bidwell, N., & Jensen, M. (2019). *Bottom-up Connectivity Strategies: Community-led small-scale telecommunication infrastructure networks in the global South*. APC. <https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/bottom-connectivity-strategies-community-led-small-scale-telecommunication-infrastructure>

New approaches are necessary to increase individual and collective agency, autonomy and self-determination in how people connect to digital technology and spaces. A radical rethinking of the role of internet connectivity and access to digital infrastructures cannot be delayed in order to better address urgent societal problems and the economic downturn resulting from the pandemic.

In APC's view, the internet is a global public resource, which should be recognised and governed as a global public good. In the context of the pandemic, the publicness of the internet and the global digital commons should be strengthened rather than eroded.

THE IMPORTANCE OF UPHOLDING HUMAN RIGHTS ONLINE

The internet allows the exchange of life-critical information and sustains communities in times of crisis. It is also integral to any emergency response to the pandemic. The responses by some governments to the pandemic have nevertheless revealed fault lines that challenge the democratic foundations of societies. The fundamentals of human rights need to be strengthened, rather than discarded, during this time of global social stress. Because of this, the internet needs to be safeguarded as a public good, and as an enabler of these rights.

Public health emergencies should not be used as an excuse or justification to arbitrarily restrict freedoms and to normalise those restrictions. On the contrary, stronger institutional frameworks will be needed to preserve democratic values when we recover from the crisis. As emphasised by United Nations human rights experts, restrictions adopted "should be narrowly tailored and should be the least intrusive means to protect public health."⁴

Interruptions to access to the internet or shutdowns cannot be justified under any circumstances during the pandemic,⁵ even on grounds of public order and national security. In today's world, this is the same as shutting

down the electricity grid. The complete or partial disruption of access, such as slowing down internet traffic, is likely to exacerbate the risks that communities face. Access to updated and timely information, as well as the possibility to connect with others to seek assistance in case of emergency, is essential not only to "flatten the curve" of the virus, but also to save people's lives.

A number of governments are using digital technologies to manage widespread testing and contact tracing to flatten the curve. Whether technology is used for the purpose of increasing awareness about the risks and severity of the situation, sharing information about the pandemic, assisting with diagnosis, reporting suspected cases or keeping track of individuals who have contracted the virus,⁶ it is crucial to ensure adherence to the criteria of necessity and proportionality in the use of those technologies in order to safeguard the exercise of human rights.

The data protection legal frameworks of most countries around the world treat the health-related information of individuals as sensitive, confidential and personal data, and therefore it should be subject to protections to prevent it from being used in a discriminatory manner or for illegitimate purposes. Sufficient information on the scope of measures implemented by governments should be clearly communicated to the population, as well as the protocols to be adopted in order to prevent illegitimate access to and use of the information by third parties – both within and outside the public administration.⁷

The private sector also has an obligation to ensure that the rapid uptake of its applications, for social, educational and work-related communications, as well as an increase in the use of social media by people in lockdown, are not used as tools for surveillance of any kind.⁸ The privacy and security of individuals need to be properly safeguarded.

Restrictive content controls can heighten social stress during a global pandemic, with chilling effects on the rights to freedom of expression and access to information.

4 OHCHR. (2020, 16 March). COVID-19: States should not abuse emergency measures to suppress human rights – UN experts. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25722&LangID=E>

5 Voule, C. N. (2019). Report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association. https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/FAssociation/A_HRC_41_41_EN.docx

6 APC & Derechos Digitales. (2019). Ecuador: Surveillance technologies implemented to confront COVID-19 must not endanger human rights. <https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/ecuador-surveillance-technologies-implemented-confront-covid-19-must-not-endanger-human-rights>; CIPESA. (2020, 27 March). Covid-19 in Africa: When is Surveillance Necessary and Proportionate? <https://cipesa.org/2020/03/covid-19-in-africa-when-is-surveillance-necessary-and-proportionate>

7 For example, see: Access Now. (2020). *Recommendations on privacy and data protection in the fight against COVID-19*. <https://www.accessnow.org/cms/assets/uploads/2020/03/Access-Now-recommendations-on-Covid-and-data-protection-and-privacy.pdf>

8 Wakefield, J. (2020, 2 April). Zoom boss apologises for security issues and promises fixes. *BBC*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-52133349>

Media workers, such as journalists and bloggers, have a critical role to play in sharing health information and keeping authorities accountable as they enforce any social restrictions during national lockdowns. They need to be able to report freely on the unfolding pandemic, and should not be censored online.

Governments must ensure that legal proceedings against individuals deemed to have violated emergency measures adhere to the principles of due process and international human rights standards, and are conducted in a compassionate manner and with empathy. Practices of information verification should be promoted instead of suppressing or censoring content or criminalising disinformation.

The increasing use of artificial intelligence and automated decision-making systems by platforms during the crisis⁹ could also have negative repercussions on vulnerable and marginalised populations. Access to crucial information to reduce the risks of contagion, and freedom of expression, could be severely affected through automated content moderation and takedowns. Human rights laws should be the default standards guiding companies' content moderation policies and procedures. Principles¹⁰ of accountability, transparency, non-arbitrariness, and meaningful appeal processes, among others, should guide content moderation during the crisis.

The "hidden ghost work" involved in image labelling, text processing and content moderation, often outsourced and performed by back-end workers across developing economies,¹¹ has also emerged as a critical issue. There have been reports¹² of content moderators contracted by social media platforms having to work from offices during the pandemic. As APC has stated, content moderation needs to be acknowledged as labour that is devalued and offshored, and often feminised as well.¹³

The labour rights of content moderators, including their right to a healthy and safe work environment, need to be upheld during the pandemic.

The pandemic has put lives across races, classes, gender and ethnicity at risk. It is unfortunate that there has been an upsurge in racist and Islamophobic messaging in online spaces in some countries,¹⁴ vilifying particular communities for the spread of the virus. Online and traditional media outlets as well as political actors and non-state actors have resorted to violent hate mongering in these countries, resulting in loss of life and sense of security. States and the private sector need to take immediate action to address these forms of violence in accordance with international law to ensure that communities and individuals are not further marginalised.

A FEMINIST LENS TO RESPOND AND TRANSFORM

If digital technology and the internet are the lifeline of our days, then a feminist internet becomes an imperative.¹⁵ We need to not only recognise and support, but to actively listen, network and amplify the work of individual and collective nodes of hyperlocal resistance happening in the streets to the global digital highways of the internet. At this moment, even though it seems far off, we have the opportunity to rethink and move towards building and owning infrastructure and strengthening decentralised networks for communications. Across the world, numerous ongoing protests have been shut down and dismantled as a result of pandemic-related lockdowns, and the grievances behind those protests are still real and remain. From a feminist perspective, it is apparent that there are still glaring structural inequalities and power dynamics in relation to infrastructure and access, but also within and among communities and within the family. As much as the internet is the terrain for resilience and connection, it is also where disinformation, "fake news", and groups driven by fascist and racist rhetoric are targeting individuals and specific communities for their alleged responsibility in relation to the pandemic, and this has ranged from attacks on transgender women to expressions of Sinophobia and Islamophobia online and onground. Therefore, the importance of a feminist internet that is safe for all cannot be overstated. In relation to the movements around women's rights, gender and sexuality that APC plays a role in, we

9 Kayyali, D. (2020, 19 March). As content moderators go home, content could go down. *WITNESS*. <https://blog.witness.org/2020/03/as-content-moderators-go-home-content-could-go-down>

10 <https://santaclaraprinciples.org>

11 Raval, N. (2019). Automating informality: On AI and labour in the global South. In A. Finlay (Ed.), *Global Information Society Watch 2019: Artificial intelligence: Human rights, social justice and development*. APC and ARTICLE 19. <https://www.giswatch.org/node/6202>

12 Biddle, S. (2020, 12 March). Facebook Contractors Must Work in Offices During Coronavirus Pandemic – While Staff Stay Home. *The Intercept*. <https://theintercept.com/2020/03/12/coronavirus-facebook-contractors>

13 Namita. (2019, 23 September). Are we any better at judging right from wrong? Automation in content moderation. *GenderIT.org*. <https://www.genderit.org/articles/are-we-any-better-judging-right-wrong-automation-content-moderation>

14 Equality Labs. (2020, 7 April). #StopCOVIDIslamophobia: COVID-19 Appeal Letter. <https://medium.com/@EqualityLabs/stopcovidislamophobia-covid-19-appeal-letter-c47dd0860ff1>

15 <https://feministinternet.org>

must sustain responsible, caring relations with one another and recognise that each of us is a critical node of power and resistance. For this to happen, we need to make sure resources are distributed within all the various different existing networks. The vision of tomorrow, regardless of how far it will be, is one that calls for a fabric of love, care and a multiplicity of voices and languages, and an internet that is far more diverse and equal than the one that we have inherited.

REINVIGORATED ATTENTION TO CLIMATE ACTION AND ENVIRONMENTALLY SUSTAINABLE TECHNOLOGIES

The current crisis and the enforced reduction of mobility in towns and cities across the world has shown how everyday economies impact negatively on the environment through excessive carbon emissions and global travel. As a result of the massive quarantine of populations around the globe, improvements in the quality of the natural environment and the recovery of ecosystems have already started to be observed. This demonstrates our collective need to seriously explore alternatives to intensive travel and face-to-face meetings in order to reduce our carbon footprint and its impact on the environment and climate. Already, organisations are exploring alternative ways to interact using the internet: university courses are being taught remotely, and forums and festivals that were cancelled due to the pandemic have moved online.¹⁶ These are creative and promising initiatives that should be supported and strengthened.

There is also a need to critically rethink our ideas of sustainable development, with the environment and human health at the centre of future strategies.¹⁷ Digital technologies can play a part in mitigating the impacts of climate change, as well as helping displaced and affected communities to adapt to the challenges that lie ahead. The internet is also a crucial tool for environmental activism, and for keeping governments and extractive industries accountable. But numerous areas require reinvigorated policy advocacy by internet rights activists. There is, for example, a need for unfettered public access to big data sets dealing with the environment,

as well as open access to the latest scientific and environmental health research. Policy needs to consider the impact of the mass production and sale of consumer technology with short lifespans (built-in redundancy) on human well-being, the climate and the environment. As reliance on the intensive use of digital technologies increases to perform numerous activities, including remote work, schooling and provision of services, among others, it is important to address the eventual increase in production of devices and its impact on the environment. Standardisation needs to be addressed, and the plans for the roll-out of new technologies such as 5G networks need to be properly assessed for their health and environmental implications. Technology giants need to be accountable for the waste that is produced through the products that they sell. Proper disposal systems for redundant technology need to be set up at the local level, and should be required ahead of massive technological roll-out or market expansion. The refurbishment of old technology should be scaled up to increase access in homes and communities. A balancing act is necessary, which can be difficult. The current pandemic has shown how individuals need access to devices for interacting, working and learning, and it may be that more than one device per household is necessary. While access to the internet is critical to enabling human rights, this access needs to be safe for both human health and the environment.

The scale of restrictions we are currently experiencing is unprecedented. It is possible that the climate crisis will in the future produce similar responses by governments in dealing with climate-related environmental and social stress. Civil society will need to remain vigilant to any curtailment of human rights and freedoms, including those related to the defence of ecosystems and the struggle around environmental sustainability, and learn from the current pandemic where the fault lines that undermine internet rights emerge.

DEEPENING INCLUSIVITY AND CONNECTEDNESS, AND STRENGTHENING OUR MOVEMENTS

APC has always acknowledged the huge potential of the internet and digital networked technologies for bringing people together, and has substantively contributed to building movements and strengthening them to drive and sustain transformation and change towards social justice and development. The COVID-19 pandemic presents movements, including the digital rights movement, with extraordinary unprecedented circumstances. Remote

¹⁶ For example, the National Arts Festival in South Africa has gone online: <https://www.nationalartsfestival.co.za/news/virtual-naf-announcement>

¹⁷ Tan, J. (2020, 21 March). What good can come out of the coronavirus? APC. <https://www.apc.org/en/blog/what-good-can-come-out-coronavirus>

work¹⁸ and virtual meetings are at the moment the primary way to keep connected, and this may remain as the only possibility for an uncertain period – yet these remain critical ways to organise, gather support and build solidarity across the world.

We believe the pandemic offers us an opportunity to not only build on our history of connecting communities and movements, but also to find creative ways to organise ourselves, to exercise agency in the way we occupy digital spaces and use technologies, to foster dynamics of collective care and to reinforce our commitment to our struggle for a better world. We need to think outside the box, identify new opportunities for connectedness, and respond to the emerging challenges around communicating and working remotely. Common agendas and collective action will be needed.

The way in which feminist, human rights and environmental movements, among others, occupy the digital space will be a determining factor in how internet governance addresses power imbalances in the future. Meaningful inclusion and participation of all stakeholders remains necessary in internet policy discussions and decision-making processes, using online multistakeholder settings and mechanisms. The way in which we challenge power structures, discrimination and structural inequality and build global solidarity in the current crisis should reinforce our commitment to decolonising digital technologies and spaces. We need to harness the collective power of our organisations, coalitions and movements to ensure an open, free and feminist internet and inclusive and fair information societies in the days to come.

As humanity goes through this crisis with massive global implications, APC renews its commitment to working towards the positive use and transformative role of the internet to build bridges and connect movements contributing to equitable and sustainable development, social justice and participatory political processes. Our priority as the year unfolds will be to strengthen the capacity of our constituencies and the communities we work with to respond to the crisis through identifying and supporting the solutions that are best suited to meet the needs of the most disadvantaged people.

People should be able to trust the internet as a means for secure and private communications, and as a platform that enables human rights that are vital for overcoming the effects of the pandemic. This places a greater level of responsibility on governments and private sector actors to put people's rights at the centre of their responses to the crisis, and to strengthen the internet's function

as a public good and space. Voices have been emerging demanding recognition of internet access as a right, and the pandemic, in which big tech firms are increasingly acting as vital utilities,¹⁹ has shown the need for all stakeholders to be part of this discussion oriented to ensure that the public interest and people's rights are the guiding principles informing internet policies and internet governance arrangements. The pandemic can be an opportunity to recognise the value of the internet in strengthening the exercise of human rights, and to enable the rights of those who have been excluded.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS RAISED IN THIS BRIEFING PAPER

The following key issues need attention by governments, private sector actors and civil society in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic:

- It is essential that governments respect human rights and that any limitations are justified and do not undermine the democratic foundations of societies. Measures adopted to respond to the crisis should be proportionate and avoid curtailing human rights unnecessarily.
- The internet is a global public resource which should be governed as a global public good. In the context of the pandemic, the publicness of the internet and the global digital commons should be strengthened rather than eroded.
- Governments and private sector actors should urgently develop strategies to increase internet access for digitally excluded communities, or those with limited connectivity. In the short term, data costs should be lowered, free public Wi-Fi spaces enabled, and the cost of access devices reduced or subsidised. In the near term, plans for a rapid upscaling of community networks should be supported in policy directives.
- For the internet to be a terrain for resilience and connection, it has to be a safe space for all. Therefore, the importance of a feminist internet cannot be overstated.

18 For example, see: <https://www.apc.org/en/node/36145> and <https://twitter.com/jhybe/status/1238116305191878659>

19 The Economist. (2020, 4 April). Winners from the pandemic: Big tech's covid-19 opportunity. <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2020/04/04/big-techs-covid-19-opportunity?fsrc=scn/tw/te/bl/ed/nersfromthepandemicbigtechscovid19opportunityleaders>

- Donors and civil society organisations have a critical role to play in implementing strategies aimed at minimising the anxiety that emerges from the need to perform at a certain level of competence in relation to professional work and invisibilised and unpaid labour domestic work.
- The right to privacy needs to be upheld in the implementation of any surveillance and tracking technologies and solutions in managing the pandemic. The private sector also has an obligation to ensure that the rapid uptake of their applications safeguards privacy and is free from surveillance. Measures implemented by governments that impact on privacy need to be clearly communicated to the public.
- Freedom of expression and access to information need to be safeguarded. Internet shutdowns or other restrictions to internet access should not be considered as a response to the crisis under any circumstances. Censoring content or criminalising disinformation should be avoided, while practices of content verification should be encouraged. While the labour rights of content workers need attention, attention also needs to be given to the restrictions that automated content curation can place on accessing health information and freedom of expression.
- We need to critically rethink our idea of sustainable development, and what can be learned from the pandemic in terms of changing our work and social behaviour. Reinvigorated information and communications technology (ICT) policy advocacy is needed to promote environmentally safe technology solutions in tackling the climate and environmental crisis.
- How feminist, digital rights and environmental movements occupy the digital space will be a determining factor in how internet governance addresses power imbalances in the future. Meaningful inclusion and participation of all stakeholders in internet policy decision-making processes and forums remains necessary during the current crisis.

APC has compiled a collection of resources, "Supporting human rights online in times of crisis", that can be accessed at

<https://www.apc.org/en/node/36162>.



Internet and ICTs for social justice and development

APC is an international network of civil society organisations founded in 1990 dedicated to empowering and supporting people working for peace, human rights, development and protection of the environment, through the strategic use of information and communication technologies (ICTs).

We work to build a world in which all people have easy, equal and affordable access to the creative potential of ICTs to improve their lives and create more democratic and egalitarian societies.

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