Mariam Afrasiabi:

Welcome and thank you for joining us today for the first session of the CivicSpace.Tech webinar series, Mediated & Monetized: How Social Media Invaded Civic Space. I'm Mariam Afrasiabi, division chief, team lead of the formerly named Civil Society and Media Division, and newly titled Civic Power and Citizen Engagement team, CPCE, at USAID's Democracy, Human Rights and Governance Center.

Mariam Afrasiabi:

Today, we, the DRG Center, CPCE, and our partners, FHI 360, Internews, and ICNL, are incredibly excited to bring together folks from all over the world to launch the new online CivicSpace.Tech resource, and to have a rich conversation about the intersection of democratic rights and norms in social media, as one example of some of the opportunities and challenges evolving in digital civic spaces. As the new resource showcases, there's an ever-expanding variety of emerging technologies influencing civic space and the DRG sector.

Mariam Afrasiabi:

The reality is that the rapid development of technologies will only continue, and their influence over democratic norms will only grow. Recognizing this, we know there's a critical role that democracy practitioners should play in considering the unintended consequences that these technologies may have on democratic societies. This includes, one, being more involved in conversations about the development and deployment of these technologies, two, debating and discussing how they can be used or misused, and three, engaging with technologies ourselves as end users. That engagement begins with us learning more about and deepening our collective understanding of these technologies, which is what we're going to get into today with a diverse and exciting panel of experts.

Mariam Afrasiabi:

And I want to thank all of the parties who have engaged in the development of this exciting platform. In particular, our partners from SCS Global, including many folks at FHI 360, especially Barney Singer, at Internews, especially Deb Ensor, and at ICNL, especially Zach Lampell, as well as the many other reviewers who have provided feedback on the platform today. We're continuing to refine the resource and the website based on your helpful suggestions, so thank you.

Mariam Afrasiabi:

And finally, I want to thank all who have been a part of the planning process for this event today, including many USAID CPCE staff, especially Lauren Kirby, as well as the gross support team. So thank you so much to all. Before we launch into our discussion, we'll hear from USAID's Democracy, Human Rights and Governance Center's deputy director, Don Chisholm. So let's hear from Don now.

Don Chisholm:

Welcome. My name is Don Chisholm, and I'm the deputy director of USAID Center for Democracy, Human Rights and Governance. USAID is committed to advancing individual rights, freedom of expression, and the promotion of democratic norms and practices as important standalone goals, as well as a means to advance self-reliance. We know that digital tools have ushered in a range of opportunities to elevate citizen voices, advanced civic participation and engagement, promote transparency, and hold governments accountable. And in parallel, we know that we can shape technologies of the future to ensure they promote democracy.

Don Chisholm:

However, at the same time, we see how new technologies have also unleashed a set of challenges to democratic societies. Specifically, we recognize the need to address the growing threat of digital authoritarianism. This is true especially as governments and other malign actors become more adept at restricting online civic spaces and using technology to limit civil and political rights. This is why USAID's DRG Center partnered with the Strengthening Civil Society Globally activity to create a new online CivicSpace.Tech resource.

Don Chisholm:

This interactive tool will serve as a knowledge hub for practitioners and citizens looking to expand their engagement with the positive and negative components of these new technologies in democratic and civic spaces. We're excited to continue to work with you on addressing many of these key issues. We also hope this resource will serve as a useful tool for local democracy partners and activists, as you navigate the rapidly changing digital technology landscape in your daily work. Thank you very much.

Mariam Afrasiabi:

We also have a short video to give you an overview of the new online resource before we dive into the live discussion, which will start now.

Barney Singer:

Welcome to CivicSpace.Tech, an interactive resource for understanding the benefits and the risks of using digital technologies in the democracy, human rights and governance space. USAID's Center of Excellence on Democracy, Human Rights and Governance, and SCS Global partners, Internews, ICNL, and FHI 360 developed CivicSpace.Tech in order to help you understand and to be prepared to use digital technologies in DRG related work. Whether you are from civil society, from the donor community, or within government, CivicSpace.Tech can help you maximize the benefits and minimize the challenges associated with various digital technologies when you are undertaking activities and the like to promote democracy, human rights, and good governance. You can use CivicSpace.Tech to learn about 14 specific technologies and trends that affect DRG work. You can assess which ones might help or hinder your work, and you can best prepare yourself to engage with policymakers and partners. Let's take a look at the site in this brief video.

Barney Singer:

From the homepage, you can search for topics you want to learn more about, or use the filters to discover solutions, trends, and threats relevant to your work. Simply choose your field and a selection of suggested topics will appear. Refine the results by choosing sustainable development goals or principles for digital development. You can find more information on the SDGs and the principles via links on the individual topic pages, or at the bottom of the homepage. Anytime you want to start your search over, just click the reset button.

Barney Singer:

Each topic page covers what the topic is about and its impact on your work. Dive even deeper with the options on the right, including key questions to reflect on when exploring the technology, curated case studies of recent uses of issues, additional resources, references, and related topics. Expandable fields offer more context and information. Live links take you to original sources while cogs signify links to

other CivicSpace.Tech topic pages. To get back to the homepage, just click CivicSpace.Tech at the top of any page. Everything you need to know all in one simple user-centric site, CivicSpace.Tech.

Mariam Afrasiabi:

Now to look at how this resource and these issues are affecting our sector, our partners, and our programs, I'm pleased to hand over to our vibrant group of panelists. And to take us forward, I want to introduce Kat Duffy. Kat is the vice president for global technology programs at Internews, a global NGO working across more than 100 countries to empower people, put the information they need to make informed decisions, participate in their communities, and hold power to account. Kat drives technological strategy, approach, and institutional learning across Internews's work globally, and oversees an extensive portfolio of programs supporting digital safety, digital rights, anti-censorship technologies, and direct technological support to civil society and media partners. She serves on the board of directors of the Global Network Initiative and as an expert advisor for the World Economic Forum's Partnering with Civil Society in the Fourth Industrial Revolution Initiative. Kat, handing over to you now.

Kat Duffy:

Mariam, thank you so much. I am delighted to be part of this webinar today to help launch CivicSpace.Tech and to engage with our amazing panelists. And it looks like at this point, close to 200 participants on the topic of civic engagement in the digital age generally. The title, as you all know for our session today is, Mediated & Monetized: How Social Media Invaded Civic Space. And I'll be honest, I initially worried that the phrase invaded civic space was a bit zero-sum, given the complexity of the issues that we're facing globally. But on further reflection, I think the construct of an invasion actually provides fertile ground for a valuable discussion, because invasions are tricky things.

Kat Duffy:

For some, invasions are a terrifying incursion by a hostile actor. And for others, they represent liberation. Across the board however, invasions tend to have seismic impact and they have long-lasting consequences that may not be adequately understood for years. And so in that sense, I think we are indeed in the middle of an invasion. And that's why I'm so grateful to have our panelists joining this discussion today, because they each bring deep expertise and a very specific lens when it comes to examining the current role of social media in civic space, how it's mediated and monetized, and whether the end result of that seems like it will be an incursion into civic space, a liberation of it, or both.

Kat Duffy:

And so with that, I'd like to start by introducing Usama Khilji. He is the director of Bolo Bhi, an advocacy, policy, and research organization focused on internet policy and safety in Pakistan. He's a columnist for Pakistan's leading English language daily, Dawn, and also contributes opinion pieces to Al Jazeera English. He serves as a board member of the Global Network Initiative, with me, a multi-stakeholder initiative to protect freedom of expression and privacy rights globally, and is also a council member of the World Economic Forum's Global Future Council on Systemic Inequalities and Social Cohesion, as well as a member of Facebook's Privacy Experts Group for APAC. Within Pakistan, Usama also trains judges, journalists, and students on matters related to the internet, such as content moderation, cyber crime, cyber security, and digital safety.

Kat Duffy:

We're also joined by Lisa Vermeer. She's the digital policy advisor at the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, or ICNL. ICNL is an international NGO that promotes an enabling legal environment for civil society, freedom of association, assembly, expression, and public participation around the world. Lisa develops and implements the digital program of ICNL, supporting civil society organizations to understand technology, respond to legal challenges, and develop international norms related to digital technologies and trends, such as artificial intelligence, disinformation, and cyber crime. Before joining ICNL, Lisa advocated for human rights online on behalf of the Netherlands.

Kat Duffy:

And finally, I'm so pleased to introduce Josh Machleder. He's the senior advisor for media and internet freedom at USAID's Center for Democracy, Rights and Governance, where he heads up the agency's flagship internet freedom programming. Prior to joining USAID, he spent 12 years working in Europe and Eurasia, and two years as well working in Asia on media development programming.

Kat Duffy:

And so I'd like to thank all of you for joining us here today. I'm so excited to have this discussion. Couldn't be a nicer way to spend a Thursday afternoon for me here in Tunisia. And Usama, I wanted, if we could just start with you. You have dedicated a great deal of personal and professional effort into examining the nuances of the questions we're addressing today. So in your home country of Pakistan, where Bolo Bhi is based, social media has been a force for liberation as well as a catalyst for violence, hate speech, disinformation. So could you give us some insights into how social media has impacted civic engagement and civil rights and Pakistan, which could hopefully help our participants connect the true practicalities of this question with the broader theoretics?

Usama Khilji:

Thank you. Yes, thanks a lot for having me, especially to the organizers and Kat. So in Pakistan, what we see is social media emerged as a very critical space for alternative narratives, and especially for people to talk about human rights violations. And this is for two fundamental reasons, and in two ways. So first, we have the border regions of Pakistan next to Afghanistan that are are conflict-prone, especially since the US invasion of Afghanistan and the spillover of conflict across the border. So what we saw there was because that area was securitized, there was no access to the media in areas where more than 40 million people lived. And what that led to was a lot of human rights violations.

Usama Khilji:

What the emergence of social media made possible is for the locals, and especially the young people over there, to speak out and report about the human rights violations in those areas, which led to huge movements emanating from that area, which can be gauged from the fact that one of the movements now has up to three representatives elected to the parliament in Pakistan. So you can just, well, imagine the impact that social media really enabled in terms of representation and voice of a marginalized community.

Usama Khilji:

And the second reason is just the ability to document anything around you, the citizen journalism bit, and to post it online has led to a lot greater accountability of the government because Pakistani citizens have been posting about corruption, about bad service delivery, as well as issues related to rights across the country on social media, which has led to greater accountability of government officials. And that's

also forced the government and the politicians to increase their engagement with the public. And now Pakistan has also launched, the government has launched apps for governance, et cetera. So in that way, I think there's been a lot of meaningful change brought about by social media as far as civic engagement is concerned.

Kat Duffy:

Thank you so much. And that is some truly extraordinary impact and change to be occurring within a country in a relatively short time period, particularly when that change is being fueled by private sector companies, right? That are based in another country, and that are global and digital in nature. How is the government responding to having less control than it traditionally has over online speech and organizing, when it's accustomed to being able to maintain a certain degree of control over our offline speech and activity, and what are the companies doing in turn to examine and address their local impact and the impact, the way that their product is being used?

Usama Khilji:

That's a very important question. Because like you said, the government now is reacting by trying to increase their control over the internet. But I think what's stopping that, and the main issue there, is the fundamental misunderstanding of how the internet works and functions. And I think that's what guides the misunderstanding, is impacting the kind of policies that are being made. So what we've seen is the government exert a lot of pressure on social media companies to sensor online content and to access user data. So it's something that I refer to as the alarming nexus in my column, which is between social media companies and the government, which would have negotiations behind closed doors without any input from citizen groups and the people who use social media are impacted by the most.

Usama Khilji:

But that's changing a little bit, because what we've seen is because the government is doubling down on the companies, the companies are starting to realize that they have to resist a lot of this. They can't keep giving data and keep censoring content on the internet. And they're starting to see the interest of citizen groups. So at the same time, there's been a dearth of investment from companies in countries and economies in the global South where the populations are large. So the user base is large, but the revenue is not that much. And because they're profit oriented companies, they haven't invested enough in local language moderation and in understanding the nuances, the cultural nuances that should impact content moderation practices.

Usama Khilji:

So what that has led to is we're seeing a lot of content related to incitement of violence and hate speech, as well as harassment that is left up, even when it is reported by users. And I think that creates a vacuum and that's the vacuum that the government is trying to fill with these draconian measures to regulate the internet. So I think there, the companies really need to step in and to improve their performance so that the governments then don't become more authoritarian and try to exert more control.

Kat Duffy:

Thank you, that's such a, I think a crystalline example to really help us start off this panel. Lisa, if I could turn to you, what Usama is raising really does illustrate the incredible complexity and range of the civic environments, but also consequently, the legal and regulatory environments in which social media

companies are operating. ICNL examines legal and regulatory issues in emerging technologies at both local and regional and global levels. Can you speak a little bit from your perspective around the trends that you are seeing globally when it comes to the legal enabling environments around social media and how those are developing in response to this very fast-moving emergent technology?

Lisa Vermeer:

Yes, of course. Hi, Kat. Thank you so much for this interesting question. So before I get into the trends, I really would like to express my excitement of being here together with you during this webinar marking the launch of this new research that I've been very proud to be able to contribute to. And I also really would like to express my thanks to you USAID for initiating this initiative and for the partners that we worked with in the establishing it. I think it's really exciting to see it online finally, and I hope it will help many people, many of you participants who do navigate the new technologies.

Lisa Vermeer:

So yeah, legal trends. So enabling environment, let's start with lesser good news. So using social media platforms is indeed heavily impacted by different legal regimes, and more than many not so tech savvy human rights activists actually realize they just use the platforms and sometimes don't think about what kind of laws are actually applying or are applicable on them. So I think that improved digital legal literacy is needed and the CivicSpace.Tech research really hopes to get the readers going and provide some starting points for that.

Lisa Vermeer:

One concerning trend is the adoption of cyber crime laws that criminalize content and criminalize behavior online in many, many countries. My colleagues and I are currently studying the new bill in Nicaragua, and we also ran a campaign about the cyber crime law in Jordan. And these laws often establish a relationship with penal codes or penal codes are changed to include cyber crimes. For example, that happened in two regions in Mexico, in Yucatan and in Sonora.

Lisa Vermeer:

So the tricky thing about these laws is actually that they are not only about what you would say that are really computer related crimes, like hacking computers, sharing child abuse images, or trading drugs on the dark web, but the crimes, the provisions are really about the justification to arrest users and their content that they post on social media platforms. And these bills are often in response to false information that is spread around the internet. And we have seen a massive increase in this kind of legal responses in response to the COVID-19 infodemic, how it is called.

Lisa Vermeer:

So the section on disinformation in the CivicSpace.Tech resource also really dives a bit deeper into the restrictions to speech and association on the internet. And then a positive trend on the other side, that is the uptake in data protection laws. We're not yet there, there are many countries without data privacy protection, but it's increasing. And the protection of personal data is really important because the data, data is the raw material for many technologies, including social media, but also artificial intelligence systems. So what we actually see on social media on our timelines is curated information based on what we would probably like most and are most interested based on our data.

Lisa Vermeer:

But data is not only zeros and ones and something abstract. It's all about human beings. Data is about us and about our behavior. So it's very relevant to realize that when using social media and sharing your data on these platforms. And it's also the CivicSpace.Tech research that has a section on data protection that really starts from this notion that data is about us, about human beings, and it guides the reader towards understanding what kind of safeguard of the rights of data, the right of privacy, and data privacy, data protection is needed to achieve democracies where people can thrive and where data is actually used for purposeful and safe way.

Kat Duffy:

Thank you for that. And what you're raising I think is such a critical issue for us to keep in mind, particularly when we are thinking about social media from the democracy rights and governance blends. So in CivicSpace.Tech's section on social media, there are, if folks go and check out the tool, you'll see that it really does examine the importance, it asks you to think through the importance of social media in different contexts, as you're considering different approaches to operating in that context.

Kat Duffy:

And I think one of the things I'm really hearing from you, Lisa, at the global level is that what we're seeing are regulatory approaches to trying to govern a lot of this behavior and respond to a lot of this behavior. And so you're looking at sort of traditional corporate regulatory frameworks potentially being put in on things like data and things like social media platforms, but that data on those platforms are fundamental to basic fundamental freedoms of association and expression as well. And so how are you seeing domestic regulators, in particular, handling the presence of social media companies in their countries in different ways that are creating really differentiated I think access to that online space?

Lisa Vermeer:

Yeah. Thank you, Kat, for this question. This is really, it wouldn't surprise anyone, I guess, if I say that there is this surge of national regulators, politicians, people in power who really want to do something with the presence of these companies in their countries, mostly the US-based companies, but there's a lot of talk about it. Well, five years ago, there was not so much talking about regulating these companies. So it's about the business models, it's about the moderation. There's a lot of issues to tackle. So I just want to, only on a very basic level, dive into two of these issues because it's a long discussion that we can have for ages amongst each others. And I'd love to continue that.

Lisa Vermeer:

But one challenge for law reform advocates, specifically, is a double-edged sword of these rules. Like if you develop rules for companies that apply to the companies. Because, well, regulatory obligations to delete, for example, very harmful or illegal content are generally welcomed in democracies or places where the rule of law is trusted and accepted. In other countries, civil society actually fear that's if you develop rules, it's yet another regulatory stick to punish dissident voices, intimidate activists, and really make it even more authoritarian. So that is a very challenging legal dilemma to realize the impact and the unintended impact as well of legislation.

Lisa Vermeer:

So in the EU, it's interesting to share that there are, very soon, I think it's next week, legal proposals are expected to introduce strong legal obligations, conditions for doing business in the EU for the social media platforms. Such as the obligation to be transparent about algorithms and data collection before

it's possible to actually operate. In other countries like Pakistan and Turkey, US-based companies are now required, and I'm not sure in Pakistan if it's already the case, but in Turkey, since the beginning of the pandemic, companies are required to establish themselves with an office in their country so the government is able to make them comply the often repressive rules in these countries. And there are even fears if governments will declare, for example, the community guidelines of this company's voice if they don't agree with how that is working out in comparison to what they actually want to see in their own countries. So these are very, very challenging or worrying developments.

Lisa Vermeer:

And from what I have seen, I have to conclude that social media companies, and this really echoes what Usama shared earlier, they really need to become much more responsive to local civil society needs and concerns wherever they operate in different countries, with different languages, and different norms, and different sensitivities. It's very challenging, but this is super important. They really need to avoid complicity with repression and censorship as has been observed in countries like Malaysia and Vietnam recently, Amnesty reported about that.

Lisa Vermeer:

So I hope that if companies, together with civil society, with local actors and experts, together with the democratic leaders, if they adopt approaches to protect the privately owned public squares online, because that's like it's public, but it's perfectly honest, but there needs to be approaches that protect these squares and protects our rights there to protest, to associate, to come together, to demonstrate, and to express ourselves. This could be a way to stay ahead of this curve of repressive legal measures that we have to fear. Thank you, Kat.

Kat Duffy:

Thank you so much, Lisa. Josh, I want to turn it over to you going from that point, because you're looking at civil society and media around the world. And I think for those of us who operate a lot in the democracy rights and governance space, we tend to default to thinking about social media platforms very much from a civil and political rights lens, right? And that's how we enter into our understanding of their role and their responsibility in a lot of these environments. But when we do that, I think we also really run the risk of discounting the critical underpinning for all of these companies, which for them is revenue generation.

Kat Duffy:

And so are you seeing a disconnect between the public's understanding of these platforms and their monetization models, and their focus on revenue generation, and the local use expectation or understanding of what the platforms are, why they're there, and why they're doing the things they're doing. So are you seeing a disconnect? And if you are seeing a disconnect, what do you think the consequence of that disconnect actually is in terms of information flow in different societies?

Josh Machleder:

So short answer is yes, and thank you for the question. And also thanks to everyone who's participated in creating this CivicSpace.Tech tool, because I actually think it makes a substantive contribution to understanding these issues that you're raising in the question, about how social media platforms work and what they really are. It's an important part of data literacy, and by data literacy I don't mean media literacy. I'm talking about that understanding of the relationship between our data and our civil liberties.

Josh Machleder:

I think that a lot of us have this very idealistic thinking about social media as it being the digital public square. And I just want to go to the Oxford bibliographies definition of the public sphere, which is, in their words, the social space in which different opinions are expressed and problems of general concern are discussed and collective solutions are developed communicatively, which is a real essential function of civil society. And ideally that's where we would be conducting our civil society work in the digital space.

Josh Machleder:

But with the social media platforms, it's not really what we have. In fact, I think we probably think that our public space is really problematic if it were filled with a lot of the toxic discourse that we're seeing online, that we're all kind of acknowledging is there. Social media is marketed to us as a space for communications and connections, but we really need to understand that it's something else and really face certain realities, that one, these are privately owned platforms designed for advertising, and the basic business imperative of social media is one that's based on sucking up all of our personal data and behavioral data in a business model that's called surveillance capitalism, which is an economy based on knowing everything about us and what we do to capture and retain our attention. So a heavy focus on attention.

Josh Machleder:

And the social medias' engineers use techniques from advertising and psychology to keep and capture that attention with frequently content that's outrageous, or sensational, or extreme, and making it a really hard space sometimes to navigate in terms of what on there is a fact and what is a lie or a deception. And additionally, part of the incentives of these platforms are to make them pretty addictive. And there's a substantive, psychological research out there that's showing that people who use social media experience symptoms that are similar to those of people who are addicted to behaviors of substances.

Josh Machleder:

So, it's not the most healthy for individuals space, the way it's currently designed. And you could also argue it's unhealthy for societies as well, because a lot of the way social media platforms are currently working in terms of the way they personalize and target information, is dividing mass audiences. And it contributes to, if actually not leading to, social polarization, which is the kind of thing we really don't want because it creates opportunities for bad actors who want to create division, chaos, and cynicism in our societies.

Josh Machleder:

And then just this recognition, which I think my colleagues here have talked about, is that these platforms seen as public spaces really have so much power over what we see on them and what we don't through their algorithms and through their content moderation. And we don't really feel like we have a say in setting up the rules of how those algorithms and how that content moderation works, which determines what we can see or say and what we don't.

Josh Machleder:

So, I guess my main takeaway here is that social media, the way it's currently existing is really not the ideal method for organizing our public communications or for hosting that public sphere that we talk about. We either need to get involved more to reform social media, or even get involved by creating alternatives to it that provide open and secure means of communicating globally to create that public square, where we can discuss and resolve all of our collective problems.

Josh Machleder:

I would argue that the current model that's based on personal data and surveillance and using automation algorithms to curate information, it's probably counter productive to really achieving that. So there's a lot of work that I think we need to do, but I think the first step is really understanding those problems. And I, again, want to say that I think the CivicSpace.Tech tool gives a really terrific fundamental understanding of that.

Kat Duffy:

Thank you so much. I love the idea that with data literacy, we would come to a better and more nuanced civic debate. And with civic debate, we could ideally bubble up new digital spheres or digital spaces that ideally would serve to benefit some of the rights that we see these social media platforms currently supporting in more information repressive environments, but also protect against a lot of the harms that we're also seeing come from this particular monetization model.

Kat Duffy:

Usama, I'm going to ask you though, what are your thoughts on this point, because do you think it's possible for the existing revenue models to support better stronger societies, or do you believe, as Josh has said, and Lisa has also alluded to this, that we really do need to be considering different alternatives for what a digital public square or a digital public space would look like? Do you have any thoughts? I'm sure this is a consistent question for you in Pakistan.

Usama Khilji:

Yes. Thank you. And I think like Lisa and Josh have rightfully pointed out, the current model does require a fundamental shift in hired functions in order for it to respect political rights, as well as democratic norms in our societies, especially with these algorithms. Like Josh mentioned, they perpetuate addiction, they exasperate polarization that we're seeing in societies, and their impact on politics, on elections, it's massive, right? And especially the tricks that social media companies have to get you to share more data with them, or to buy more. I fall for so many online ads every day. So we know how that works.

Usama Khilji:

But in the recent past, we've seen some exogenous shocks to these companies that have led to some reactive reform. So for example, with Cambridge Analytica, we saw a lot more accountability of Facebook. And then we saw Facebook respond to that in some ways that improved their privacy models, but so much more needs to be done. So I think new alternatives would be amazing, but I think the monopolistic power that the current internet companies hold is very hard to break because they end up just buying any competition that arises, and smaller companies can't resist those kind of offers.

Usama Khilji:

So I think until then, we have to rely on the current systems simply because of the scale that they provide and the connectivity that they provide. But I think we really have to push to improve them. So we have to use the existing tools and mechanisms that we have. So for example, international human rights law, which includes the United Nations guiding principles on business and human rights, and then existing industry-led models such as the Global Network Initiative principles that bring in multi-stakeholder voices and dialogue that try to improve a lot of the freedom of expression and privacy issues that we see on social media companies.

Usama Khilji:

And then this has to go along with public pressure through the media, through social media, and all I can say is we need to keep pushing for rights so that the platforms also start respecting rights more and bring in reforms. And I think that's really the idea that excites me. And I think the current tool for Civic.Tech is I would recommend everyone go through it in detail because it really breaks down a lot of these issues that you and I we know about because we've been working in it, but a lot of people do not. So I think the way these adults are mentioned is greater digital literacy into understanding these platforms. And then I would recommend curriculums need to include this also so that children are taught a lot of digital literacy stuff so they're able to use these platforms in a better and effective way. Thank you.

Kat Duffy:

Thanks, Usama. And that actually is a beautiful segue into our question and answer session. We have 200 participants and we really want to be able to hear from you, so please do drop your questions in the chat. But one of the questions that we've received that, Josh, I'd like to throw over to you, if you don't mind. And then Lisa and Usama, obviously jump in if you have any thoughts. What Usama's been referencing, I think also brings to mind the fact that it can be challenging, especially in sort of foreign assistance mechanisms or civil society work, to bridge the gap between traditional civil society organizations that are really accustomed to working with policymakers doing grassroots campaigns, supporting constituencies, doing outreach and strategic communications, fundraising.

Kat Duffy:

All of those skills that the traditional civil society organizations bring to the table, it can be difficult to connect them or create a linkage or a connection between the more digitally literate, young activists and young organizers who really understand the issues that we're talking about at a deeper technological level. And so have you seen any good approaches to trying to bring these groups together to empower each other? Do you see this as a challenge as well? What are your thoughts on that?

Josh Machleder:

Yeah, it's a great question, and it is a challenge. I mean, you do have sort of a certain kind of traditional generation of civil society that really understand, and I'll just refer back to this idea of the public space, they really understand the public space and they understand how institutions work, and they really bring in robust knowledge of kind of the offline world. And then there's this sort of new generation that's a lot more tech savvy. They might even be digital natives, they've been using the tech for a long time, and they have that really firsthand knowledge and encyclopedic experience with the tech platforms.

Josh Machleder:

And so some way I really want to see them working together a little bit more. They each have a lot to learn from one another. They each bring tremendous expertise. And again, the problems that I think we've even just talked about in this one session around the privacy, someone just mentioned monopolies. We're talking about civic space, we're talking about freedom of expression. I mean, there is no one expert that I think that can encompass this all.

Josh Machleder:

And so for certain, you need a lot of different people with a lot of different expertise at the table to really engage on a program of reform to make these social media platforms look like the internet that we want and to create that next generation, that digital public sphere that we want. And so I do think that if we're able in our programming to foster those kinds of collaborations and networks between the different actors, with the different kinds of expertise, we actually are able to create a much more robust and much more thoughtful plan. So certainly bringing a lot of stakeholders in is important I think.

Kat Duffy:

Thank you. Lisa and Usama, I don't know if you had any points that you wanted to add to that? We also have a bevy of other questions to go to. So let me know if you'd like to add anything.

Lisa Vermeer:

So maybe just a short addition that what I see is happening is that the there's, since [inaudible 00:43:37], I think it really started with digital rights organizations that have done so much pioneering work to bring digital rights to the agenda, and there've been very pioneering donors as well, and funders around that are spurring this work. But I feel that the community is growing, has been growing over the last couple of years, but even more because of the pandemic, and everyone is forced to work online. There's this massively growing awareness and a window of opportunity to grow the community.

Lisa Vermeer:

So think about the KeepitOn campaign or coalition that is very large and trying to find innovative approaches to push back against shutdowns. And what we see is that there is more and more people engaging with this cyber crime laws, or with other league repression, or understanding laws that are trying to use facial recognition or AI. So just working together to grow these communities and to improve knowledge, improve awareness, and really also bring technical knowledge to civil society organizations that are originally working on other human rights instead of real digital human rights. I think that is happening and we need to continue to do that and push against repressive laws as part of that effort.

Usama Khilji:

And I'd just like to add a bit. In Pakistan, we see a lot of collaboration between traditional civil society organizations and then digital rights focused organizations such as ours. So for example, we do a lot of briefings for the senior members to enable them to understand the issues. Just today, we drew up a statement against a new regulations for social media that Lisa mentioned earlier in Pakistan. So a lot of the traditional human rights organizations are also signing onto this statement. So we see a lot of exchange and that sort of collaboration between the two. And I think it really helps strengthen our voice also. But yes, definitely there need to be more avenues for cross-sectoral civil society organizations to learn from each other and then amplify each other's voices.

Kat Duffy:

Thank you. Another question that we had, I'm going to try to get us through two more questions before we have to wrap up the panel. So the first question goes to, I'm going to turn it over to safety and security first. And then from there, we're going to go to fact checking and misinformation. So, thinking through safety and security in civic space, and the question is that it can exacerbate existing gender norms and perpetuate online and in-person violence and discrimination. And I just think this is such an incredibly important issue that I really did want to highlight it. How does social media affect the political participation of marginalized groups? Particularly women, people with disabilities, and I would say ethnic minorities as well, and young people? I would welcome anyone's thoughts on that question, I think it's so important.

Usama Khilji:

I can go first. So yes, I think, especially with the pandemic, the, so to speak, the digital divide has really been made very prominent, because what we're seeing is that, A, there's a huge gender digital divide, and I think the Civic.Tech tool also talks about that, where you have, for example in Pakistan, the gender digital divide is huge because families don't trust their daughters to have mobile phones in more traditional households because they link it a lot to morality. And we're seeing that in the government doing that also. So for example, this summer, the Pakistani government blocked the entire TikTok app for 10 days on the basis of obscene and immoral content. And that's really patriarchal speak for girls should not be having fun and dancing on TikTok or creating videos. And I think that that really speaks to the existing patriarchal norms that you have, and a lot of the oppressive mechanisms that exist in society, and then they're perpetuated online also.

Usama Khilji:

And similarly, when we speak about disabled communities and persons with disabilities, it's a major issue of accessibility. But we're seeing a lot of innovation in that. So for example, in Pakistan, there is one startup that basically is trying to bring in more people to cater to people with disabilities. They're using a lot more sign language, and a lot of companies and other people are using their services to improve that service delivery. So there is a push towards that, but at the same time, I think the companies are not doing enough. So for example, it costs a lot more money for a person with visual impairment to buy technological tools that can improve their accessibility to laptops and mobile phones, for example. So companies also need to keep this in mind, that accessibility should not come at a cost to those who have certain disabilities.

Kat Duffy:

Lisa, Josh, any follow up on that?

Lisa Vermeer:

Thanks, Josh. Yeah, maybe just to add that this also relates to what I flagged earlier in terms of responsiveness to specific local context. I think you could replicate it for specific communities that the responsiveness of the companies towards the needs of specific communities who use a certain language that's really important to express identification, or that is used to talk about very sensitive issues. The fact that the companies tend to spend more money in countries where they can earn more money, and my impression is that other countries are more neglected by the companies in terms of careful moderation or taking down, responding to flagged content by certain members of local communities or certain, for example, LGBTI communities, or indigenous communities that understand the context.

Lisa Vermeer:

I know that companies actually want to be in connection with this local context, but I think it's failing and companies should spend way more time and money and resources to respond to this, because otherwise social media platforms will continue to exacerbate the main stream talk and only respond to what is flagged as political or what is flagged by known people instead of the smaller communities that needs the same kind of protection and probably even more.

Kat Duffy:

Got it. And Josh, quickly, and then we have a misinformation thing that I want to turn over to you.

Josh Machleder:

Oh no. But just I did want to add something to what Lisa said, is that these platforms, everything is automated. And the thing is when we think about traditional institutions, you actually need people there to kind of run things. And there's a whole invisible part to social media moderation, where we have people out working and taking off all the horrible things that are on it so that you don't have to see it. And they are actually trying to automate that process now. And I actually feel like you actually need humans in there to be working on some of these toxic speech issues or more inclusion. We have that in our cities, in our communities, in our day-to-day life. And I think that probably, if we were to think about a different model of social media, it would be one with those institutions that are run by people and maybe not automation and algorithms doing similar, crazy idea to put out there.

Kat Duffy:

Just nutty. So I want to follow up with you and then we're going to be almost at time. But we have a great question here that platforms of you, or definition or fact checkers may really differ from that of citizens and civil society. And there are real fears of misinformation spreading rapidly in niche communities. How should we think about doing fact checking in different countries when official sources may be biased, or there may not be an open civil society space. Solve the problem, Josh?

Josh Machleder:

Yeah. I think fact checking of course is a good thing. And actually in traditional media, fact checking was actually a thing that was always a part of the role of the media and journalism, but I think we're learning a lot and there's a lot of experimentation about ... I think we've seen a lot of more robust approaches to fact checking by the platforms right now. And it raises the questions, how effective they are, can you actually change someone's mind if they already saw something before, or they already believe something that's false. So there's just so much open questions around how effective this is.

Josh Machleder:

That said, regardless of effectiveness, I think that it is a public good in general to be having fact checking, and people in those environments where there is not robust freedom of expression or freedom of press, people I think crave alternatives. And sometimes they crave a fat check that validate something that maybe they observed that's different from what the authorities are telling them, or something that they know in their hearts, and that's not what the authoritative media of their government is stating. So I'm saying, I think that this is a good thing, but I don't know that it's necessarily enough to do the trick.

Kat Duffy:

And I think that, as we wrap up and I turn it back over to Mariam, I feel like one of the, if I were to sort of tie this up a little bit with a bow, I feel like one of the overriding themes that has come out of all of your answers is that for these companies to operate at scale, they've been relying heavily on automation, right? Because they have such giant user bases that they haven't invested in doing it really in any other way. And maybe as we move forward, it's thinking less about moderation and monetization and it's thinking more about humanity versus automation, and how we do a better job of putting the emphasis on humanity to inform automation, make it smarter, make it stronger, make it more effective, and give us digital spaces that are more rights respecting if they are controlled by private sector actors, or if they are controlled by a collective or the public.

Kat Duffy:

Let's I think look to a future where we can take all of the possibility that's been offered by this invasion, and all the liberation that it has offered, and see how we can mitigate the harm that is also clearly coming from it. And so with that, I just want to, again, emphasize that I think the CivicSpace.Tech tool is really a wonderful primer, not just on social media, but on all sorts of other different topics, on automation, drones, big data, disinformation, smart cities, there's a whole range of topics. And so I really do hope that people will check it out. It's designed to be very user-friendly, it's designed to be very accessible, very easily understood. And I want to just thank, from the bottom of my heart, my amazing panelists and colleagues and friends, as well as USAID and FHI 360 for all of their support, not only for this webinar, but also for this larger project. And so with that, Mariam, I'll turn it back over to you.

Mariam Afrasiabi:

Thank you. And just a sincere thank you, Kat, Josh, Lisa, and Usama, for that fantastic discussion. And thank you to all of the participants joining us here today. It's wonderful to see such a large turnout for what obviously is a topic of great interest for many. We invite you also to join us for the next session, which is called Robots, Drones, and Artificial Intelligence: Who's Watching Us. This will be December 16th at 9:00 AM Eastern Standard Time, and my colleague will drop the registration link in the chat box now for that. We also have a short survey about the session and the new resource for you to provide feedback that we're putting into the chat as well, and we'll also send that out in a follow-up email.

Mariam Afrasiabi:

So thank you again to all of the participants for joining us today, to our excellent panelists, and to our organizers. Please check out CivicSpace.Tech, and we hope to see all of you on the 16th. So have a great day and we hope to see you for the next webinar. Thanks again. Bye, everyone.

Kat Duffy:

Bye everyone. Thanks so much.

Usama Khilji:

Thank you.