

GENDERED COLONIALITY AND THE POLITICS OF INTERNET ACCESS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis re-theorises the under-researched concept of internet access from a decolonial feminist perspective, contributing to emergent decolonising debates in the field. Scholarship on internet access has bifurcated towards 'digital divide' and 'digital inequalities' approaches on the one hand, and internet governance and policy approaches on the other, limiting view of multi-scalar arrangements. This research considers how varied modes of access facilitate and limit decolonising politics with relation to the historically-constituted, geopolitical and sociotechnical construction of the internet. The multi-sited, multi-scalar, decolonial feminist methodology has involved five years of participant observation at internet governance consultations, Mozilla Festival, RightsCon and the global Internet Governance Forum, taking place both in-person and online. Additionally, I have followed and interviewed youth activists located across the African continent and feminist activists located across South Asia, as they have circulated between these sites and their communities of work. I argue that relations of gendered coloniality, shaped by co-constitutive processes of gendered/racialised oppression, structure expansionist moves to generate a particular internet universality. Research findings show these workings are obscured from view often by seemingly virtuous claims that, at face-value, look to be in opposition the entrenched disparities that the colonial matrix of power maintains. Gendered coloniality denigrates Majority World knowledges, ways of being and socialities. In the governance of the internet these relations project Western societies as kinetic, innovative and future-oriented, whilst Majority World societies are fixed into the eternal past. In the face of these moves to power activist collaborators who contribute to the research engage in multi-scalar negotiations for access for themselves and their communities. In their organising these activists value lived experience at the borders and multi-scalar tactics, whilst embodying decolonial habitus and cultivating solidarities. The work finds that 'access' is in an inherently limited concept, functioning to foreclose options outside of a market-based, US-shaped and Global North-led internet universality. However, the access agenda is used by activists to articulate and share differentiated notions of interconnectivity which are expansive and optimistic in their ambitions towards social justice; these visions are the basis for what I term 'internet pluriversality'.

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GLOSSARY

IANA – Internet Assigned Numbers Authority

ICANN – The Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers

ICT – Information and communication technologies

ICT4D Information and communication technology for development

IETF – Internet Engineering Task Force

IGF – Internet Governance Forum

ISP – Internet Service Provider

MAG – Multistakeholder Advisory Board of the Internet Governance Forum

MDGs – Millennium Development Goals

NGO – Non-governmental organisation

NIEO – New International Economic Order

NRO – Numbers Resource Organization

NWICO – New World Information and Communication Order

SDGs – Sustainable Development Goals

UNESCO – The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UN DESA – United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs

WSIS – World Summit on the Information Society

PART I

Part I begins by questioning the internet access consensus which permeates and shapes policy at all institutional scales, both undergirding and undergirded by the vision of internet universality that occludes other options for global interconnectivity. I argue that internet access has remained under-theorised in the literature, allowing for this policy consensus to go uninterrogated in the majority of scholarship. A decolonial feminist conceptual framework is introduced and located amongst existing approaches, highlighting in particular, the need for multi-scalar research. To respond to these gaps in knowledge I introduce the multi-sited, multi-scalar, ethnographic, decolonial feminist methodology for the research.

1. INTRODUCTION – WHOSE INTERNET (UNIVERSALITY) IS IT ANYWAY?

1.1 Questioning the access consensus

Is inter-connectivity an intrinsic good, and if so, why is this held to be the case and by whom? Is this view ‘universally’ held? Given the racialized colonial nature of the global political economy, is it not possible that reference to ‘capacity to connect’ masks (obscures, occludes), albeit unintentionally, the possibility of being connected by a hegemonic other – that is, to be colonized through connectivity? (Ali, 2018, p. 143).

This provocation from decolonial computing scholar Syed Mustafa Ali reaches to the core of the concerns that this thesis contends with. Despite discontent and concern about how the internet is developing, visions of an inexorable *internet universality* grow stronger, depicting a world in which everyone is connected to the internet. This thesis intervenes from a *decolonial feminist* standpoint by questioning the received wisdom of the internet universality, asking *whose* vision for global interconnectivity is being brought forth, and to whom it brings benefit. From this theoretical perspective ‘universality’ sheds its happy-clappy image. The lens of *gendered coloniality* exposes universality as “someone else’s culture” with “just enough power to spread it, even force it, upon others” (Mavhunga, 2017, p. 17). This undoing of gendered colonial logic opens up the *pluriverse* of decolonial options for interconnectivities at different scales.

In 2016 the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) passed a non-binding resolution (Human Rights Council, 2016) which affirmed that states should respect human rights online, and went further to assert that disruption of internet access is to be considered a human rights violation. The same resolution also calls on states to adopt “Internet-related public policies that have the objective of universal access and enjoyment of human rights at their core” (ibid., para. 12). This followed the UN’s Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (UN, 2000) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UN, 2015), both of which include references to internet expansion. The former, signed in the year 2000 by 189 UN member states, to be achieved by 2015, promised to, “in cooperation with the private sector, make

available the benefits of new technologies, especially information and communications”; this was one of the six targets under Goal 8 to “develop a global partnership for development” (UN, 2000).

The stakes rose in 2015’s SDGs, to be achieved by 2030, which see access to ICTs appearing under more than one of the seventeen goals in various forms. The strongest expression appears under Goal 9, to “build resilient infrastructure, promote sustainable industrialisation and foster innovation”. The specific target under this Goal is to “significantly increase access to information and communications technology and strive to provide universal and affordable access to the internet in least developed countries by 2020” (UN, 2015). These changes reflect how embedded and explicit the vision of an internet universality has become amongst international institutions following the UN-hosted World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). As I will expand on in Chapter 2, this process which ran from 2003 to 2005 was a key turning point. Ambitions of internet universality are backed up by the World Bank which offers support to client countries through digital development activities, including lending for the purposes of building infrastructure and to monitor rates of internet growth (World Bank, n.d.).

Regional institutions show a similar orientation. The African Union’s Agenda 2063 (2015, p. 6) commits to expanding broadband infrastructure and seeks to work towards “a continent on equal footing with the rest of the world as an information society, an integrated e-economy”. The European Commission’s Digital Strategy, revised in early 2020 includes amongst its aims to expand “ultra-fast broadband” (European Commission, 2020, p. 2) throughout the European Union (EU), and to “support developing economies in going digital” (ibid., p. 3).

The majority of national governments too have sought to develop dedicated strategies variously focused on ICTs and digitalisation (Yusuf, 2005, p. 317). Governments in pursuit of approaches to communications governance outside of these visions have variously been criticised as backwards or close-off, juxtaposed against the internet’s purported ‘openness’. In recent years a so-called ‘fragmentation’ of the internet has been imagined as a process of decline, with China, Russia and Iran prominently staking different paths outside of the

universality, and many more governments engaging in national policy changes, censorship and internet disruptions.

These institutional orientations at all scales have seen internet access emerge as a pivotal issue area in the development industry, with private sector actors stepping in to fill gaps in provision; multinational telecommunications companies and corporations that trade primarily online in search of pastures new. This is a geopolitical set-up that is ripe for *technosolutioneering* as tech-based options are proffered for the problem of un-universal access, defined primarily in technical terms as a lack of infrastructure and technology. Marketing, lobbying, advertising online and offline, as well as strategic funding of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are all tools available to these firms to further consolidate the imaginary of a life well-lived being a life lived through and on their services.

Activists, resistance movements and journalists have sought to maintain and defend access to the internet, which has been instrumental to successive progressive movements including, to name a few, the Arab Spring Uprisings, Me Too and Black Lives Matter. Internet disruptions have seen governments in collusion with corporations using sophisticated tools to censor, block and slow services in target localities, and nationwide, particularly during times of repression, unrest and even during elections (Freyburg and Garbe, 2018). As such access is a site of struggle at every scale, from skewed global power arrangements to national internet manipulation and disruptions.

Definitions of 'internet' or 'Internet'¹ are simultaneously narrow and technocentric, expansive and all-encompassing. Despite the lack of clarity, fewer theoretical and scholarly contributions address this indecision in recent years as attention falls to conceptualising newer ideas such as the Internet of Things (IoT) and Artificial Intelligence (AI), 'internet' having, for some, outgrown its conceptual utility for its omnipresence. For the purposes of

¹ Capitalisation of 'internet' is contentious, and both capitalised and non-capitalised usage can be found in the literature. In 2016 the influential Associated Press (AP) style guide for media and journalists changed its accepted style, no longer treating 'internet' as a proper noun (Easton, 2016). The word 'internet' comes from a specific technical usage, referring to inter-networking, a process creating connections between networks. These interconnecting networks were described as 'internetworks', or 'internets' and whilst *the* internet is one such internet, it is not the only one. See Franklin (2019b, p. 2) for alternative choices Curran (2016, p. 34).

this research the internet is considered both a discursive field and physical object, an imaginary of global interconnectivity and an interoperable digital network (Franklin, 2013, p. 1). Understanding that these facets coexist and are co-constituted is analytically important in recognising and shaping the internet to come (Franklin, 2009, p. 223). As Ali (2018, p. 132) asserts, “the *what* of the Internet cannot be separated from its *how*”, as he conceptualises the technical infrastructure as both a ‘sedimentation’ of power and a dominant worldview.

Historian Janet Abbate (2017, pp. 9–12) describes three broad strands of definition: the internet conceived of as a technical configuration of hardware and software, exemplified by understanding it as a ‘network of networks’; the internet as a social space, or ‘cyberspace’ made up of the interactions and content of users online; and the internet as situated in experience, taking into account that whilst “[the infrastructure] is global, for users the internet is always local”. Through this acknowledgement research about the internet can move away from dominant narratives that centre technocentric, ‘heroic’ inventor, institutional, corporate and Western narratives (Abbate, 2000, p. 4).

In 2023 internet access is considered tantamount to a human right, and although there has been and continues to be extensive research on the perceived ‘haves and have-nots’, the idea of internet access itself remains under-conceptualised. This is a lacuna further entrenched by research which is siloed, looking either upstream at internet governance and policy, or downstream at internet experiences, split along political-economy and culture-centred lines and methodologies. Further, the temporal stamp on internet governance often fails to look at global communications policy within the long historical tail of coloniality (Oppermann, 2018). The scholarly and policy field of ‘internet governance’ sees prevailing views trained to technical standards and formal institutions. Narrow definitions of internet governance place Northern actors in a privileged position (Franklin, 2013, p. 130), centring institutions and a geopolitical set-up that been shaped by those who exercise ‘first-movers advantage’—governments, corporations and civil society actors located in the Global North. A more expansive definition locates internet governance more broadly, and crucially, problematises rather than elides evident disparities of power (Ali, 2018).

1.2 Gendered coloniality and the internet

Decolonising approaches in scholarship about the internet have gained greater prominence recent years (Couldry and Mejias, 2021), although these perspectives still remain at the fringes of internet governance and policymaking. Accounts variably focus on: online languages and content (Graham and Sengupta, 2017); US corporate preponderance (Kwet, 2019); data harvesting (Coleman, 2019; Couldry and Mejias, 2019) and the nature of computing itself (Ali, 2014). Cognate perspectives bring together political-economy and culture-centred views to offer broader, systemic interventions (Ávila Pinto, 2018; Nyabola, 2018). Researchers have also drawn on social justice theoretical frames to consider varied alternatives (Amrute et al., 2022; Estrada and Lehuedé, 2022; Jimenez and Roberts, 2019; lasade-anderson, 2022). This thesis contributes to these growing discussions, and to the broader field of internet governance, by interrogating the under-theorised concept of internet access. At the same time, it offers a decolonial feminist approach to decolonising scholars of the internet.

I have developed a multi-scalar, multi-sited, decolonial feminist, ethnographic methodology, rooted in decolonial feminist epistemology. The work has included five years of engaged participant observation: at internet governance consultations, Mozilla Festival (MozFest), RightsCon and the global Internet Governance Forum (IGF), and with the NGO TechEverybody in India. In addition, I have conducted interviews with internet access activists whom I have met and followed in the field-sites. Working with youth activists located across the African continent, and feminist activists located across South Asia, the work engages with decolonial resistance practices. These are: *border-thinking* (Grosfoguel, 2011, pp. 9–11), rooted in the lived experiences of those at the sharp end of gendered coloniality; *delinking* (Mignolo in Mignolo and Walsh, 2018, p. 115), from gendered colonial epistemology; and *relinking* (ibid., p. 120), to community and other ways of being and relating.

The methodology makes use of carefully negotiated ‘lines of relating’ (Tuhiwai Smith, 2013, p.8) which seek to subvert exploitative and extractive ways of doing research. This has involved working with collaborators in ways that respect their personal and activist agendas,

as well as their time, privacy and safety. Doing research in this way has required flexibility and a long research period, both of which multi-sited ethnographic work affords. It has also enabled the development of the multi-scalar approach, which I argue is much needed as disciplinary lines between internet governance and internet access scholarship serve to obscure gendered colonial power dynamics from view. The thesis intervenes at various entry-points along three scales: spatial (local to global), institutional (informal to formalised) and temporal (over the five years), which I will explicate in Chapter 3.

The primary question guiding this thesis asks: how do varied modes of access facilitate and limit decolonising politics with relation to the internet, under conditions of gendered coloniality? This is underpinned by two sub-questions: One, how do organisers of global policy consultations shape internet access agendas? And two, how do youth and feminist activists negotiate access for their communities of work, and for themselves?

1.3 Chapter outline

Chapter 2 outlines the original conceptual framework of *gendered coloniality*, bringing to internet research, in particular, the work of decolonial feminist scholars María Lugones and Françoise Vergès, and decolonial thinkers Anibal Quijano, Ramon Grosfoguel and Walter D. Mignolo. I reconceptualise the *colonial matrix of power* as a set of relations which configures the world-system in hierarchies structured by co-constitutive gendered/racialised classification. Here I offer a novel *decolonial feminist* approach to internet scholarship broadly, and to internet access scholarship specifically. From this standpoint I trace the historical circumstances that have brought about the particular geopolitical and sociotechnical set-up of the internet, and show how the ‘information society’ and information and communications for development (ICT4D) agendas have been met with resistance. I argue that the concept of internet access has been under-theorised, and using multidimensional analysis I show how the idea of ‘access’ is inherently limited. I conclude by indicating the need for multi-scalar research which transgresses disciplinary silos and takes note of contiguous politics of gendered coloniality in internet governance and internet access.

Chapter 3 draws out the multi-scalar, multi-sited, decolonial feminist methodology developed for the research. Inspired by George E. Marcus (1998) the work follows both the idea of access and internet access activists through varied sites. This approach has allowed for shifts and changes which I describe as ‘pathfinding’, involving a constant negotiation of positioning. The thesis intervenes along three major scales: one, temporal, involving work with collaborators over longer and shorter terms, as well as involving interventions at different points during the research period; two, spatial, from local community projects in India to the three global internet governance consultations, Mozilla Festival (MozFest), RightsCon and the Internet Governance Forum (IGF); and three, institutional, from work with independent youth activists to longstanding, formalised NGOs like TechEverybody and global institutions like the United Nations Educational and Scientific Organization (UNESCO). I outline how in working with African, youth and South Asian, feminist activists I engage with decolonial practices of border-thinking, delinking and relinking. Following Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2013), I outline ‘lines of relating’ that inculcate a decolonial sensibility into these relationships to subvert colonial and extractive processes of research.

Chapter 4 first sets the scene by looking closely at the organisers behind the selected internet governance consultations, MozFest, RightsCon and the IGF, their values, funding and programming processes. I illustrate how these factors foreclose certain options and limit the agendas at internet governance consultations. MozFest and RightsCon in particular see organisers profess to be in support of social justice movements, but continue to engage in tokenism, whilst centring themselves rather than ceding power. The IGF sees more space for continuity on issues from year to year, however, the multistakeholder model can also serve to strengthen incumbent powerholders. I then analyse the sessions that I observed, both in-person and online, around the theme of access, at each of the sites between 2018 and 2022. This analysis looks at who is involved in the discussions and how they are framed, with an eye to dominant and peripheralized views. Conversations bear out limited ideas of internet access that are shaped by capitalist logics and Global North-led visions of internet universality. These are met with resistance from feminist, Indigenous and disabled activists.

Chapter 5 looks at three case studies with youth activists located across the African continent, who engage in different ways with MozFest, the IGF and RightsCon. Sam and Pat share experiences of volunteering with MozFest as organisers and highlight the challenges that come up for them as young African women called on to 'represent' their communities. Parte Afta Parte, an informal group of friends and youth activists work together to submit proposals to hold sessions at IGF, encountering both rejection and acceptance. Digital Grassroots find that their work is being used by the internet governance community, but struggle to access funding in line with their politics, even as they hold successful sessions at RightsCon. These youth activists find ways to manage tokenism, resist preponderant cultural norms and navigate organisational processes, reconfiguring orthodoxies of internet governance.

Chapter 6 follows feminist activist collaborators located across South Asia. The work includes observation of local projects with TechEverybody in India, and interviews with representatives from Nepal-based GenderOnline, Pakistan-based InternetWitness and independent activists Shama and Irum. Speaking to collaborators about their work at different scales, I bring together these conversations with observations of their sessions at consultations. The work illustrates complicated negotiations that women and queer persons engage with at every level, from surveillance when using internet services and online violence and abuse, to the difficulties of travelling to in-person consultations. Whilst dealing with tokenising manoeuvres, and myriad gendered limitations of access, the activists illustrate resistance tactics rooted in regional and Majority World feminist solidarities. At the same time, they draw attention to the assertion of resistance in their communities of work, countering gendered colonial notions of Brown women and queer persons in need of saving.

Chapter 7 begins by tracing how agenda-setting processes at the selected internet governance consultations are continuous with the broader historically-constituted, geopolitical and sociotechnical set-up of the internet, underpinned by gendered colonial relations. I outline the double-standards and tokenism that are rife in these spaces, arguing that processes of programming that are cast off as administrative are deeply political. Opening-up the slippery terms of reference employed at consultations, I critique language

that serves to preserve the status quo, including 'inclusion', 'openness' and 'platform'. Sketching out the resistance strategies practised by activists, I draw attention to how they intersect and diverge. Expressions of a decolonial way of being, or what I call *decolonial habitus*, following Walsh (2018, p. 43), vary from rejecting opportunities that do not feel culturally comfortable to taking on as many opportunities as possible. Both youth and feminist activists make use of multi-scalar tactics to make the best of the limitations they face at different levels of their work. Finally, I find that revisions to 'access' that are expressed at internet governance consultations have been limited, deferring to a market-based, Global North-led set-up. However, Indigenous activists, in particular, are at the helm of struggles that re-define connectivity in ways that serve local needs.

Chapter 8 concludes the thesis by arguing that access of any kind can be a foot in the door for resistance strategies. This is demonstrated by activists that already make complex multi-scalar negotiations to counter power disparities. With the research collaborators I concur that tactics to decolonise the internet must be many and diverse. From my decolonial feminist perspective, which is but one option, I suggest that the work begins by making visible the glaring double-standards upon which the vision of internet universality rests. To unveil these gendered colonial arrangements we must nurture visions of global interconnectivity rooted in Majority World and feminist solidarities.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK – DECOLONISING INTERNET ACCESS

At the heart of this thesis are unchecked aspirations towards a specific (market-led, US-centred) ‘internet universality’ and the massive disparities of power that go unquestioned beneath promises of ‘internet development’. The provision of *internet access* is underpinned by ‘inclusion’ measures that are tasked to include the most people, taking into account minimal specific or additional needs they might have, ultimately ‘including’ them into a system that seeks to remain unchanged by their entrance. These are agendas that side-step questions of power arrangements writ large in the governance of the internet, leading to neglect of how these are imbricated in so-called ‘digital divides’ or ‘digital inequalities’ where interrelated policy and research agendas tend to focus (Gurumurthy and Singh, 2009, p. 9).

Working from a *decolonial feminist* standpoint, I advance the theoretical frame of *gendered coloniality*. This perspective unseats the singular, inexorable internet universality and questions internet access agendas, opening up the *multi-sited* and *multi-scalar* politics of resistance that are obscured by notions of the internet as a technical, rather than sociotechnical construction. Building with heterogenous postcolonial, decolonial and decolonising scholarship and activism, which has begun to unveil the skewed geopolitical underpinnings of the internet, this chapter argues that decolonial feminist epistemology creates much needed discursive space, contending with theoretical proclivities and methodological orthodoxies of internet access scholarship and policy discussions.

2.1 Theorising gendered coloniality

2.1.1 Modernity/coloniality and locating power

Whilst decolonial theorists have yet to bring to bear their theoretical contributions in study of the internet, a number of researchers focusing on the internet specifically, and the digital more broadly, have begun to consider the implications of decolonial thought for these fields (Ali, 2014; Ávila Pinto, 2018; Couldry and Mejias, 2021; Estrada and Lehuedé, 2022). It is into

these conversations that I present a novel perspective that is decolonial *and feminist*, as such I will begin by taking some time to outline the theoretical principles of decoloniality, tracing key debates and feminist critique.

Aníbal Quijano (2007, p. 168) describes colonialism as “direct political, social and cultural domination” by Europeans who conquered all the continents, which saw its end with decolonisation movements for nation-states in the ‘Third World’², as it was referred to at the time. According to his account, colonialism has been succeeded by Western³ imperialism, or ‘coloniality’, that sees dominant social classes and/or ethnic groups engaging in the maintenance of unequal power relations (ibid.). European modernity’s claims to equality for humanity are shattered when seen with its occluded dark underside; the Enlightenment century was also the period that saw the Transatlantic Slave Trade peak at 70,000 to 90,000 Africans trafficked per year (Vergès, 2021, p. 28). Written as ‘modernity/coloniality’, Quijano insists on a constant reckoning with coloniality as the dark underside of modernity, as Mignolo (2011) puts it, two sides of the same coin. The distinction between colonialism and coloniality is crucial to name continuous inequities of power that have characterised the world along lines of empire and through novel geographies, well past decolonisation, whilst not relegating the meaning of colonialism to metaphor (Tuck and Yang, 2021).

Under coloniality, Majority World⁴ societies and peoples are continually forced into a linear trajectory towards (Global North modelled and prescribed) civilisation that places Europe

² The term ‘Third World’ communicates a particular historical and political imaginary. According to Bevins (2020, p. 13), for postcolonial nations the term Third World held echoes of France’s revolutionary Third Estate as the third and final act (not necessarily third-rate) succeeding the first and second world’s failed attempts at a world order.

³ The ‘West’ as an imaginary with blurred edges that is rife with contradictions and by its nature involves simplification: comprised of Europe and North America, and at times other wealthier societies around the world, not inclusive of Latin America, and certainly not inclusive of all of Europe (Hall, 1992, p. 186). In this thesis ‘West’ and ‘Western’ refer to this imaginary, formed against the Other of the Orient (Said, 1978). I also use Global North, which overlaps with the West but has a more diffuse territory and a more contemporary purview.

⁴ Photographer Shahidul Alam (in Shafaieh, 2022) uses “Majority World” to critique the “hypocritical rhetoric used by superpowers in the Global North” in proclaiming democracy and freedom by highlighting that they claim to speak for the majority of humankind, who never asked them to do so. In this thesis I use ‘Majority World’ critically to signpost societies in Africa, Asia and Latin America where colonialism and gendered coloniality have been and continue to be resisted, as well as cultures and peoples from these societies in

and North America at the leading edge and everyone else behind. In other words, these societies are the present, superior and future (the newest and the most evolved) in contrast to the inferior, racialised Majority World (which is primitive and uncivilised) (Quijano, 2000, pp. 541–542). Quijano (2000, p. 541) observes that coloniality impacts different parts of the world in different ways, with repression in the Americas and African continent severely impacting intellectual legacies in particular. Meanwhile, in Asia, he finds some intellectual legacies have been allowed to remain in the fabrication of the “Orient” as comparable Other to Europe (ibid.).

Global North-led policy arrangements enforce the internet as a global network, in its very conception expansionary, a characteristic shared by Quijano’s understanding of the European version of modernity⁵. European modernity/coloniality, which began with the colonisation of Latin America, is distinct in its creation of the first ‘world-system’⁶. This globality involves four interrelated processes: one, in each sphere of social existence a system is created to configure social relations; two, each of these spheres is under the hegemony of an institution which was produced under coloniality; three, each of these institutions is in a relation of interdependence with the others; fourth, this model of power is intended to cover the entire planet’s population. Modernity/coloniality is unique in its demand to order all available space, like the internet, expansionary at its heart (Ali, 2014)⁷—the hegemonic institutions that control each sphere of social existence are universal as “intersubjective models” including the “nation-state, the bourgeois family, the capitalist

diaspora that reside across the world. ‘Majority World’ carries similarly, but more lightly, the problem of ‘Global South’, that is lumping vast societies and regions together (Gurumurthy, 2017). More lightly I argue because majority can imply multitudes far better. I select it over Global South for this reason and a number of others: one, it signifies abundance rather than lack, the opposite to ‘developing world’ (Panigrahi, 2023); two, it enables the regions of Africa, Asia and Latin America and diasporic communities to be discussed together; three, whilst Global South is used commonly amongst institutions that administer relations of gendered coloniality, Majority World has not (yet) been captured; lastly, Global North and Global South are easily cast as opposites and equal due to the symmetry and neatness of the terms, Majority World cuts the overblown fantasies of colonial powers down to size and offers no symmetrical other.

⁵ Eurocentric views, Quijano (2000, p. 543) argues, consider Europeans historically and geographically distinct in their birthing of modernity and rationality, an assertion that he contends with arguing that China, India, Egypt, Greece, Maya-Aztec and Tawantinsuyo all had their own modernities characterised by rationality and secularisation, although he argues they likely did not share the desire to homogenise basic forms of social existence for all their populations.

⁶ The discussion of the structuralist world-systems perspectives and their relationship to the decolonial feminist option adopted in this thesis is important and discussed later.

⁷ This is a quality which is particularly important for Ali’s view of the field of computing which for him materialises this expansionary nature (2014).

corporation, and the Eurocentric rationality” (Quijano, 2000, pp. 544–545). In his “coloniality of power” model, Ramon Grosfoguel (2011, pp. 9–11) expands the spheres of social existence named by Quijano. He theorises an “entangled package” of *heterarchies* ordered by the classificatory systems of race and racism that include (but are not limited to, by his own call for further theorisation) gender and sexuality; labour classes; global geography; a nation-state system; racial/ethnic groups; spiritualities; epistemologies; languages; aesthetics; pedagogies; media and information; age; ecologies; and rural/urban spatialities.

The specific model of power which allowed Europe to set itself as the centre of the capitalist colonialist world-system is what Quijano (2000, p. 540) calls the “colonial matrix of power”⁸. This is made up of four overlapping processes and points of control: one, control of the economy, including that of land, labour exploitation and natural resources; two, control of authority, including institutions, governance and military means; three, control of gender and sexuality, including self-expression and sociality through the family structure; and four, control of knowledge creation in education, epistemology and the formation of subjectivities (Quijano, 2000, summarised in Mignolo, 2007). María Lugones (2010, p. 370) offers an important and significant criticism to Quijano’s work, finding that these four spheres of social existence treat sex/gender insufficiently. She argues these domains themselves to be eurocentric myth, none being metaphysically prior to the systems which constitute them. Lugones (2010, p. 370) specifically takes issue with control of “sexual access, its resources and products” defining the domain of sex/gender which she deems a patriarchal, heterosexist and eurocentred, capitalist understanding of gender.

For Quijano and Grosfoguel, universal racial categorisation is the keystone which has allowed coloniality to persist (Grosfoguel, 2007, p. 70; Quijano, 2000, pp. 533–535). The development of racial hierarchies maps onto the articulation of peripheries which are integral to the international division of labour; even when they have migrated, racialised

⁸ In Spanish this is “patrón colonial de poder” which Mignolo translates to “colonial matrix of power;” “matrix” from the French ‘matrice’ which means uterus, from which origination stems stands in for ‘patrón’ a “set of structural relations and flows constitutive of an entity (conceptual and mechanic, like in the film The Matrix)” (in Walsh and Mignolo, 2018, p. 114).

groups retain peripheralised positions to varying degrees. As such there is a “periphery outside and inside the core zones and there is a core inside and outside the peripheral regions” (Grosfoguel, 2007, pp. 73–74). I do not deny the significance of racial classification, however I follow Lugones in her criticism of this approach for following a eurocentric understanding of gender. Quijano’s formulation considers all labour relations to fall into the economy, however, even though the waged-labour model is hegemonic under capitalism, it also co-exists with unwaged labour (Lugones, 2007, p. 191); as shown by the exploitation of Black women and Women of Colour⁹, whose labour is both racialised and gendered (ibid. 2010, p. 388). Lugones (2007, p. 198) foregrounds Yoruba and Indigenous American societies’ cosmologies and organisation of sex/gender which are radically different to the eurocentric perspective adopted by Quijano, a view which she argues takes for granted that those designated female are a “resource” of whom sexual control is sought by those designated male. Lugones (2007, p. 186) asks why the colonial system benefits from a binary sex/gender system and argues that this was required to destabilise existing *gynocratic* social systems and spiritual plurality; when land was taken from Indigenous¹⁰ groups, they were forced to opt into new patriarchal systems as this was paved as the only way towards survival¹¹.

Lugones (2010, p. 369) finds that Third World, Women of Colour and Black feminist thinking benefits from the coloniality framework and therefore looks to bridge between these theoretical perspectives. To understand what she calls “the modern/colonial gender system”, which is part of coloniality, requires investigation of conceptualisations of sex/gender that are characterised by biological binary sex, patriarchy and hetero-compulsion towards reproduction (ibid., p. 371). For Quijano (2000, pp. 541–542), the racial

⁹ The term Women of Colour is a political signification that enables resistance of white feminist movements by racialised women and women of the Majority World (Crenshaw, 1991; Mohanty, 1986). White feminism is characterised by a focus on individual rights, failing to question the content of this freedom and the genealogy of European modernity from which it stems, and thus failing to engage with the notion that this freedom for some women comes from other women’s unfreedom (Vergès, 2021, p. 17). White feminisms are also called “civilisational feminisms” by Vergès (2021, p. 19) for their complicity in Europe’s civilising missions.

¹⁰ In this thesis I follow Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2013, p. 7) to define Indigenous as a “term that internationalizes the experiences, the issues and struggles of some of the world’s colonized peoples”, with a particular focus on groups that live with settler colonialism. The ongoing presence of settlers requires a way to distinguish their relations to the land and culture from that of Indigenous communities.

¹¹ This is not to say that all hetero-patriarchy emerges with coloniality, as argued by Walsh in the context of Abya Yala (in Walsh and Mignolo, 2018, p. 41).

hierarchy is a newer version of the gender hierarchy¹², allowing Europeans to feel superior to other races, a superiority that is seen to be endowed by nature or god. Whilst he does not deny gendered racial oppression, the expression of gendered dimensions is limited. Quijano (2000, p. 555) notes that European rationality regarded the body as an “object of knowledge” outside of the realm of subject and reason, therefore the body is considered part of nature, enabling ‘less rational’ races to be seen as bodies devoid of rationality and also primitive and a part of nature. He finds that European women are considered to be more body than rational, and therefore closer to nature than the apex of civilisation, European man. In this way Women of Colour are considered to be closest to nature and Black women are considered part of nature (dehumanised) (ibid.). Lugones (2010, p. 748) disagrees, arguing that under the modern/colonial gender system gender, and thereby humanity, is denied to Indigenous peoples who are not ascribed gender due to their inhumanity, they are thought of not as man/woman but as male/female with the coloniality of gender enforcing dichotomous gender norms as part of the civilising process.

The concept of ‘gendered coloniality’ advanced in this thesis builds with Lugones in particular, articulating gendered/racialised oppression as co-constitutive and integral to structuring social life into hierarchies. The coloniality of gender and universal racial classification are inseparable under gendered coloniality and it is their working together that structures the world-system. Gendered coloniality retains Quijano’s understanding of the colonial matrix of power, whereby intersubjective systems are created to configure all social relations under the hegemony of institutions produced under coloniality that work interdependently to cover the entire planet’s population. With Grosfoguel and Lugones I complicate Quijano’s spheres of social existence which he names as sexuality, authority, subjectivity and labour. I make the original argument that establishing the particular configuration of the colonial matrix of power lies with the collective or individual looking to make sense of social life from their perspective. This is an extension of border-thinking, which is outlined below, enabling analysis that transgresses eurocentric, universalising research orthodoxies.

¹² Vergès recalls Elsa Dorlin’s work which suggests that sexual difference was a model for developing race in the Americas with racialised groups ascribed weak and feminine traits.

2.1.2 A decolonial feminist option

As Quijano (2007, p. 168) has pointed out, decolonisation refers to the formal end of colonisation in some parts of the world, the end of “direct political, social and cultural domination” by Europeans succeeded by the ‘independent’ nation-state. Yet relations of colonality remain, and as decolonisation resisted colonialism, decoloniality resists colonality. Having outlined how power relations are structured variously under the colonial matrix of power (Quijano), colonality of power (Grosfoguel), the modern/colonial gender system (Lugones) and in the view advanced here, that of gendered colonality, it remains to consider what it means to *decolonise* broadly, and in accordance with the particular *decolonial feminist option* developed in this thesis. To avoid the hegemonic practices which prize grand theory, decolonial analysis is offered as one option among many (Mignolo in Gaztambide-Fernández, 2014, p. 197; Icaza, 2017, p. 40)¹³.

It is important to briefly situate this work within wider feminist politics. Building with Third World, Latin American, Black, Women of Colour and postcolonial feminisms, the view advanced here is critical of universalist, white, neoliberal¹⁴ and other hegemonic feminist agendas that have been, and continue to be, complicit in relations of gendered colonality. A decolonial expression of feminism is not wedded to biology but commits to theories and practices that are rooted in the daily experiences of those experiencing oppression produced by the colonial matrix of power which manufactures the category of ‘women’ (Vergès, 2021, p. 23). Inasmuch as being by nature oppositional, decolonial feminisms are deliberately pluralistic, relational and situated (Ballestrin, 2022, p. 116; Walsh in Walsh and Mignolo, 2018, p. 39) calling for an emphasis on the positionality of the *subalternised*¹⁵ (Ballestrin, 2022, p. 122). I particularly emphasise the creativity and energy of expansion

¹³ There is of course no one decolonial option either, or no one decolonial feminist option, for example, Vergès (2021) titles her book “*A Decolonial Feminism*” in her commitment to plurality.

¹⁴ Following Jimenez and Roberts (2019, p. 3) “Neoliberalism is a hegemonic ideology or a theory of political-economy discourse that ‘proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade’”.

¹⁵ A term borrowed from postcolonial studies, the subalternised, those who are made subaltern (subordinated, othered, marginalised) in relations of colonialism (Spivak, 1988), and in my usage under lasting relations of gendered colonality.

within decolonial feminist approaches, as shown in Anzaldúa's (in Icaza, 2017, p. 32) move from 'thinking at the border' to 'thinking from borderlands', a place where *futurity* can be fathomed. Futurity here involves building futures from the decolonial elsewhere, the expansive borderlands. Tina Campt (2017, pp. 34–35) in her Black feminist futurity seeks to bring this into being through use of the "future real conditional" tense, what she describes as "that which will have had to happen". This involves "living the future now—as imperative rather than subjunctive—as a striving for the future you want to see, right now, in the present".

The task of the decolonial feminist approach taken here is certainly to make relations of gendered coloniality, as well as resistance and futurities visible; all the more difficult as the coloniality of power¹⁶ occludes its own workings. This requires the "fracture of the epistemology of the zero point" (Grosfoguel, 2011, p. 6; Icaza, 2017, p. 29) Simply put, we must foil the 'god trick' which removes the observer from view; here decolonial thought benefits from Edward Said's postcolonial articulation of the Orient as the Other to Europe, thus rendering the European gaze visible (Bhabra, 2014, p. 120). Quijano's (2000, pp. 552–553) work is attentive to eurocentric epistemologies that encompass: a fascination with dualisms and linear, one-directional evolutionism; the naturalisation of differences between human cultures in the codification of race; and the temporal relocation of non-Europeans into the past. The practice of "delinking" from the colonial matrix of power enables sight of these workings by fostering local and historically-embedded thinking, being and doing (Mignolo in Mignolo and Walsh, 2018, p. 115). For researchers, delinking involves disconnecting from theoretical and conceptual tenets revered in the Western canon (Walsh and Mignolo, 2018, p. 7)¹⁷ and rejecting the 'containers' of social life—economic, political, cultural, social—that make these moves to power part of the furniture (Grosfoguel, 2011, p. 19). This is a reclamation that follows from European *epistemicide*, which subordinates other forms of knowing by making modern, European forms of knowing the normative frame (Maldonado-Torres, 2017, p. 433) as European knowledges have, in their claims to

¹⁶ The specific way in which colonial hierarchies structure all aspects of social life.

¹⁷ Mignolo (in Walsh and Mignolo, 2018, p. 106) practices this in what he calls an "undisciplinary" stance which transgresses academic fields to unsettle Western epistemic assumptions.

universality, dismissed other epistemologies as particularistic and thus inferior (Grosfoguel, 2011, pp. 6–7).

Delinking from the colonial matrix of power involves ‘relinking’ to something else, decoloniality is simultaneously undoing and redoing (Mignolo in Walsh and Mignolo, 2018, p. 120). ‘Resistance’ is a part of this, but can feel insufficient as it implies that decoloniality can be boiled down to being the Other of coloniality. Meriem Kamil (2020, p. 78) envisages a decolonial futurity for Palestinians rooted in geography, embodiment, situatedness and memory that crucially does not serve to entrench dispossession through claims of placelessness. Relinking is a reflexive process that, following Paulo Friere (1996), moves in dialogue from action to reflection, and then from that reflection to a new action (Walsh in Walsh and Mignolo, 2018, p. 50) emphasising historic and movement continuity, rejecting the idea of a ‘new wave’ or ‘new generation’ thinking which obscures connection and conversations with forbears (Vergès, 2021, p. 11) and South-South circulation of people, knowledge and resistance practices (ibid., p. 16). This is a significant challenge in internet research, which often tends towards chasing the newest device or the next big thing (Lovink, 2016, p. 40) and as such, is in dire need of more ‘zoomed-out’ approaches that rebuild historical connections (Franklin, 2013, p. 8; Lovink, 2016, p. 53). This is a challenge that I take up in the methodology crafted for this thesis.

Both a practice and a sensibility, decoloniality is a *way in which things are done*. Walsh develops a theory of “decolonial habitus”, influenced by histories of *marronage*—whereby enslaved peoples extricated themselves from slavery—this involves creative, social strategies of resistance that affirm collective being, memory and knowledge. Significantly, a decolonial habitus involves “the posture, attitude, act, action, and thought *casa adentro* (or in-house) of disobedience, rebellion, resistance, and insurgence, and also of the decolonial construction and creation of freedom” (Walsh, 2018, p. 43). This attitude is expressed in the home, amongst ourselves, even alone, embodying Camp’s (2017, pp. 35) idea of futurity by living it. These aspects underscore a “re-humanizing” of the world through theories and practices which are anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-capitalist and anti-colonial, “multidimensional and intersecting” (Vergès, 2021, pp. 19–20), offering, like *marronage*, the

radical promise of a future and an elsewhere from which to attack capitalist coloniality's claims that no elsewhere exists.

In this vein a decolonial feminist sensibility is inherently coalitional, perhaps 'messy', yet in its sociality brings together those who have been isolated from one another under colonial conditions (Icaza, 2017, p. 33). Such a practice breaks down modern/colonial lines between the researcher/subject, where the researcher 'generates' knowledge about the subject whilst engaging in processes that attempt to undermine, denigrate and erase the self-knowledge of those at the other end of their gaze (Tuhiwai Smith, 2013, p. 77). Although writing from a different theoretical location, Haraway (1988, p. 593) expresses a similar orientation in her theorisation of "situated knowledges" which are embodied; for her knowledge is generated socially, within the "power-charged social relation of 'conversation'", not in isolation or through extraction.

Decoloniality shares many aims with postcoloniality, however, these approaches differ in crucial ways (Tlostanova, 2020, p. 166) Decoloniality is strongly linked with world-systems theory and questions of the material, whilst postcoloniality has tended to be more focused on questions of culture¹⁸ (Bhabra, 2014, p. 115). Tlostanova (2020, p. 167) draws distinction between the "postcolonial *condition*" an existential situation, and the "decolonial *option*" consciously chosen as a "political, ethical, and epistemic positionality and an entry point into agency". Postcolonial perspectives have been criticised for presenting a "Eurocentric critique of eurocentrism" in their use of postmodern theory, in contrast to decolonial approaches which involve "critique of eurocentrism from subalternised and silenced knowledges" (Grosfoguel, 2007, p. 65). In calling for the epistemic decolonial turn, Grosfoguel (2007, p. 66) requires: a broader theoretical framework than that which is located in Western thought; a challenge to the European inclination towards grand universalities; an insistence on heterogeneity working towards epistemologies which are developed in 'pluriversal' dialogue; and concern with the epistemologies and cosmologies of critical thinkers from the Majority World, locating knowledge with the subalternised.

¹⁸ These are broad strokes, there are exceptions in both these expansive areas of thought.

Pluriversality challenges universality, rather than there being one superior, eurocentric worldview marked as truth, pluriversality acknowledges many worldviews.

“Border-thinking”, a shift in what Grosfoguel (2011, pp. 9–11) calls the “locus of enunciation” from a eurocentric perspective to a subalternised view, plays a central role in delinking. The workings of gendered coloniality are exposed through the lived experiences of those at the sharp end, showing “what was imposed on us” (Lugones, 2010, p. 370). Working in coalition, this involves uncovering and advancing radically distinct perspectives and positionalities or “relational ways of seeing” (Walsh in Walsh and Mignolo, 2018, p. 17). Where modern/colonial epistemologies are “disembodied, masculinist, and placeless” (Lugones in Icaza, 2017, pp. 43–44), decolonial feminist epistemologies centre body-politics and geo-politics offering an exit point from cyclical divisions between political-economy centred approaches and culture-centred approaches, exposing this as a “false dilemma” that “obscures complexity” (Grosfoguel, 2011, p. 10). As Grosfoguel (2011, pp. 9–11) illustrates, to see colonisation as primarily economic is to view it from the European perspective as a project of economic extraction, the view of colonisation from any specific subalternised position though is far more complicated, bringing together a litany of attacks on land, spirit, body, sexuality, epistemology, language and more.

2.1.3 Decolonising approaches in internet research

Decolonising political movements grew more visible in different quarters during the 2010s, and whilst remaining at fringes, this mood has begun to surface in study of the internet (Chakravartty and Mills, 2018)¹⁹. In this thesis I use ‘decolonising’ perspectives or approaches as an umbrella term which connotes explicitly declared, shared concern with relations of gendered and racialised resistance and domination. At the same time, I take note that ‘decolonising politics’ include differing experiences of colonialism and coloniality, varied scholarly lineages, and debates amongst and between activists and scholars. In study

¹⁹ These theoretical approaches are garnering growing interest amongst internet scholars during the writing of this thesis; conferences including IAMCR (2020), GigaNet (2021) and AOIR (2022) included related topics on their programmes, with the last theming its conference on ‘Decolonising the Internet’.

of the internet a range of theorisations have emerged, within which I situate the present study.

An entry point for this thesis was criticism of Facebook/Meta's Free Basics programme, a product which had seen huge growth in Majority World contexts in the late 2010s (Fisher, 2012). In 2015 digital policy think tank LIRNEasia researcher Helani Galpaya conducted research in Indonesia and then in Nigeria—both amongst the highest online populations on their continents—which showed that people surveyed did not consider Facebook to be part of the internet, they considered it to *be* the internet (Mirani, 2015). At this time Facebook/Meta's Free Basics tool was met with opposition in India, leading to further scrutiny about how firms that operate online conduct themselves globally; in India Free Basics came under fire for impinging on the principle of 'net neutrality', the idea that all content on the internet should be treated the same. After a national campaign that included billboards and pleas in the Indian press from founder and chief executive Mark Zuckerberg, as well as opposition from India's tech sector and civil society, a ruling by the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) banned differential pricing in the country, thereby banning Free Basics too. One of the key tools in the arsenal of Indian technology activists looking to mobilise regular Indians in what had until now been a fairly technical issue related to the idea of foreign interference in national affairs, a techno-nationalism which found fertile ground in a postcolonial country roused by the nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's imaginary of a world-leading technologically advanced ascendent India (Prasad, 2017, p. 416)²⁰.

Renata Ávila Pinto highlights a common theme in the postcolonial and decolonial literatures, that there is a disjuncture between the internet's promise of democratised communication, information and opportunity for all, and what has unfolded (Ávila Pinto, 2018; Gurumurthy and Chami, 2019, p. 1; Tawil-Souri and Aouragh, 2014). In a political-economy-centred account of what she calls 'digital colonialism' Ávila Pinto (2018, p. 17) argues that "the world's offline populations are the disputed territory of tech empires, because whoever gets

²⁰ The feeling was not one-sided though, soon after Facebook board member and investor Marc Andreessen took to Twitter writing "Anti-colonialism has been economically catastrophic for the Indian people for decades. Why stop now?" (quoted in Bowles, 2016).

them locked into their digital feudalism, holds the key to the future” using whatever tools they have to influence politics globally to support these visions. When it comes to delivering access to the unconnected, Ávila Pinto (2018, p. 18) notes local companies and governments are not able to compete with multinational conglomerates. The wealthiest nations and corporate actors maintain advantages that include: one, control of resources including cables, servers and data, as well as experts and researchers; two, national and international legal systems which block smaller economies from adopting economic policies to favour their domestic goods, limited further by new free trade agreements Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), and Trade in Services Agreement (TISA); and three, access to financial resources to invest in the research and development of new technologies, which developing countries severely lack (ibid., pp. 16–17). Ávila Pinto’s formulation is strongest in providing an important zoomed-out view of the warped geopolitics that have structured this particular sociotechnical set-up of the internet. She also alludes to the implications downstream, with a sense for what temporality (late entry) can mean. Rather than bringing liberation, she finds, internet access in latter-connected contexts is often limited, allowing only personal consumption and very little to no creativity, autonomy or collective benefit (ibid., p. 18)²¹.

Focused on the critique of US-based “Big Tech” firms and their unwieldy power, Michael Kwet’s (2019a) version of ‘digital colonialism’ centres these corporations’ control over “computer-mediated experiences” (in collusion with Global North government surveillance) enabling them power over political, economic and cultural relations. Distinguishing from “classic colonialism”, Kwet describes digital colonialism as fuelled by “American empire”; dependent on “ownership and control of territory and infrastructure, the extraction of labor, knowledge and commodities, and the exercise of state power”, digital colonialism is

about entrenching an unequal division of labor, where the dominant powers have used their ownership of digital infrastructure, knowledge, and their control of the means of computation to keep the South in a situation of permanent dependency (Kwet, 2021).

²¹ Echoing Logan Hill (in Hines et al., 2001, p. 29) who prophesied the very same in regard to a “digital divide” at the turn of the millennium.

Building from Kwet's (2019b) research on the pervasive insertion of US-made tools into South African education, the role of corporations is important, however, asserting a dichotomy between 'classic colonialism' and 'digital colonialism' endangers attention to contiguous epistemic, institutional and political conditions. This can also be seen in "data colonialism" theses which centre extraction of value from data, likened to the "scramble for Africa" (Coleman, 2019, p. 418) or "landgrab" that brought about European colonialism (Couldry and Mejias, 2019). For Couldry and Mejias (2021, p. 10), "data colonialism" and the development of this new type of resource is novel and historically distinctive, and thereby not an extension of colonialisms past, but colonialism anew. Meanwhile Coleman (2019, p. 424) finds that "extraction, analysis, and control of data in African countries with limited infrastructure, limited data protection laws, and limited competition, combined with social, political, and economic power imbalances and decades of resource pillaging" is the key source of power under digital colonialism. I argue that these accounts, which centre economic factors, miss key aspects of the colonial imposition. As discussed above, it is a eurocentric view of colonial expansion which classifies these processes as primarily economic; shifting the locus of enunciation, or the body-politics and geo-politics of knowledge to the subalternised reveals an 'entangled package' which is far more complicated (Grosfoguel, 2011, pp. 9–11).

In doing the work of border-thinking, situated accounts of coloniality are better suited to decolonial work. Nanjala Nyabola (2018, p. 166) writes from a Kenyan perspective and develops a view of 'digital colonialism' from this standpoint, emphasising the extent to which technological tools, specifically social media, have enabled political manipulation on a grand scale. She illustrates this with the high-profile Cambridge Analytica scandal; prior to the firm's work on 2016 UK Brexit vote and US election²², the company tested its methods in

²² The company which was shut down in 2018 elicited global controversy when it was found to have harvested 50 million Americans' Facebook/ Meta data via a third-party app, using it without permission for micro-targeted political campaigning. Staff from the company have gone on to launch new ventures in the same sphere (BBC, 2018).

Nigeria, Kenya²³ and South Africa (ibid.)²⁴. This draws to attention how technologies have historically been tested in ‘the middle of nowhere’, which is always somewhere. Cold War technologies were deployed on people in the ‘Third World’ for testing, yet the peoples and lives wrecked at the other end of “American engineering excellence” have been neglected (Aouragh and Chakravartty, 2016, p. 563)²⁵. In this light Aouragh and Chakravartty place development of internet technologies into the context of postcolonial ‘diffusion of innovations’ research involving experimentation regarding how people adopt and use tools. This is thinking rooted in the assertion that the capitalist order is natural and “promises that technological and scientific solutions will transform its ruins into spaces of happiness” (Vergès, 2021, p. 22).

Nyabola’s account focusing specifically on Cambridge Analytica’s actions in Kenya demonstrates some of the key characteristics of what she calls digital colonialism: one, the collusion of international elites, in this case the ruling government, to manipulate the election at a price of 6 million USD; two, the use of African countries as testing grounds for tools and methods to be brought into the West (2018, p. 166); and three, the powerful colonial discourse that allows for this to be pulled off, one that discounts what is happening in ‘peripheral countries’ as unimportant to global politics, Nyabola notes, “had the conversation on digital technology included Kenya and other developing countries earlier, maybe things would have gone differently for everyone”. Drawing on Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Nyabola (2018, p. 214) describes how a linear view of time and development discounts ‘adolescent’ countries from having a say in adult affairs to everyone’s harm.

In another situated account, Palestine is a site of what Helga Tawil-Souri and Miriyam Aouragh (2014, p. 107) call “cyber-colonialism” which “reinforces a world of contact and

²³ In an ironic twist of the knife, the company’s Kenyan campaign fanned the flames of ethno-nationalism in resistance to neo-colonial influence (Nyabola, 2018, p. 166).

²⁴ Speaking of the same firm, Ávila Pinto (2019) describes how they provided Internet connectivity to a small southern Mexican town to gather data to be used for election microtargeting, arguing similarly that the Cambridge Analytica case indicates a broken system tipped in favour of the wealthy.

²⁵ Legacies of these tests remain, nuclear waste from France’s 1960 “Gerboise Bleue” atomic bomb test that caused over forty thousand deaths at the time, and further irradiated many more thousands in southern Algeria, has still not been cleared and made safe by the French government despite calls for compensation (Ayachi, 2018).

influence between radically asymmetrical powers” leaving Palestinians with no choice but to join the online world, where they are confronted by much more powerful actors. According to the pair, the international community has pressed for the importance of internet access in Palestine, yet hardware and expertise has had to be from the US, in accordance with conditions of aid. Further, access is under control of occupying Israeli forces, with Palestinians not granted their own international internet gateway (ibid., p. 112). Thus Palestinians are offered an internet which works against their ongoing struggle as they are unable to develop their expertise to maintain their own systems, or design their own tools (ibid., pp. 110–112)²⁶. In this line of thinking, rather than being given access to the world of the internet, Palestinians experience “cyber-colonialism” that works to gain access to *them*.

Meriem Kamil expands on these deep contradictions in the Palestinian context, which I argue can only be observed through a view that is multi-scalar, that is looking at *different scales at once*. She writes that as much as the internet is claimed to facilitate access and mobility, it functions on inaccessibility and immobility, there being always geographies that are not connected, and even that connection might look like access through the cloud (which does not impact the local landscape), or it might be through server farms which do (2020, p. 56). Speaking in particular about Palestinian activism facilitated by the internet, she sheds light on complicated tensions; the struggle is rooted in territory, conducted on mediums that *disavow space* whilst simultaneously relying on infrastructure *in space* (ibid.). Further, in this tension she notes a reassertion of the differences the internet claimed to leave behind, “as internet access is predicated on infrastructure, socioeconomic divides along racial, ethnic, and national lines are reified through the very technology imagined to undo these divides”; national borders which were things of the past have been reasserted using control over the network (ibid., p. 76).

The above are theorisations of colonialism-coloniality that differently weight varied aspects of inequitable systems. In the context of this research, I argue that it is unhelpful to place the terms ‘digital’ and ‘cyber’ before ‘colonialism’, contributing to false and pernicious

²⁶ This reflects Mark Graham’s (2014, p. 16) research on Google maps which finds both Arabic and Hebrew annotations over Palestinian and Israeli areas, with a greater concentration of Hebrew annotations over all areas.

notions that the problems described stem from technology. This is not to say coloniality does not work through the internet, however, as I continually reassert it is the historically-constituted, geopolitical and sociotechnical set-up of the internet that is bound up in gendered coloniality. This emphasises the long tail of decisions and relations that have led to contemporary expressions of gendered coloniality and de-emphasises the (blameless, automated) technical as the root.

Decolonial and postcolonial computing are two perspectives that look more deeply at technical workings which are helpful in challenging notions of automation as neutrality. Advocating for a “decolonial computing”, Ali (2014, p. 2) argues that computing is underpinned by modern-rational values of societal progress and perfectibility and from this draws its inherently expansionist nature resulting in the continuities of colonial dynamics. This approach finds that computing is compromised from its very beginnings; expansion amongst subalternised groups will not change that. Ali (2018, p. 155) challenges what he sees as techno-utopianism, arguing that the “Internet is embedded in a racialized modern/colonial world system” with “racialized coloniality both informing and manifesting itself through network effects” meaning the internet is “not a level playing field”. Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga (2017, p. 18) disagrees; Africans, he writes, “are coming to ‘Western’ [science, technology and innovation] not as outsiders looking in but as coauthors of a knowledge store monopolized through imperialistic power”. In the context of the internet this involves staking a claim in its creation:

whereas the psychology of knowing that science, technology, and innovation are not Houdini acts of white people but the latest iteration of a long process of accumulative, multicultural knowledge production frees the mind to come to STI as a builder—past, present, and future (ibid., p. 2).

Mavhunga’s position requires us to be attentive to a narrative which erases African contributions to technology; although important to acknowledge, this should not flatten that these contributions have not always been voluntary. Staking a claim to an inequitable system risks further perpetuating those harms, particularly those of epistemicide. If we lay claim to the internet as a monopolised “knowledge store” without adequacy challenging its

method of collection and storage, then there is a danger that gendered colonial knowledges are claimed too.

Writing for a “postcolonial computing” Lily Irani and colleagues (2010, p. 9) criticise a universal notion of technology, encouraging design practices that acknowledge cultural location and asymmetrical power relationships. These writers perceive an encounter between ‘postcolonial subjects’ and former colonial powers in contemporary computing, which produces hybrid design and technology—implying the possibility of power being shared for exchange in this regard. As such, progress in the design of information and communication technologies should consider the complexities that arise from these encounters, whilst allowing for them to unfold, embracing heterogeneity, rather than masking or controlling it (ibid.). This approach is particularly useful in that it allows for an eye to the agency of subalternised groups through encouraging examination of the small-scale encounters which make up grand ones (Philip et al., 2012, p. 23).

The differences between postcolonial computing and decolonial computing are emblematic of the two broader theoretical spheres, the decolonial view emphasises structures and systems, whilst the postcolonial view draws attention to agency. Scholars have pointed towards these different concerns as opportunity for complementarity and dialogue (Bhambra, 2014; Grosfoguel, 2011; Tlostanova, 2020). Tlostanova (2020, p. 171) finds that it can be advisable to work with decolonial concepts, which emphasise systemic inequity, using postcolonial tools that allow sight of subalternised agency. Whilst this thesis locates itself within decolonial frameworks, it does not discount what postcolonial scholarship offers in its shared counter-hegemonic aims.

2.1.4 Race, place and temporality

Decolonising politics, whilst encompassing issues of racial classification, do not always directly attend to race; similarly, research on race and the internet is well-established but does not always explore relations in the context of global coloniality. As I have argued above gendered/racialised oppression are co-constitutive and integral to structuring coloniality,

below I raise areas for connection that are particularly relevant to internet access and internet universality.

Views of racialised groups and their relationship to technology often begin in terms of a 'lack' or 'fear' (Benjamin, 2019, p. 41; Hines et al., 2001, p. 3). This is visible in models of 'development', which I outline further below, that envision a diffusion of the internet 'from the West to the rest'; racialised and subalternised groups are seen to be absent an understanding of 'technological advancement', which has one form and one 'correct' trajectory. Hines and colleagues (2001, p. 5) assert that "when we limit discussions about technology simply to computer hardware and software, we see only a 'digital divide' that leaves people of colour behind". Fears of technology make perfect sense in line with experiences of extreme violence perpetrated by military (Aouragh and Chakravartty, 2016; Ayachi, 2018), policing and surveillance technologies (Benjamin, 2019) in the North and South. Where Majority World cultures are disregarded as laggard, stuck in the past holding back development and progress (Moyo, 2020, p. 193), whiteness, wealthier nations, and North America and Europe are projected into the future (Mavhunga, 2017, p. 11; Shome, 2016, p. 251). Discourses of so-called 'leapfrog development' are particularly illustrative of this; so shocking were the different forms of social change that did not map onto Western models around the world that they were named to be jumping ahead or 'leapfrogging' the linear path of development (Singh, 1999).

Research on the 'digital divide' in the United States identifies a "racial ravine" between the connected and unconnected (Hines et al., 2001, p. 18). This downplays structural barriers impacting Black and racialised communities, whilst disregarding the multifarious ways in which communities of colour engage with technologies (Benjamin, 2019, p. 42). Further, differently racialised groups are conceived of as having different relationships to technology, for example, Asian migrants working in technical jobs are stereotyped with high proximity to technology, being 'biologically well-suited' to tech work, whilst African Americans are kept at a distance as the digital 'have-nots' (Hines et al., 2001, p. 5; Nakamura, 2013, p. 27)²⁷. Gendered and racialising processes are crucial to distributing the labour required to uphold

²⁷ These differences can be viewed in light of Quijano's (2000, pp. 555–556) understanding of how different regions of the world have been differently subjugated under relations of colonialism and lasting coloniality.

the internet's materialities, and at the same time must remain hidden. Lilly Irani and Monika Sengul-Jones have shown through their work on Amazon's obfuscation of the labour behind technical mechanisms that the companies who dominate discourses around the internet benefit from promulgating a narrative that diminishes the role played by underpaid, predominantly Majority World-based labour. This reinforces an impression of technological mystique²⁸ and emphasises the companies as exemplary and unique (Irani and Sengul-Jones, 2015); the internet, as they would have it seem, is automated, mechanised, disconnected from labour and highly sanitised.

Race has been theorised as a kind of technology; solving the problem of hypocrisy that came about when Enlightenment values of liberty and equality were only to be applied to some (Benjamin, 2019, p. 36). This view in many ways is continuous with notions of race under gendered coloniality as a structuring tool for the colonial matrix of power, yet reframes the invention in a way which questions our definitions of technology. It is important to be attentive to how processes of gendering and racialisation are imbricated at multiple scales at once within the geopolitical, sociotechnical set-up of the internet. Benjamin (2019, p. 177) looks to so-called "glitches" whereby an event, often claimed as an oversight or error, is flagged to cause harm by those whom it impacts, thereby she argues, shedding light on the flaws inherent to the whole system.

Hyper-visibility and invisibility of racialised persons is an important part of Benjamin's (2019, p. 97) analysis which she calls "coded exposure", which she illustrates using the example of how a soap dispenser in a public bathroom in the US does not work for a dark-skinned person but works for a light-skinned person because the design process did not factor for darker skinned individuals. It does not take much imagination to consider how this 'glitch' can be magnified by many orders in complicated 'artificial intelligence' models. This tension is also a theme in Safiya Umoja Noble's work, which sees her looking specifically at how algorithms function. She describes how she was inspired to begin her research when looking

²⁸ It is interesting to consider the theme of mystique as a powerful persisting tool of domination. Quijano (2007, p. 169) notes the role that this plays in colonial relations writing colonisers "imposed a mystified image of their own patterns of producing knowledge and meaning" to which they tactically allowed limited and partial access.

on Google search for things her stepdaughter and nieces might find interesting, she searched for “black girls” and found the top results for her search were racialised pornography (2018, p. 64). Noble (2018, pp. 1–2) describes what she calls “technological redlining” as being the process by which racial profiling occurs through ubiquitous tools of automation, coming about, she writes, through the continuity of human biases that exist in society along lines of racism, sexism and classism amongst those who design algorithms. Hines (2001, p. 3) notes that “narrators of the information revolution have regaled us with tales of hackers and geeks, and in the process have constructed technology as a site of white male superiority”. At the same time purported ‘colourblindness’ simultaneously takes race off the table for discussion (Noble, 2018, p. 168) whilst attesting that technologies are by design neutral. A “de-raced” internet simultaneously reflects the interests of its creators, in this context men who are white and in the Global North, whilst also hiding their influence on the de-raced technology, under the cloak of appearing de-raced (Ali, 2014, p. 16).

The internet’s projected universality, and thus placelessness, can be contrasted with indigeneity, understood as a “continual assertion of place and an affirmation of identity” (Kamil, 2020, pp. 76–77). The idea of access, which requires mediation, is for Kamil the “central feature of dispossession”, promising to neutralise difference through inclusion, like settler colonialism did before framing access as liberatory (ibid.). Kamil highlights the need for a critical view of access, as well as flagging the same for the related term ‘inclusion’ which, with her analysis, takes on a troubling tenor.

2.2 Geopolitical currents and the internet set-up

A long historical trajectory has shaped, and continues to shape, the geopolitical and sociotechnical set-up of the internet²⁹. The point of entry for this study is the 1955 Bandung

²⁹ I belabour the reference the *historically-constituted, geopolitical and sociotechnical set-up of the internet* to counter ahistorical, apolitical, determinist and instrumentalist depictions that shape our view in the cotemporary moment. I select the term ‘set-up’ to convey the underhanded workings of gendered coloniality, we have been you could say, set-up. At the same time ‘set-up’ helps to depict a system which is somewhat fragile, contingent and changeable, leaving room for resistance and opportunistic negotiations within and without.

Conference, a meeting of African and Asian leaders, the majority of whom were from nations newly independent of colonial rule. As noted by Daniel Oppermann (2018, p. 15), Bandung is an under-regarded juncture in international relations studies and yet it demonstrates a key expression of solidarity and struggle for equality amongst Majority World societies. The meeting was geared towards cooperation and guarding against future colonialism, whilst the Non-Aligned Movement which emerged from it, bringing also Latin American and Caribbean regions into the conversation, sought to maintain the independence of members from the two power blocs of the Cold War (ibid., p. 21).

Within the United Nations system, these countries formed the Group of 77 or G77 in 1964, by the 1970s advocating for more economic equality between 'developed' and 'developing' nations through the New International Economic Order (NIEO) (ibid., p. 23). A parallel discussion problematised Western 'cultural imperialism' or 'media imperialism' in the Third World giving rise to the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO), demanding more equal flow of information and media between North and South (ibid., pp. 28–29). By 1977, in light of these demands, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) established the MacBride Commission to investigate the state of media and communications globally resulting in *"Many Voices, One World"* (MacBride, 1980), also known as the MacBride report which stressed topics such as the need for greater media literacy, the development of capacities for local content production and widening of access to media (Mansell and Nordenstreng, 2007, p. 17).

Recommendations included support for 'developing' countries to maintain local cultures through limiting transnational Western corporations' exports to the Third World, an idea that was criticised as serving (authoritarian) world leaders' interests (Oppermann, 2018, p. 33). Hamelink (2008, in Oppermann, 2018, p. 31) writes that this concern was played on by global media to disregard NWICO demands, whilst Daya Thussu (2005, in Oppermann, 2018, p. 31) complicates the view asserting that NWICO was vulnerable to control of information by authoritarian leaders. Ultimately, whilst this enabled the New World Information and Communication Order to be steadfastly removed from the political agenda, the politics of decolonisation and subsequent nation formation are not to be taken as a model for liberation from gendered coloniality. Decolonial feminism takes seriously the "indifference"

shown by racialised men towards Women of Colour, the complicity of the former in the subjugation of the latter alongside Europeans, and an ongoing failure to stand in solidarity (Lugones, 2007, p. 188).

2.2.1 Cultural imperialism backdrop

Culture and media imperialism debates held a significant influence at this time. The structuralist concept of cultural imperialism gained influence in the field of media and communications during the 1970s, prominently advanced in the works of Armand Mattelart, Herbert I. Schiller and later Oliver Boyd-Barrett as these ideas were also championed in international policy spaces. The expansion of American capitalism into the Third World, along with its cultural products and communications tools, was the centre of these scholars' analysis, heavily influenced by the Frankfurt School³⁰ and Antonio Gramsci's idea of cultural hegemony (Roach, 1997, p. 48). Schiller (1976, p. 9) describes cultural imperialism as "the sum of processes by which society is brought into the modern world system" with its dominant classes and groups working with "structures dominating the centre of the system". Media imperialism, a part of the broader cultural imperialism thesis, was portrayed in empirical studies as unequal "flows" of information between the West and the 'Third World'. In his work, Boyd-Barrett (1980, in Fuchs, 2010, p. 35) found the biggest news agencies of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were based in "imperial capitals" and their expansion "was intimately associated with the territorial colonialism of the late nineteenth century", leading into a continuing dependency on Western news agencies.

Problems of the cultural imperialism concept were marked early on by Mattelart: one, the local factors of domination, elite classes who colluded with foreign powers; two, the discounting of forces of imperialism which are not the United States; and three, questioning the framing of audiences as simply passive receivers (Roach, 1997, p. 49). Colleen Roach's (1997, p. 56) readings of Schiller and Mattelart's development of their work in light of these issues finds that, whilst the thinkers engage with criticisms that emerge through the rise of

³⁰ Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of mass culture is illustrative (1944).

cultural studies and the “active audience”, they both remain suspicious of approaches that assume high levels of audience autonomy, which they see as serving dominant interests.

Empirical studies measuring the size of media flows make up the majority of research on media imperialism, whilst the development of the theory itself is limited (Fejes, 1981, p. 282). For Fred Fejes, location of media imperialism within dependency theory³¹, which was hugely influential in development studies at the time, helps to better situate this empirical work. He calls for scholars of media imperialism to re-orient their focus to ask how “modern communication—its media, its practices and its products—relate to the larger structures and dynamics of dependency” (ibid., p. 288).

The theoretical frame of cultural imperialism largely fell out of favour in media and communications research by the turn of the millennium (Aouragh and Chakravartty, 2016, p. 561; Boyd-Barrett, 2014, p. 8) however, certain voices, namely Boyd-Barrett and Thussu continued work in this vein. Conceptualising media as “flows” following Castells, Thussu (2006, p. 25) marks “dominant flows” that emanate from the Global North with their centre in the United States and “subaltern flows” that originate in global “peripheries”, warning that a “false impression” of democratisation in world media is undermined by empirical evidence that includes limited revenue and impact amongst subaltern flows, alongside the strengthening of the same for dominant flows. These are suspicions rife also in the globalisation-as-westernisation or Americanisation theses which promulgated in the 1990s, measuring global markets and the export of cultural and consumer goods as sites of unequal exchange and cultural imperialism (Tomlinson, 2007, p. 353).

Cultural imperialism is an important optic through which to view the geopolitical currents that shape the emergence of the internet, as well as the scholarship of the time, with recognisable lasting impacts in contemporary decolonising discourses of the internet. The view from Bandung shows Majority World struggle towards co-designing global communications policy, including that which gives rise to the internet, has a long history,

³¹ Dependency theory challenges modernisation theories in development studies. In brief, dependency theory sees so-called ‘underdevelopment’ as entrenched in relations between developed and underdevelopment countries, whilst modernisation theories look to internal values and dynamics within developing societies (Fejes, 1981, p. 283).

with demands consistently opposed and unmet by wealthier Global North governments and institutions (Oppermann, 2018, p. 32). Accounts from the internet governance field, which aligns closely to the discipline of international relations (Franklin, 2013, p. 42), tend to mark the beginning of their scholarly remit much later on, with the advent of internet unique protocols (DeNardis, 2014, p. 18), or with the first usage of the term (Mueller and Badiei in DeNardis et al., 2020, p. 70), limiting engagement with this historical tail.

Milton Mueller and Farzaneh Badiei find that publications about “internet governance”³² emerged as legal scholars became invested in the political movement that contested US unilateral control over the Domain Name System (DNS) and Internet Protocol (IP) address systems. This control was exercised through the United States Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA)-funded Internet Assigned Numbers Authority (IANA). The Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) emerged after these struggles, seeing functions somewhat divorced from the US government, but still eliciting challenge given its status as a private California-based non-profit corporation (Mueller and Badiei, 2020, p. 70) under the oversight of the US Department of Commerce (Froomkin, 2000). In light of the NWICO’s sentiment and concerns about US-led cultural imperialism, the idea that the US government would maintain control over any new global media and communications system, let alone one which had roots in military technologies is clearly antagonistic. This illustrates struggles over definition of the field to be deeply political, drawing the lines on what is up for discussion and who gets to have a say (Franklin, 2013, p. 130).

Mueller and van Eeten’s (2013, p. 721) definition of internet governance spans formal ‘global governance’ institutions such as the United Nations (UN), ICANN or the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), as well as “interconnection agreements among Internet service providers (ISPs), routing arrangements, content filtering by national governments, or the control of spam, copyright infringement and botnets”. Mueller (2010, p. 10) adds that due to “technological convergence” the rules that once governed a variety of media; TV, phone, newspapers, all collide in internet governance, along with new issues

³² They define internet governance as “as a label, a field of research and academic study, and a real-world arena where stakeholders and interest groups clash and cooperate” (Mueller and Badiei, 2020, p. 59).

such as cybersecurity. This view raises the importance of being attentive to relations that are “emergent and decentralised” (ibid.), yet focus is oriented towards technical and policy arrangements.

Writing as an engineer, Laura DeNardis finds that technical standards which enable the architecture of the internet are the first and central part of internet governance. This line in the sand means that work on technologies which are not “internet-unique” belongs in the larger sphere of governance of information and communication technologies (ICTs) (2020, p. 21). In a view that is useful in bringing certain moves to power from the ‘behind-the-scenes’ of the internet into visibility (ibid., p. 15), DeNardis (2014, pp. 7–17) defines internet governance as having five features: one, technical designs that embed arrangements of social and economic power; two, technologies used as a proxy for content control; three, private ordering of networks, technical design, and new institutional forms; four, technical “control points” as sites of global conflict over competing values; and five, a space of tension between local geopolitics and the global collective scope of the internet.

These perspectives, heavyweight in internet governance scholarship, trained as they are to legal, technical and policy issues, fail to include in their purview the sociocultural decisions that have underpinned the internet’s particular geopolitical and sociotechnical set-up (Ali, 2018, p. 112). These are elisions are crucial to groups who have been at the margins of this very decision-making, and who continue to feel its sharp end (Franklin, 2013, p. 138). The prevailing discursive framing of internet governance in the field of scholarship—centred on technical standards and architecture, or related agreements and institutional machinery—is limited to the interests of powerful actors (Ali, 2018, p. 112). The present study questions the temporal, spatial and epistemic lines of internet governance scholarship with an eye to: firstly, this field’s privileged location within certain internet governance spaces, particularly the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) where the annual symposium of the Global Internet Governance Academic Network (GigaNet) has taken place since 2006 (Mueller and Badiei in DeNardis et al., 2020, p. 68); and secondly, the role that contributing disciplines international relations and science and technology studies have had in ‘serving up’ “the West’s scientific rationality and technical expertise” for corporate and nationalist policy agendas (Harding, 2011, p. ix).

Writing from a postcolonial sensibility, and attentive to the limitations of the field, Franklin (in Eriksson and Giacomello, 2009, pp. 178–179) contends that internet governance takes place in “multiplex settings”, with the terrain, the actors, the stakes, and the means all “multi-sited” and “multidimensional”. Whilst research on internet governance ebbs further towards more use of computational tools (Mueller and Badiei in DeNardis et al., 2020, p. 74), Franklin (2013, pp. 10–11) has advocated for work that looks at the co-constitutive “micro and macro politics of power and resistance” bringing together “big picture” and “close up analysis”. Limited engagement with these dynamics is a pernicious problem in scholarly engagements and perhaps indicative of occlusive gendered colonial optics. This conceptual reckoning offers a methodological orientation towards work that is multi-sited (socially and spatially) and multi-scalar. Here the term multi-scalar seeks to apprehend geopolitical spheres that are constituted in relationship to one another (Çağlar and Glick Schiller, 2018, p. 8), under relations of gendered coloniality. Scale is not conceived as a neatly fitting system but as complex and overlapping “territorially referenced entry points for an analysis of globe-spanning interconnected processes” (Çağlar and Glick Schiller, 2021, p. 210). In the methodology I will outline the ‘entry points’ that have been selected for this study.

2.2.2 Information society: prophecy, policy, prescription

Dissatisfaction with US control over the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), as described earlier, was a part of discussions at the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). Beginning in Geneva, Switzerland in 2003, WSIS was made up of two large-scale summits with the second meeting taking place in Tunis, Tunisia in 2005. The United Nations-run WSIS process saw the European Union (EU) take issue with US preponderance over the Domain Name System, stimulating demands for further decoupling (Singh and Gurusurthy, 2006, p. 878). WSIS was an arena where Majority World nations’ ongoing concerns with regards to communications policy were to once again be voiced, returning to the issues of the MacBride report (Mansell and Nordenstreng, 2007, p. 17).

To situate the WSIS requires a look at the *information society* concept. Writing at the turn of the millennium, Manuel Castells (2000, p. 500) heralds an “Information Age” in his trilogy of

the same name observing that “as an historical trend, dominant functions and processes in the Information Age are increasingly organized around networks”. Inclusion, exclusion, or a position within the network is of the utmost importance in Castells’ Information Age and thus has led to a “dramatic reorganisation of power relationships” (ibid., p. 502). He goes so far as to assert that “exclusion from [global information and communication] networks is one of the most damaging forms of exclusion in our economy and in our culture” (ibid., p. 503). There is no option but to connect:

I imagine one could say: “Why don’t you leave me alone?! I want no part of your Internet, of your technological civilization, of your network society! I just want to live my life!” Well, if this is your position, I have bad news for you. If you do not care about the networks, the networks will care about you, anyway. For as long as you want to live in society, at this time and in this place, you will have to deal with the network society. Because we live in the Internet Galaxy (Castells, 2001, p. 282).

All of society is affected either by inclusion or exclusion as the “global architecture of global networks connects places selectively, according to their relative value for the network” (Castells, 2000, p. xxxv). At the same time networks, due to their open structures, are able to “expand without limits” (ibid., p. 501). In the information society “information generation, processing, and transmission become the fundamental sources of productivity and power because of new technological conditions” (ibid., p. 21) enforcing hierarchies as space and time are restructured. The ‘space of places’ is organised by clock time and is where cultural and social meaning are defined; these are places which are increasingly fragmented from each other in locales that perform subordinate functions. Meanwhile, functionality, wealth and power are organised in the ‘space of flows’ operating under ‘timeless time’ where past and future are negated (ibid., p. 507). Whilst value is generated in flows, people make their lives in the space of places (ibid., p. xxxix).

Souter (2017) calls the information society both an “observable phenomenon” and an “aspirational vision” underscoring the influential role played by early theorists. Garnham (1998, p. 98) observes that information society theory acts as both a science and ideology,

used to explain contemporary social processes whilst also legitimating economic and political powerholders. In this, Garnham (1998, p. 118) sees the information society as capitalism in new clothes, as such he takes issue with theorists' claims to novelty and exceptionalism for the contemporary moment.

The term "information society" is introduced in WSIS documentation as a state of affairs that has already been agreed upon, with very little definitional detail about what this means, as demonstrated in this quotation from the WSIS principles.

We, the representatives of the peoples of the world ... declare our common desire and commitment to build a people-centred, inclusive, and development-oriented Information Society, where everyone can create, access, utilize, and share information and knowledge, enabling individuals, communities and peoples to achieve their full potential in promoting their sustainable development and improving their quality of life (WSIS Declaration of Principles in Pyati, 2005).

Feminist and other civil society groups sought to shift the WSIS declaration from this "narrow techno-libertarian and market focus, calling for a broader human societies and knowledge and communication orientation" (Gurumurthy, 2017, p. 5). However, efforts were compromised well ahead of the process according to Gurumurthy, who claims that Global North companies had ploughed millions into building infrastructure in the Majority World ahead of the second WSIS phase in Tunis. Leaders turned up to deliberations with already limited visions for policy futures, trained to options located in market fundamentalism (ibid.), as David Souter puts it

There was an evangelical zeal abroad at WSIS, which spread awareness and engagement, not least within developing country governments, many of which began to put together national ICT4D strategies (2017).

Cees Hamelink (2004, p. 287) writes that the WSIS process was characterised by “technological determinism in its crudest sense”, with the idea that “technological development leads to productivity and economic growth and subsequently to the improvement of the quality of life” without sufficient empirical evidence or concern for varying definitions of quality of life. Further he observes that prevailing narratives at WSIS were stark in their lack of engagement with the “dominant neoliberal globalization process” (ibid.). Hamelink (2004, pp. 282–283) calls the information society a “promotional concept” which “fits remarkably well into a vision that puts western ‘civilization’ at the centre and forces others to trail behind the model”.

2.2.3 (Multi)stakeholders assemble

Writing contemporaneously Parminder Jeet Singh and Anita Gurumurthy (2006, p. 876) are critical of information society discourse broadly, and specifically within the WSIS, for facilitating the elision of the breadth of implicated impacts on society and politics in the Majority World. They describe the WSIS as an ill-defined project without the mandate of a clear “problem” leading to “fuzzy” outcomes. However, the picture is more complicated than only one of critique; Singh and Gurumurthy (2006, p. 876) find the process of the WSIS to have allowed for “considerable progress in terms of a broader and certainly more legitimate conception of a global information society” than previous Information and Communication for Development (ICT4D) discourse centred on ‘pragmatism’ and ‘efficiency’.

In this light the prospect of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF), a forum in which policy related to the internet is to be discussed, offers some hope, as does the new definition of internet governance which comes from the Geneva phase of WSIS, the 2003 meeting giving rise to the Working Group on Internet Governance (WGIG). The WGIG was a ‘multistakeholder’ group tasked with investigating and making proposals on the future of internet governance in the period prior to the second summit in 2005 (ibid., p. 878). The WGIG defines internet governance as

the development and application by Governments, the private sector and civil society, in their respective roles, of shared principles, norms, rules, decision-making

procedures, and programmes that shape the evolution and use of the Internet.
(*Report of the Working Group on Internet Governance, 2005, p. 4*)

The WGIG recommends the creation of a new space for dialogue for ‘all stakeholders’ on an ‘equal footing’ on all internet governance-related issues. This would come to be the IGF (ibid., p. 10).

Such a space or forum for dialogue...should allow for the participation of all stakeholders from developing and developed countries on an equal footing (ibid., p. 11).

The WSIS process introduces the norm of ‘multistakeholderism’, an idea which has become entrenched amongst the IGF community, and by relation also at RightsCon³³, both of which are sites for this study. Practice of multistakeholderism regards representation in discussions of the three stakeholder groups outlined in the WGIG definition—“Governments, the private sector and civil society” (Report of the Working Group on Internet Governance, 2005, p. 4) as necessary and a good in its own right. Whilst hopeful for its potential at the time, Singh and Gurusurthy (2006, p. 878) note the context into which WSIS and WGIG were brought forth; criticism of US unilateralism on internet matters, with governments feeling ‘left behind’ by technology-specialist corporations—in this vein, the idea that participation in policy discussions was to be widened had its appeals for some.

Ali (2018, p. 110) argues that colonial moves to power are able to mask themselves through advocacy of multistakeholder approaches. This is borne out in Julia Pohle’s (2015) empirical work which sees her find that multistakeholder systems tend to increase Global North overrepresentation and neglect Majority World representation, particularly those countries which lack strong civil society and business representatives. Yet South and North, as has been highlighted earlier, are not the only axes along which analysis of coloniality should proceed; this in itself can be occlusive. Ali’s view, whilst important to note, tends to hold

³³ In Chapter 4 I go into more detail regarding how RightsCon organisers position the consultation, relative to the IGF.

'stakeholder' identities and interests constant (Singh in Eriksson and Giacomello, 2009, p. 224). Singh (2009, pp. 220–221) asserts that the internet's diffusion around the world cannot be boiled down to great power interests alone, emphasising the "inter-actional circumstances of the Internet" that involve multiple actors. Internet governance processes might be rigged by first mover advantage (Ali, 2018, p. 109), yet it cannot be that Majority World participation in multistakeholder systems has had no impact (Franklin, 2019, p. 193). To look into these complicated dynamics requires an understanding that not everyone socially located in the Majority World represents subalternised views, a great deal of the success of modern/colonial dynamics involves the opposite (Grosfoguel, 2011, p. 6; Lugones, 2007, p. 188).

A critical view of multistakeholderism requires discussion of the notion of representation, upon which it rests; the idea that there is a fixed world or situation to be represented by multiple stakeholders. This flattening and simplification makes processes of representation useful for maintaining status quo, as it is possible to be selective of who represents any given group. From a decolonial position there is no representation, only enunciation from any particular body-political and geo-political location, with each enunciation locating itself amongst previous enunciations (Mignolo in Gaztambide-Fernández, 2014, pp. 198–199).

Writing as an engaged participant-researcher, Franklin (2013, p. 140) finds that multistakeholder spaces have been useful in terms of allowing more people to speak, standing in stark contrast to views that see the IGF as a 'talk shop' (Badiei and Mueller in DeNardis et al., 2020, p. 68; DeNardis and Raymond, 2013, p. 8). Franklin (2013, p. 149) adds that the 'open' structure, which allows anyone to attend (caveating the need for time and resources) allows critics such as journalists and academics to observe, a departure from the earlier 'closed shops' of UN meetings, so making space for usually siloed groups such as technologists and policymakers to meet (*ibid.*, p. 142). Activists with diverging preoccupations and politics can, and do, turn up.

Another engaged participant-researcher Gurumurthy (2017, p. 7) agrees that the IGF has been "a vital arena for policy debates on the internet" allowing "emerging issues on internet policy to be framed, explored and cartographed through varying standpoints". However, she

is also highly critical of a space that retains gender hierarchies and has no processes to take consensus further towards policy (Gurumurthy, 2013, p. 7). Gurumurthy (2016) warns that multistakeholderism acts as a “smokescreen” for inequitable relations of power, enabling skewed internet arrangements facilitated by public-private partnerships. These see technologies as market goods for ‘development’ with corporates stepping in as providers to supplement government shortfalls. The case of Facebook/Meta’s Free Basics programme is illustrative; operating in over sixty Majority World countries despite research finding it does not serve local needs, all the while pushing content from the Global North and engaging in massive privacy violations (Solon, 2017, in Gurumurthy and Chami, 2019, p. 4). Whilst I agree with Gurumurthy’s (2017, p. 9) view that the rhetoric of multistakeholderism provides cover for underhanded collusion, the following chapters located at internet governance consultations demonstrate that this is a partial view of what happens in these spaces. As this thesis will show, a purely political-economy perspective limits sight of the resistance tactics to which Franklin alludes; utterances, ways of being and connections built in multiplex settings that require further research.

2.3 Limitations of access

‘Internet universality’ has been brought forth in the internet ‘heartlands’ (Franklin, 2013) as a foregone conclusion, as illustrated in the geopolitical currents outlined above. To further move towards the internet universality has required a focus on extension and expansion of ‘internet access’, a concept that I argue that has seen insufficient critical attention. Internet access is an area of commercial activity, advocacy and policymaking that covers ongoing negotiations between diverse groups including activists, academics, private companies, governments and technical organisations. These negotiations interlap with varied approaches to research and measurement leading to varied conceptualisations that include the ‘digital divide’, ‘digital inequalities’, and ‘digital inclusion’.

The term ‘access’ is an entry point for this thesis to ‘delink’ from common-sense understandings which mask the coloniality of power; here this is developed by multidimensional analysis. The concept of ‘multidimensionality’ extends Kimberlé

Crenshaw's (1991) notion of 'intersectionality'. Françoise Vergès (2021, p. 20) recalls Darren Lenard Hutchinson (2000) arguing that, not only do oppressions of racialisation and gender create specific exclusions, they also shape all "social proposals and subjectivities". In this vein I propose that relations of gendered coloniality shape possibilities and options with relation to the internet universality. Multidimensional analysis acts as a way to refuse a hierarchy of oppressions, whilst also avoiding the division of social life into ideologically configured categories (Vergès, 2021, p. 20)³⁴. I will demonstrate how this operates by briefly considering the implications of the term access here, with a view to circumventing disciplinary divisions and hierarchies, whilst also de-centring the technical.

Access is a type of relation between entities, one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-one, or many-to-many. Access is to be able to get near something or someone, for example, access to a celebrity ('access all areas') or access to wi-fi signal; this suggests that the more proximity there is, the more access is available, and further suggests that access is limited otherwise proximity would not matter. Access is the opportunity to look at something, commonly access to information or tools can be granted or revoked by someone who controls access, this might be limited by time and it may have a cost involved – it feels conditional to the one not in control and can be precarious, lost when out of range. An access is an entryway, a physical place such as a driveway or gate, an access point might be where items are collected. Access is to be able to get inside a space, again suggesting that this is an ability that is not available to everyone, to be able to get inside might require a key, password or secret handshake – it is very much related to being in a space (physical or virtual). The capacity for access resides in the accessor as well as in the object; it involves the capacity to be able to use something (a door, a key or a device), although the emphasis is on the permission to use here, rather than the capacity to use; there is no access without some usability. To gain access implies that there are existing rules which need to be abided by, unlike for instance, 'sharing' which can have two or many actors participating in a more horizontal way.

³⁴ She describes the method as follows "Starting from one element to uncover a political, economic, cultural, and social ecosystem in order to avoid the segmentation that the Western social-science method has imposed. The most enlightening and productive analyses in recent decades have been those that have drawn the greatest number of threads together to highlight the concrete and subjective networks of oppression that weave the web of exploitation and discrimination" (Vergès, 2021, p. 20).

Power transforms how access looks: from below access is the permission to be in a space or use a resource, it feels limited; whilst access from above feels far less boundaried. For something to be accessible involves more responsibility on those in control of the space or tool to make it available. In its specific use regarding persons with disabilities this term involves the social model of disability³⁵, or outside of this specific use it can be in terms of ease of access for everyone. This requires consultation with those who have been invited to find out what they need and expect. 'Inaccessible' can refer to being exclusive of persons with disabilities, difficult or impossible to access for everyone, or it might refer to remote areas and challenging terrain. Access can be binary in/out or have gradations along a spectrum of those that have partial access to those that have complete access, this can also be more defined in terms of levels of access granted by rank (for example, classified), by place in gendered and racialised social hierarchies, distributed by responsibility (for example, viewer, commenter, editor), achieved by skill (figuring out how to access), or it can go to the deepest pockets.

'Access' is conceptually limited: contingent on another entity, with a controlled scope and dependent on varying capacities amongst the accessor. Even visions of internet access that focus on ensuring the accessor has *some* capacity to achieve their goals have this conceptual limitation as foundation. Yet, for the creatively-minded, the opportunist and the activist, access can be a foot in the door. With a way in, however small or limited, anything might happen.

2.3.1 Digital solutions for digital problems

The analysis presented above proposes that just, liberatory and equitable visions cannot be deemed synonymous with access of any kind, however dressed up. Thinking about alternatives involves questioning the mythmaking that is deeply entangled in liberalised information and communication technology industries, their requirements, and their heroes. I argue that predominant conceptualisations of internet access rely on feelings and depictions of this particular historically-constituted, geopolitical, sociotechnical set-up as

³⁵ Whereby persons are not disabled by their impairments, but by inadequate social consideration of varying needs.

purely technical, an inexorable route to social progress (defined tautologically within the terms of internet access); global interconnectivity in its finalised form.

‘Digital divide’ research, which I will now outline, is undergirded by these assumptions, oriented towards a technosolutionist agenda. Even as scholars try to complicate the field by adding more consideration for social difference it is fundamentally hamstrung by its basic assumption that the internet can and should be spread, like butter on toast, over societies, without any fundamental reconsideration of its structuring.

The majority of scholarly accounts locate the emergence of the ‘digital divide’ concept around the years 1998-99³⁶, coming from the US Department of Commerce’s National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) in two reports both entitled *‘Falling Through The Net’* (Hill in Hines et al., 2001, p. 17; Srinuan and Bohlin, 2011, p. 5; van Dijk, 2017, p. 1). David Gunkel (2003, pp. 502–503) challenges these accounts by looking further back to the mid-1990s, where he traces the emergence of varied understandings of the term³⁷. A binary ‘haves/ have nots’ concept was framed carefully by the NTIA as continuous with existing US policy relating to telephone network expansion which was concerned chiefly with whether households had telephone lines or not (DiMaggio and Hargittai, 2001, p. 2; Hill in Hines et al., 2001, p. 16, 2001). By 1999, Gunkel (2003, p. 503) writes that in the NTIA’s usage, which goes on to have significant impact, ‘digital divide’ refers to “a form of socioeconomic inequity demarcated by the level of access that one has to [Information Technologies]”.

The predominant studies of this time see the problem of the divide as the lack of access to information and communication technologies (ICT); to close the divide, connectivity and devices need to be diffused more widely, once present their use being a foregone conclusion (Mwim and Kritzinger, 2016, p. 4). The ‘digital divide’ quickly became a popular area of media and communications research with studies abounding in the 1990s and

³⁶ A metaphor that continues to be used decades after its emergence (van Dijk, 2020, p. 1)

³⁷ According to Gunkel ‘digital divide’ was simultaneously being used to refer to a variety of issues during this time, including: a difference of opinion on whether technology was a force for good; unequal distribution of information technology in American schools; technical incompatibilities and issues of interoperability; and discussions of racial diversity in Silicon Valley (Gunkel, 2003, pp. 502–503).

2000s, across disciplines including economics and business management; information technology and information systems; and the social sciences (Srinuan and Bohlin, 2011, p. 3) and broadly falling into two research areas: one, around depth of engagement vertically, and emergent gaps; and two, horizontal differences at national and global scales (Vartanova and Gladkova, 2019, p. 194).

The digital divide field is made up of mainly empirical studies of so-called ‘penetration’ (Srinuan and Bohlin, 2011, p. 6) focused on description, with limited theoretical engagement (van Dijk, 2006, pp. 231–232). Theorists of the field argue that disadvantage comes from not having access, insufficiently treating how access is restricted by social disadvantage (Warschauer, 2002). Complex sociocultural and socioeconomic issues are reduced to technical gaps to be remedied by provision of internet connectivity (Gunkel, 2003, p. 517). Diffusion of hardware, software and connectivity are considered synonymous with improving access at this time (Kvasny, 2006, p. 174; van Deursen and van Dijk, 2014, p. 376; Warschauer, 2002) without addressing how resources, knowledge and skills can be more equitably distributed in a more just society (Hill in Hines et al., 2001, p. 29)³⁸.

Later scholars establish the digital divide as a more complex social phenomenon (Vartanova and Gladkova, 2019, p. 195) looking to address the ‘overly technical’ focus to go ‘beyond access’ by adding social, psychological and cultural considerations (van Dijk, 2006, p. 224), or by arguing that there has never been one digital divide, but “a constellation of different and intersecting social, economic, and technological differences” (Gunkel, 2003, p. 503). Earlier literature saw connectivity³⁹ and access used almost synonymously; in later literature which complicates access away from a binary on/off notion, connectivity begins to emerge as a part of access—the technical part—thereby re-emerging as a technocentric concept unstuck from social relations.

³⁸ Responding to what he calls “misconceptions” around the metaphor, and drawing on criticism van Dijk (2020, pp. 2–3) argues that the digital divide should be considered: one, in gradations rather than a clear divide with two poles depicted as the “digital elite” and “digitally illiterate”; two, as a gap that *can* be bridged; three, a conversation about relative inequality, not absolute; four, as not one gap but linked to social, economic and cultural divisions in society; and five, as not purely a technical issue as ‘digital’ suggests.

³⁹ As I will show in Chapter 4, there are still many instances where connectivity is still used synonymously with access, however there are also many where it is used to emphasise the technical.

Researchers flag an array of divides along different lines: geography, both global and rural-urban differences; age (Yu, 2006, p. 240); skills and literacy; culture and language; content availability; attitude and education (Mwim and Kritzing, 2016); gender and race (Jackson et al., 2008); disability (Gorski and Clark, 2002); community and institutional structures (Warschauer, 2002). ‘Digital equality’ and ‘digital inclusion’ came into use as alternative framings (Vartanova and Gladkova, 2019, p. 195) depicting axes of difference along multiple spectrums, spanning: technical means (hardware, software); the capacity to exercise autonomy; digital skills; social support; and crucially, and reason for use—which comes with the assertion that connection does not assume use, as is the case earlier on (DiMaggio and Hargittai, 2001, pp. 8–9).

Resting on the information society paradigm, divide literature is underpinned by the view that expansion of internet access is a “precondition for the future development of society, communities and individuals” (Vartanova and Gladkova, 2019, p. 195), and further paints a normative vision of how internet access should be experienced, arguing that everyone should be involved in similar and ‘useful’ ways⁴⁰. Changes to the original digital divide conceptualisation are skin-deep but nonetheless throw up useful observations which start to allude to tendencies that appear in the fieldwork. First, even as the lines along which divides and inequalities abound, considerations of intersecting identities and socioeconomic positions are limited, with impulses towards homogenising groups and regions, and certain groups and experiences particularly overlooked (Helsper, 2021, p. 252; Scheerder et al., 2017, p. 1614). This relates to the second tendency, the term ‘digital’ which precedes ‘divide’, ‘inequality’ and ‘inclusion’ ‘spins out’ inequities from their social and historical contexts, thus making room for digital solutions to digital problems. Last, the development of the term ‘inclusion’ here is indicative of moves to bring (or even force) groups in, without “revision of the very architecture of power, knowledge, being, gender, and perception” (Tlostanova, 2020, p. 166).

⁴⁰ A study on inequality of “domestication” of the internet in Dutch households is illustrative; Scheerder and colleagues (2019, p. 2114) find that households with lower levels of education have a habitus that can be summed up as “keeping up with the crowd” whilst those with higher levels of education have a habitus characterised as “studious leisure,” with implications that the latter make ‘good use’.

2.3.2 Information society-development intersections

As mobile phones and cheaper data packages proliferated amongst the better off and in wealthier nations, research preoccupations with expanding internet access in the North began to diminish, whilst persisting with regards to the Majority World (van Dijk, 2020, p. 10). Meanwhile the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (UN, 2000), a new set of development targets in search of a delivery mechanism, found within ICTs a delivery mechanism, whilst these tools found in the MDGs a purpose (Heeks, 2008, p. 27). An agenda of information and communications technologies (as a solution for) (under)development was promoted through the World Development Report (1998), the creation of the G8 Digital Opportunities Task Force in 2000, and then the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in 2003 and 2005 (Heeks, 2008, p. 27).

Information and communication technologies for development also called 'ICT4D' is an area of research and policy concerned with how technologies can be 'put to work' in the process of 'developing' the 'underdeveloped' parts of the world. Information and communication technologies are not synonymous with the internet, however, the internet certainly falls under this agenda. In a preoccupation with visions which have been shown as seeped in designs and relations of coloniality (Escobar, 2011) and lack of critical engagement with 'diffusion of innovations' assumptions on which it rests (Ramadani et al., 2018, p. 2425), ICT4D rhetoric and projects have primarily served to justify technosolutioneering under the (colonial) aegis of 'development'. The nexus of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (UN, 2000), subsequent Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UN, 2015) and the ICT4D research-policy agenda are dominated by an instrumental view of technology where ICTs are posed as 'here and now tools' (Gurumurthy 2014 in Gurumurthy and Chami, 2019, p. 4). This view of ICTs lacks interrogation of how proliferation of information and communication tools 'for development' aligns with neoliberal political and economic logics (Gurumurthy and Singh, 2009, p. 4), deploying a simplistic, linear view of "technology-transfer" concerned with how the Majority World can "catch up" with wealthier nations (Ramadani et al., 2018, p. 2424).

At the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), global differences in the proliferation and adoption of ICTs were marked as a problem in their own right, discussions

were built upon an unquestioned assumption that resolutions in this regard can solve global socioeconomic inequities (Hamelink, 2004, p. 283). Similarly, 'development' was not defined, leaving only an assumed default option that development is integration into the global marketplace, and as such any technology that facilitates this integration is 'developmental' (ibid., p. 284). This was further enforced by a lack of engagement with existing trade agreements which shape communications policy at the national level by limiting how governments can look to provide national universal access. Localised information and communications that could disadvantage foreign corporations were off the table lest governments face the wrath of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) for infringing free trade rules. Put simply, as Hamelink (2004, p. 285) has argued, the focus on access at WSIS was on the kind of access that Global North providers would have to consumers across borders.

International organisations have projected the relationship between communication technologies and 'development' as cause and effect through the publication of indexes with the richest nations at the top; these are supported with economic arguments that technology increases efficiency, backed up with anecdotes of Majority World located entrepreneurship facilitated through the internet (Avgerou, 2017). Following the 'add women and stir' move in development (Harding, 1995), there has been a focus on 'integrating women' into the "network/information/knowledge society" (McCarrick and Kleine, 2019, p. 103) transforming them into "self-managing neoliberal subjects" to attain national-level economic growth (ibid., p. 109). These visions have attacked feminist struggles by depoliticising the notion of what it means for women and queer persons to be 'empowered' (Gurumurthy, 2017, p. 2).

Research on ICT for development echoes impulses seen in digital divide research, sharing similar quantitative methodologies which are more readily accepted by business, NGOs and policymakers, serving the "cognitive needs of capitalism" (Lugones, 2010, p. 373), over qualitative and bottom-up studies (Ramadani et al., 2018, p. 2427). Understanding in these forms of research is equal to measuring; when research is reduced to measurement understanding becomes mainly concerned with procedural problems limiting the terms of discussion (Tuhiwai Smith, 2013, p. 44). Scholars note a close connection with industries,

finding that the academic research of the ICT4D field includes the same technologists and business people who seek to fund projects (Gurumurthy and Singh, 2009, p. 9); even where projects continue to do badly, the prospect of using ICTs ‘for development’ continues to attract support. These dynamics are perpetuated as—whilst beneficiaries are absent from design and planning of projects—governments, international organisations, non-governmental organisations, consultants, corporations and academics all gain from each new engagement (Chaudhuri, 2012, p. 333).

In 2013 UNESCO created the ROAM-X framework⁴¹ to be used for national-level assessments of “internet universality” so that progress in “internet development” might be quantified in view of the WSIS+10 (2014) recommendations, Sustainable Development Goals (2015) and to work towards “knowledge societies”. The ‘knowledge society’ is UNESCO’s suggested upgrade for the ‘information society’ with the latter argued to centre “technology and connectivity”, which whilst “clearly crucial” should not be “viewed as an end in themselves”. According to UNESCO (2013, pp. 27–28), technology and connectivity should be pursued for their capacity to bring forth “knowledge societies” that nurture “human development based on human rights”. What all this self-referencing from UNESCO shows is that the internet universality indicators serve to measure national level performance against a prescriptive and linear model of so-called “internet development” with little scope for divergence or capacity for change upstream, unless it is within the frames presented by the indicators. Through bringing in the role of non-technical factors in ‘internet development’ towards universality, UNESCO has marketed this approach to be an improvement from previous views of internet development that they outline as being predominantly technical in scope (UNESCO, 2015a).

Criticising the skewed power dynamics of development projects from a postcolonial perspective, Chipidza and Leidner (2019, p. 28) suggest that projects should seek “power

⁴¹ Internet universality is assessed at the national level by examining the extent to which any country’s internet is “based on universal norms” (UNESCO, 2013, p. 2), these four norms make up the “internet universality indicators”, communicated as the acronym ‘ROAM-X’. Spelled out these principles are: “an internet that is based on *rights*; that is *open*; that should be *accessible to all*; nurtured by *multistakeholder participation*” (Souter and van der Spuy, 2019, p. 12). ‘Cross-cutting’ indicators, added later, contribute the ‘x’, and relate to “gender and the needs of children, sustainable development, trust and security, and legal and ethical aspects” (ibid., p. 13).

parity”; not entrench power asymmetries but challenge them. For the researchers, power can be evaluated in two ways: first, whether subalternised groups find their voices enabled, or “voicing”, or whether they are “de-voiced”; and second, whether subalternised groups gain independence or dependence on resources (ibid.). Yet this project-based form of evaluation neglects the bigger picture and where such projects fit within larger-scale pressures and processes.

By contrast to this postcolonial approach, emerging decolonial interventions challenge views of technology that centre Global North paradigms, calling for ‘Indigenous theory’ defined as

a theory of human behaviour or mind that is specific to a context or culture, not imported from other contexts/cultures and purposely designed for the people who live in that context or culture (Davison and Díaz Andrade, 2018, p. 760).

This approach can be seen in the work of Jimenez and Robert (2019, p. 6), who advocate for a shift from technological innovation that is bound up in ‘neoliberal logics’, offering an orientation taken from the Andean philosophy of “Buen Vivir” which centres collective wellbeing in communion with the natural environment. Meanwhile, Suárez Estrada and Lehuedé (2022, p. 2) theorise a “Territorialized Internet” which acknowledges the connection between the internet and material extraction and territorial occupation of “Abya Yala”⁴² over the past five centuries since Spanish and Portuguese invasion. Situated in this long history, they develop an imaginary for the current and future internet located in “dissenting groups” working in solidarity across Abya Yala who are concerned with the “physical-material consequences of the expansion of the internet” and in their work are engaged with enabling “alternative futures” (ibid., p. 8). These decolonial visions are part of a growing hub of work in the field (Masiero, 2022, p. 9), to which the findings of this thesis contribute on the under-theorised topic of internet access.

⁴² Abya Yala is a term used by certain Indigenous movements to refer to North America (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018).

2.4 Summary

To close this chapter, I will restate the key terms of reference which have been outlined, and which will be substantiated in the empirical chapters to follow. 'Gendered coloniality' rests on the 'colonial matrix of power', tracing co-constitutive processes of gendered/racialised oppression as structuring expansionist moves to order all social life under a eurocentred universality. This is a powerful optic with which to view the historically-constituted, geopolitical, sociotechnical set-up of the internet that embodies modern/colonial virtues. This thesis presents a novel decolonial feminist theorisation to a growing landscape of thinking that seeks to 'decolonise' the internet, whilst also developing new paths in internet access research, challenging technosolutionist narratives of linear technological 'development'.

As I have indicated, the dearth of multi-scalarity in existing research, compounded with other disciplinary and theoretical divisions (political economy/culture, decolonial/postcolonial) has limited opportunities for work that centres continuities between inequities relating to internet governance and internet access. The enclosure of what constitutes internet governance and the expansionary vision of the internet universality collude to take up all available material-discursive space. Simultaneously, the concept of access is inherently limited and limiting, fundamentally built on inequity and resting on gendered, racist, paternalistic and exploitative notions of 'development'.

A decolonial feminist intervention opens up these cramped discursive spaces demonstrating that the internet universality and skewed notions of access are both *options*. Delinking from modern rationality involves a conscious rejection of common-sense notions of linear 'development', whilst border-thinking provides an anchor from where to theorise. Challenging structuralist visions of domination, the following chapters will show practices of resistance including delinking, border-thinking, and relinking through rooting into culture and place, and through building solidarities. In these struggles both the terms of debate and the manner of organising are characterised by decolonial habitus, a way of being and doing. Like the activists who I collaborate with I take this seriously in my own research practice; Indigenous scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2013, p. 41) has said, in decolonial research

theories, methodologies, the questions they engender and ways they are communicated all need to be decolonised before they are applied; in this vein the methodology below builds on the conceptual grounds that have been laid out.

3. METHODOLOGY – DOING DECOLONIAL FEMINIST RESEARCH

The term access, even with its limitations that have been alluded to conceptually and are further drawn out in the empirical chapters, acts as an entry point for this thesis to look both upstream and downstream at internet access policy and activism. The binarization between political-economy and culture-centred perspectives stymies research on internet access by decoupling policy and governance processes from experience and use. Literature has tended to bifurcate towards research about ‘digital inequalities’ and ‘internet governance’ along methodological, theoretical and disciplinary lines, leading to a paucity of multi-scalar engagements (Franklin, 2013, p. 10). This is not to say that research does not treat policy, cases and outcomes together, but this is often concerning national, community or local contexts, missing world systemic factors that are crucial to study of the internet as an (envisioned, material or both) global construction.

The multi-sited ethnographic approach presented here enables multi-scalarity along spatial, institutional and temporal scales, whilst following activist collaborators and the concept of internet access. Offering a range of ‘partial’ perspectives (as all perspectives are) this methodology is rooted in border-thinking, engaging with practices of delinking and relinking.

Certain ‘open systems’ of internet governance, particularly the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) and the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) have been studied a great deal (DeNardis et al., 2020, p. 23), however, research on a broader range of consultations⁴³, such as RightsCon and Mozilla Festival (MozFest), and from a decolonial feminist perspective, is an area that has yet to develop. These are all sites where issues are framed and agendas are set (Franklin, 2009, pp. 139-140). This thesis emphasises the relevance and significance of an explicitly decolonial feminist, ethnographic methodological approach in fields of internet governance and ‘internet development’; in this way it shares the struggle of resistance with activist collaborators.

⁴³ I refer to all three key research sites—MozFest, RightsCon and the IGF—as ‘internet governance consultations’, asserting the role of each in processes of internet governance, whilst emphasising that they are fora for discussion, rather than policymaking or implementation.

Fieldwork has taken place over five years from 2018 to 2022, comprised of participant observation at 16 internet governance consultations, of which seven have been in person and the remainder online. It has also taken place in India, with visits to urban, village and rural settings. Further, I have collaborated with internet access activists operating in different modalities, ranging from individuals, to those working in informal groups and well-established organisations, as they move between these sites and others in the course of their work.

The research questions to which this methodology responds bear restating at this juncture. The primary question asks how varied modes of access facilitate and limit decolonising politics with relation to the internet under conditions of gendered coloniality. This is underpinned by two sub-questions: One, how do incumbent powerholders and organisers of global policy consultations shape internet access agendas? And two, how do youth and feminist activists negotiate access for their communities of work and for themselves?

3.1 Multi-sited pathways

The object of study, global internet access, benefits from a multi-sited approach that offers insights from different parts of the geopolitical, sociotechnical setup of the internet. Multi-sited ethnographic practice takes as a starting point that cultures are always in circulation, and in the contemporary period are increasingly so, making every site of research a partial perspective (Marcus, 1998, p. 5). Engaging with multiple sites brings this circulation into view, whilst acknowledging that perspectives are always partial fosters research norms that avoid extrapolating outwards, applying accounts of the specific in universalising ways. Looking together at partial perspectives of those who resist gendered coloniality sheds light on the workings of gendered coloniality in its myriad manifestations, this is necessarily communal, made up of differentiated experiences in relation (Lugones, 2010, p. 747).

This study makes use of ethnographic methods over a range of sites with a view to “following leads and making connections” (Marcus, 1998, p. 17) which would fall outside of the frame of any one site alone (ibid., p. 21). It has been designed around “chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions” in locations where I have spent time (physically

and online) (ibid., p. 90). In this undertaking, sites are at times of a similar type (like the internet governance consultations), or completely different (rural settlements). Sites are not treated uniformly, they cannot be; some receive limited attention as part of longer-term engagements over the research process that move through sites. What multi-sited work offers is to bring these sites into the same frame of study to posit their relationships on the basis of ethnographic research Manifesto (ibid., p. 84).

The multi-sited methodology makes use of thin description to support the ability to follow trails and make connections in the writing up. As I have mentioned, here we are concerned with the circulation of ideas and people as they move, rather than getting weighed down by any particular setting (Benjamin, 2019, pp. 45–46). Thin description is like a single piece of paper which is easy to fold to allow two sides to meet directly, rather than a thick pad which cannot be folded for two sides to touch. This is not to say that initial participant observation is not observed with care, and even then notes are richly detailed, however, later in the process these have been ‘thinned down’.

DeNardis (2020, p. 23) finds that “open systems” of internet governance in practice have been “overstudied”, adding that this is likely because they have been relatively easy for participant observation, whilst more insular systems subject to “proprietary enclosure” have been under-studied. An example of an ‘over-studied’ area might be Cogburn’s analysis of IGF transcripts which sees the researcher using text mining techniques to examine 1020 transcripts from 12 annual meetings to identify an array of key themes and figures over the research period. However, as Cogburn (in DeNardis et al., 2020, p. 189) notes, the shortfalls of this technique are that workshops, side events, and informal discussion as well as nuance, sarcasm, euphemism (and I would add linguistic particularities for speakers of European languages from the Majority World) are missed—he characterises his findings as “front-stage” behaviour and suggests that “back stage” behaviour is not visible to text mining methods. This thesis contributes where these shortfalls lie by offering views from ‘front-stage’, ‘back-stage’ and travelling with the activists ‘off-stage’, and it also offers *real-time participant observation*, which is unmediated as a transcript will always be.

I have been open to changes of what is ‘in the picture’ as the research process has unfolded. Changes to sites, participants and engagements all situated in the experiences and events of the research period (Marcus, 1998, p. 85) are par for the course in multi-sited work. Marino (2020, p. 78) notes the importance of negotiation in Marcus’ approach, finding that it “taps into broader conceptualisations of the flexibility and adaptability required to understand the fluidity of contemporary systems” facilitating reconceptualisation as part of theoretical and methodological praxis, of both research sites and the people involved in research.

‘Pathfinding’ in the face of changes (the COVID-19 pandemic being the most significant) is not peripheral to the process of multi-sited ethnographic work, but an integral part in how I have practised. The methodology is better conceived of as a journey or story, than it is as a comparative exercise, dislocated from space and time, and as with most journeys I had in mind a direction of travel and certain connections, if not the exact itinerary (Marcus, 1998, p. 90). The story and the journey I argue, are powerful decolonial tools, enabling delinking and relinking, rooted as they are in every culture, they disturb modern/colonial linearity and research conventions⁴⁴. The two primary lines of connection in this thesis involve ‘following the metaphor’, of internet access, and ‘following the people’, internet access activists, and these lines are tracked and traced across the multiple sites. The research has been designed with an argument in mind (Marcus, 1995, p. 106), that the circulation of policy, ideas and people in these sites matter, inflected as they are by gendered coloniality and further, that there is much to be understood about the circulation within and between sites and scales.

3.1.1 Following access and activists

When the ‘thing’ to be traced is part of discourse, Marcus (1998, p. 92) proposes to ‘follow the metaphor’. The concept of access and the varied ways it is constituted and reconstituted, makes up one multi-sited tactic used here. Key points of reference, similarities, differences, groundings in experience and changes over time all make up the diverse ways in which I follow the ‘metaphor’ of access (to the historically-constituted, geopolitical and sociotechnical set-up of the internet) through the sites and scales, with the

⁴⁴ Tuhiwai Smith (2013, p. 201) marks the importance of disturbance in counter-hegemonic struggle.

research collaborators. I have used participant observation and policy analysis to develop insights about how access is constructed in material and discursive terms across the sites.

This is complemented by ‘following the people’, that is to “follow and stay with the movements of a particular group” (ibid., p. 91). I have followed a number of internet access activists as they have moved between internet governance consultations and other research sites, specifically into their varied communities of work. This has enabled us to piece together, through interviews, their experiences of advocating for access in different sites, in ‘front-stage’, ‘back-stage’ and ‘off-stage’ settings of their own definition. Bhattacharya (2009, pp. 1064–1065) argues that front and back stages are not fixed but relational, there is always a performative aspect to actions. Yet it is useful to consider the distinction in the research sites in terms of the modalities of ‘performance’ that activists assume, for which audiences and to which ends. In this way the work is sensitive to ways of being as a site of resistance, or decolonial habitus.

3.1.2 Scales: spatial, institutional, temporal

This thesis envisages the multi-scalar politics of resistance and gendered coloniality; scales are not neat and orderly but messy configurations that serve as “entry points for an analysis of globe-spanning interconnected processes” (Çağlar and Glick Schiller, 2021, p. 210). In other terms, the tools used are attuned to complex “macro-interdependencies” of “micro worlds” (Marcus, 1998, pp. 51–52); ethnographic work at different scales has shared insights on a world system. “Macro systems of analysis should be radically rethought from the ground up”, because as Marcus (1998, p. 40) warns, there is a danger that ethnographic findings become fodder to justify a “canned” vision of what the world system looks like. Whilst the work is premised on the structuring role played by relations of resistance and gendered coloniality, building from the work of decolonial and feminist thinkers, it is through the ethnographic practice that glimpses of these relations are generated.

To grasp some degrees of multi-scalarity, take for example, the 2018 global Internet Governance Forum (IGF) meeting: spatially this takes place in Paris, the capital city of France; institutionally it is hosted by the French government at the UNESCO headquarters;

temporally, this is the IGF's 13th annual meeting, as well as into the part of this research that took place before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the same location a meeting with an individual internet access activist involves different points of entry: she has travelled to Paris from Lahore, Pakistan, at experiencing the sharp end of the global visa regime; she comes with a bursary from Internet Society⁴⁵ which pays for her attendance; this is her first Internet Governance Forum meeting, and as a youth activist this is occurring early into her career. To consider multi-scalarity means to take note of continuities outside of the frame of the research.

There are three major scales along which this research intervenes at various points, some of which I describe here for the purposes of illustration. The first scale is spatial, at one end of this scale there are small communities, the Indigenous groups and Hindu villages I visit in south India, in the middle we have the activists who are regionally grouped in different ways, and at the other end there are the internet governance consultations that have attendees from different parts of the world. The second scale is institutional, from individual activists working independently through to formalised organisations of different sizes and at the other end United Nations agencies like UNESCO and initiatives like the IGF. The third scale is temporal, ranging from situations captured in participant observation, through the to the whole research period, punctuated as it is by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the broader historical processes into which this thesis situates itself.

3.2 'Working the borders'

This thesis locates itself in what has variously been called 'margins', 'peripheries', 'borders' or 'borderlands', Tuhiwai Smith summarises the complicated spatiality of research located here.

⁴⁵ Internet Society, set up by Bob Kahn and Vinton Cerf, is a US-based non-profit which positioned itself in 1992 as a guardian of internet standards, retaining a privileged position in this regard having taken a key role at the United Nations' World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) and subsequently at the Internet Governance Forum (IGF).

work the borders, betwixt and between institutions and communities, systems of power and systemic injustice, cultures of dominance and cultures in survival mode, politics and theory, theory and practice (Tuhiwai Smith, 2013, p. 199).

Living at the sharp end of gendered-racialised oppression in the UK, I occupy some marginalised positions. My ancestral lands have been violently split through by borders in Kashmir and Panjab and gendered coloniality marks my family history. Simultaneously, I occupy a number of privileged positions, most pertinent here is that I am a native English speaking person registered at a UK university, living in London. It a radical decision to *choose* the margins, which I see like bell hooks as a site of belonging as well as resistance (hooks in Tuhiwai Smith, 2013, pp. 204–205), and in this respect the margins are neither limited nor limiting. Often I feel unease with all the terminology of borders, margins and peripheries, as well as concepts of struggle and resistance, which do not seem to convey well enough the expansiveness and creativity I envisage here. Tuhiwai Smith(2013, p. 202), theorising from a Māori perspective contributes that intersections of different experiences are meeting spaces, this idea of meeting spaces goes some way to point towards what has been my experience at borders.

In working within a decolonial feminist epistemology, this thesis writes at margins of research, particularly of fields relating to internet governance and internet access. I engage from this location with a view to producing work that supports struggle towards social justice, to challenge the unequal geopolitical and sociotechnical set-up of the internet and to envision equitable and liberatory futurities. It does so building on my argument that the particular configuration of the colonial matrix of power is a pluriversal, in that it lies with the collective or individual looking to make sense of social life from their perspective/s. At the same time, the work involves grappling with, and holding in mind, the historical and contemporary complicity of research, academia, the university and the UK university in particular, with colonialism and enduring relations of gendered coloniality, through carefully negotiated praxis (ibid., p. 3).

Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1986, p. 335) writes that ‘Western feminist’ discourse accrues power to itself through the “homogenization and systematization of the oppression of women in the third world”. This thesis explicitly focuses on how women and queer⁴⁶ persons are active and present in projects; I seek to do so with care, and simultaneously with a consciousness of how we have been presented in academia. The research is conducted alongside activist collaborators with whom I share the goals of seeking social justice, in view of the distorted set-up of the internet. All of us have different social and spatial positions, and we are also in varied ways “working the margins” Tuhiwai Smith, 2013, p. 204). It is through sharing amongst ourselves that we engage in border-thinking pluriversal dialogue (Grosfoguel, 2007, p. 66) and consider options for liberatory futurity. The sociality of this research process has allowed me to build friendships and solidarities, through this practice reconfiguring isolation that gendered colonial conditions continually reassert (Icaza, 2017, p. 33). This is not straightforward and has involved coming up against assumptions that I carry about the world, living as I do in (one) heart of empire. Border-thinking here is a process of thinking together, it is not seeing through the eyes of differently subjugated others (Haraway, 1988, p. 585), but an acceptance that any view is partial and working with others allows us to see together (ibid., p. 586).

3.2.1 Journey to the project

Four important experiences and inspirations, which I will outline here, led me to this research project and have shaped my thinking, interests and focus. One, in 2013 I joined *Media Diversified*, a collective based in London, UK, who had the mission of increasing representation of Black writers and Writers of Colour in the British press, which at that time was hugely homogenous in terms of its middle-class whiteness. The collective ran a website — of which I was editor in varying capacities — that published essays, comment pieces and analysis with explicitly radical antiracist, Black feminist and decolonising politics. *Media*

⁴⁶ In this thesis queer is used as an umbrella term which encompasses identities which are not heterosexual or cis-gendered. Sometimes more specific identities are named, where this is permissible in-line with privacy requirements, however, on most occasions the expansiveness of ‘queer’ works to challenge the idea that identities and experiences in relation to gender and identity can be easily classified. Where the acronym ‘LGBTQ!’ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex) is used it is because this is the term in circulation amongst that group or setting.

Diversified was hugely successful, building on the legacies of minority press in the UK, a forerunner that saw an outpouring of community media for and run by Global Majority groups emerge, notably *Black Ballad*, *Skin Deep*, and *gal-dem*. On Twitter the @writersofcolour feed amassed tens of thousands of followers and the plentiful articles commissioned and edited by a team who were majority Black women and Women of Colour, achieved wide readership.

Donations would enable us to eventually pay writers a small fee for their pieces, however for much of our time the team worked for free or limited pay. I joined *Media Diversified* after having blogged for other small media, the feminist *For Books' Sake* reviewing books by women writers, and *The Samosa*, covering South Asian diasporic culture—all as a volunteer whilst I did other work to pay the bills. There was such an excitement fizzling, particularly on Twitter, around conversations of identity and representation during this time, it felt like something was changing and we were finding each other thanks to online tools and services. Now that internet access was widely available, we felt that every voice could be heard, and I certainly shared this optimism for a time. Yet as years passed and I saw the labour, critique, intimate feelings and experiences of Global Majority creators attracting abuse, whilst accruing value for companies who created the spaces and set the terms of how we participate, this optimism diminished. I began to wonder what was really changing when we did not have a say about the spaces in which we were gathering. As Saha (2018, p. 114) asks, what 'authorial' role are these contexts playing in reifying race and shaping discourses around it? Who was benefitting from the intimate stories being shared? Who benefits from our unpaid labour? In our manner of organising through publishing online were we upholding systems we wished to overturn?

Two, one of my paid jobs during the mid 2010s was with *Newzulu*, a company that had spun out from French news agency Agence France Presse (AFP), with a focus on acquiring photos and videos created by average people of events that could make the news. We trawled social networks looking mainly for footage of wars, civil unrest, climate crisis events, natural disasters and crimes and then reached out to individuals to 'validate' their materials before trying to sell them onto news agencies. Contributors were not paid on submission, however, if their work was sold, they would receive a nominal fee, whilst *Newzulu* would be paid the

majority of the price. In my role as an international news editor I would interact with people living under conditions of violent militarised conflict and attack in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Palestine. The suggestion that they could earn money from filming and photographing the horrifying events around them would often be enough to put individuals, usually young men, in dangerous situations, and all while there was no guarantee of receiving said payment. There would certainly be no support if they were to get caught in one of these events and be harmed.

For the individuals that worked with us in these conditions, internet access was not always about expression or democratisation or narratives, as we had been perceiving it for writers at *Media Diversified*, it felt different. Often images and video would arrive to our office in London, hastily sent at high cost from poor quality wi-fi, access for which these reporters would need to travel. They would often come with detailed first-hand accounts of what was being experienced, which we were instructed at our end were surplus to requirements in favour of short captions—only spectacles of military might and suffering were of interest. Rather than democratising narratives, it felt like inequities of internet access were allowing the crafting of stories about these conflicts by those of us with better connections, and all the social capital that enable them and come with them, making use of labour which was pretty much unpaid and unacknowledged for its extremely risky nature.

Three, up until this point I was primarily concerned with what happens once online, however, a controversy in 2015 that would mark one of Facebook/Meta's first highly-publicised global setbacks gave a glimpse into how concerns about access are always multi-scalar. Facebook/Meta's Internet.org service was effectively banned in India following a ruling from the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) to safeguard net neutrality in the country. Internet.org, later renamed Free Basics, is a mobile application, which at the time of its launch allowed people to use curated internet-based services without being charged for data by their mobile network (an offering also called 'zero-rating'). The services, which were limited to around thirty, were selected by the company, and Facebook/Meta's services were the only social networking tools to be included, with the company claiming that the intention behind the service was to allow access for the masses who could not otherwise afford it. At the same time, following on from the Millennium Development Goals

(2000), the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (2015) emphasised the need for 'universal Internet access' in a much more concerted way. Prescriptions for what this access might look like were left absent, making space for services such as Free Basics.

When TRAI announced that it was considering a ban on differential pricing in accordance with the net neutrality principle⁴⁷ Facebook/Meta launched a huge campaign across India to garner support for Free Basics. Activists and internet entrepreneurs rallied in techno-nationalist expressions to oppose what was described as 'foreign interference' in India's internet, in what was being called "digital colonialism" (Solon, 2017). Up until this point internet access had felt to me like a question of an on/off switch. Yet as restricted access was becoming increasingly commonplace through zero-rating in various Majority World countries, whilst 'open' access was enjoyed in Europe and North America, inherent double-standards became evident. To me it was clear that these expressions of what was being called 'digital colonialism' were connected to the other instances I describe here. It was also evident that resistance couched in nationalism came with its own slew of oppressions.

Four, drawn by the 'digital colonialism' conversation I decided to learn more and in 2017 I undertook interviews with prominent internet activists from countries including India, Kenya, Mexico, Pakistan and the United States. The interviews were conducted in my capacity as a journalist and informed a successful article titled 'Who will save the world from digital colonialism?' that I published on *Media Diversified* (Zamurd-Butt, 2017). My intention in this piece had been to unearth the hegemonic influence of corporations, the so-called 'tech giants' that have been to varying extents attributed the crowns of tech empires. Yet what emerged from the activists' accounts was a more complex picture of actors vying for influence in dynamics that vary between countries and contexts. Certainly, tech companies, but also governments, legal systems, academia and NGOs all had a role to play.

The perspectives of the activists who I interviewed further complicated how I had envisaged the Indian Free Basics controversy. These accounts, and how the activists went about

⁴⁷ The norm that all services on the internet should be treated equally, without discrimination, including price differences.

balancing the interests of other actors to achieve their aims, pointed towards more complexity that the corporate domination perspective would suggest; whilst governments and corporations develop and pursue their own agendas about connecting the ‘next billions’ and closing the gender ‘digital divide’, incorporating the purported needs of women in the Majority World, there was agreement from my interviewees that their work—the work of ‘Southern women for Southern women’—lacked support in many aspects, particularly funding. They described their own experiences of gendered access issues, from abuse on social media, to government opposition to their work and exclusion from involvement in defining access on their terms (ibid.).

To me access was significant in all four of these situations, specifically its uneven distribution at varying scales, and the ways they were in relation. In the case of *Media Diversified* using online tools enabled community creation, but the labour of marginalised groups felt like it was being exploited in ways that widening connectivity could not ameliorate; with *Newzulu* it felt as if global inequities enabled exploitation to be even more profound, endangering people in the crafting of othering news narratives; the Free Basics case in India pointed towards how inequities are much broader and wider than is visible, and how narratives of nationalism and colonialism can collide in differently oppressive ways; whilst meeting the activists indicated that access is always a negotiation. It is in looking to bring about change to the conditions that I describe having seen in my work at *Media Diversified* and *Newzulu*, in standing with the activists who have inspired me, and in envisaging just and liberatory *options* for interconnected information and communications systems, that my research takes a decolonial feminist standpoint (Tuhiwai Smith, 2013, p. 210); choosing the margins as a researcher, though fraught with challenges, offers a space of excitement, hope, and possibility (ibid., pp. 210–213).

3.2.2 Positioning

Decolonial frameworks have played a crucial role in helping me understand my positionality, not only as a researcher, but as a person inhabiting the world. My mum of Panjabi heritage was born in Dar e Salaam, Tanzania and spent her formative years growing up in Mombasa and Nairobi, Kenya. After Kenya gained formal independence from the British empire her

family moved to Pakistan, where she met my dad, of Panjabi and Kashmiri heritage, with whom she relocated to the United Kingdom in the 1970s. The barriers of language, miles and the high costs of connection across distances in the 1980s and 1990s, and my dad's passing in his forties in 2001 means my siblings and I had limited engagement with our heritage and culture growing up—trips were unaffordable. It was only when I ended up, after a chance meeting with a student at my gap year workplace, at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) for my undergraduate degree that the implications of colonialism on my own life became apparent. This was a history I had *never* come across through my entire education, and a story which was never imparted at home either. The 'partition' of Panjab, the ongoing repression of Kashmir and the role played by South Asians in the anti-black and colonial violence perpetrated on the lands and diverse ethnic groups of eastern Africa. I had grown up being called 'p*ki' and 'terrorist', constantly urged to 'go home', but it would take until university to understand why I had been born in the UK. Decolonial theoretical work has been, and continues to be, a keystone in self-understanding. As hooks (2014, p. 59) writes, theory can be a form of healing, and a way to stand in solidarity with others with shared histories as a liberatory practice.

In 2017 this project's earliest iteration was rejected by both the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and the Economics and Social Sciences Research Council (ESRC) for postdoctoral research funding. At that time the literature on themes of digital and networked technology and colonialism or colonality was very limited, with analysis and scholarship taking place outside of academic journals on Twitter, in journalism and in conversations amongst activists. This experience points towards the exclusiveness of UK academic institutions, and a reluctance to explore fresh research agendas, whilst also underscoring the permeable barriers to academia which allow those with access to social capital and bourgeois modes of communicating from youth to pass through, whilst excluding those, like myself, for whom these modes are newly learned in adulthood.

Being self-funded has meant that I have never been a 'full-time' researcher, and have always balanced conflicting demands on my time, with this work taking place over six years whilst I also earned the income required to support myself and pay the fees. My jobs have included: running an online publication, consultancy, running an arts festival and seminar

leader work in my university department. The inhibitions of self-funded research have been constraints against which a creative methodology has developed, and I have continued to reflect on this experience, whilst also noting the presence and creativity of other self-funded researchers around me, particularly Black women and Women of Colour.

In carrying out this project my identity has not been fixed, but has shifted in different relationships, groups and settings. In multi-sited research there is not one positionality, but a constant negotiation and renegotiation of *positioning*; I have moved between sites situating myself within each landscape, and resituating myself with the passage of time (Marcus, 1995, p. 112). This has involved understanding that there is no space between being the researcher and being a person who is interacting with others. Considering what changes between sites for me personally, in how I have felt and how I have interacted is an important part of the ethnographic process and findings contributing towards a 'situated objectivity' (Haraway, 1988; Marcus, 1995, p. 112).

An instance of identity shifting is demonstrative; my research supervisor, Marianne Franklin is well-known and active in some of the research sites, and was in attendance at a number of the observed internet governance consultations. The two of us discussed this and reached an agreement not to engage in substantive discussions of the research whilst at the events, to maintain the independence of the ethnographic fieldwork being undertaken. This was not always easy, the two of us were often bumping into each other – —the events are not *that big* after all. In some cases, I observed sessions where Marianne was a speaker or organiser, and this required us both to hold different positioning in relation to one another for that time. As we attended more events, we honed different modes of interaction for different settings. In the research sites we shared light-touch chats and retained some of these boundaries into our supervision meetings, allowing for me to process my own experiences of the sites.

The action of positioning interrogates purported dualities between being an insider or an outsider researcher in this thesis. My positioning is often fluid and changing, in particular by

association with the spatial, institutional, I begin as an outsider, but after several years of showing up in spaces this changes⁴⁸ as more people get to know me and my work. As a person from the UK, from Europe and a native English speaker, an academic, I am an insider in a number of ways already. For example, I was very easily able to travel to locations such as Paris, France or Berlin, Germany for the IGF meetings, whilst activist collaborators found themselves dealing with dehumanising border processes. Yet when it came to getting permission to visit both India and Pakistan⁴⁹ I encountered huge difficulty. This was a painful blow, not just because of the administrative difficulties, opaque bureaucracy and cost, but for the hard realities of not being able to freely travel and visit a part of the world where I locate my cultural heritage and parts of my identity, and where many relatives still live⁵⁰.

With activist collaborators my relationship changes over time and, given our shared aims and overlapping communities of interest, the delineation of insider/outside is not clear. If being an insider means being in such a position that I have to live with the consequences of the research (Tuhiwai Smith, 2013, p. 138) the issue still is not clarified. In a broad sense I am impacted by limitations of access. These limitations mean I can be located as an insider in some ways (in my perception and in the perception of collaborators), however this is varying. I share linguistic (Panjabi, Hindustani⁵¹) and regional affinities (Kashmir, Panjab, Pakistan, Eastern Africa) with some activists, however my experience has always been diasporic. The fieldwork was conducted when I was between the ages of 31 and 35 years old, not young, but *youngish* in the research sites, close enough to be able to relate with youth activists. These contrasts go some way to avoid the fiction of a researcher who is detached from the field, and I declare them to add a pinch of salt to any binary notions of this thesis fitting as either insider or outside research.

⁴⁸ This is an experience I share with some research collaborators too, who deepen their communities over the four years.

⁴⁹ As I will explain in due course I did not end up visiting Pakistan, however, I did go through all the preparations.

⁵⁰ These events unfolded against the chilling backdrop of the UK's 'hostile environment' for migrants, the Windrush Scandal, and the removal of Shamima Begum's British citizenship, all of which I was working to document in my role as Editor at Media Diversified, and which left Black, Asian and racialised communities in the UK feeling fresh instability.

⁵¹ A term for the spoken forms of Hindi and Urdu which are very similar in conversational registers.

3.2.3 'Lines of relating' and ethics

"Lines of relating" have been given priority, with the understanding, communicated in consent forms (Appendix 3.a) and relayed regularly, that the individuals and groups collaborating on the research are fully empowered to change their minds (Tuhiwai Smith, 2013, p. 8). My aims in designing ways of working have been to avoid and challenge colonial approaches of discovery, collection and classification that reduce those who take part to 'research subjects' (ibid., p. 77); the work is underpinned by solidarities, amity, and respect for boundaries and varying priorities. This has been supported by the pacing of the project allowing trust to develop and giving collaborators flexibility to contribute at timescales which are convenient to their priorities. Some collaborators have had limited capacity for ongoing interaction or have experienced changes in circumstances—in particular the pandemic had significant impact here—electing to take part in the shorter term. Others have taken part through longer interactions that involve sharing their updates, difficulties and milestones, allowing the research to benefit from their insights over time in ways that would not have been captured through formalised interviews alone.

As the author I stand to gain most from this research in terms of status and career, collaborators do not benefit from authorship (ibid., p. 178). Most collaborators are unable to be credited for their knowledge, ideas and experiences due to safety concerns, which deepens this disparity. As such there has been responsibility involved in working relationally (knowing that I gain the most) and in making sure that the voices of collaborators come across in ways that feel right to them. All research collaborators are working with limited resources and are generally incredibly busy, therefore becoming involved in their work provided a way to conduct the research without burdening the groups. In this regard I have tried to contribute to the work of collaborators as they have contributed towards mine, this has felt comfortable in many ways because we are working towards similar goals, although it has meant that, at times, I have had a lot of priorities to manage at once. Whilst visiting TechEverybody I volunteered to support the organisation with projects that included proof-reading and design of reports and publications they were working on at the time. TechEverybody is extremely time-stretched and therefore I have limited the requests I have made to them since fieldwork. In my work with Parte Afta Parte I have supported the group in developing applications for sessions at the global Internet Governance Forum (IGF).

Digital Grassroots in particular, as a youth group, have struggled to access funding for their projects meaning their labour tends to be voluntary or underpaid. In this context it has been important to be flexible to their schedules which involve working in several different roles, using interview time in efficient ways.

Research that looks into social injustice is a “risky business” for all of us involved (Tuhiwai Smith, 2013, p. 198). I have been in receipt of “privileged information” which I then interpret, as Tuhiwai Smith observes, through both a stated theoretical framework and an internal “ideological framework” (ibid., p. 178). Whilst the latter cannot be eliminated, reflexive practice can work towards bringing it out into the open. Reflexivity here involves thinking about where my representations of the field of research might differ from those of collaborators, this “stimulates radical rethinking of research identities and relationships” (Marcus, 1998, p. 17). Careful consideration has been given to the safety and privacy of collaborators throughout the project, with different levels of anonymity built-in, according to varying permissions, requirements and preferences. This involves using pseudonyms for most organisations and individuals, whilst attributing other factors of identity and location that have been shared. ‘Thin description’ provides a methodological tool to relay events and situations in ways that respect specific boundaries, valuing the ideas, bodies and privacy of collaborators and colleagues. Benjamin (2019, pp. 45–46) makes use of thin description to push back against “all-knowing, extractive, monopolizing practices of coded inequity”; thinness, she argues is not analytic failure, as tech discourses would have us believe, but an acknowledgement of fragility.

The importance of the anonymity built into the project cannot be overstated. Internet access activists as well as women activists and feminist and queer campaigners negotiate very real dangers and insecurities at all scales, from violence online to governments who are hostile to their work. This is before even considering the difficulties of getting work and funding, and how they might be impacted by speaking out as part of this critical decolonial feminist research. Even where this is not currently the case, positions can shift rapidly in changeable political climates. For the observation carried out in India the schools, colleges, villages and communities mentioned are described with enough information to contextualise the findings, however the exact names and specific locations are not included

in the text. This is to preserve the identity of the activist organisation and the collective privacy of the communities included in the work, and to avoid the dangers of seeking to represent them. As an observer in these communities who attracted questions and looks, but who did not have the skills to communicate directly with the residents, it is important to maintain these boundaries.

Data collection in public and online spaces has been complex; it is important for researchers to share these complexities to support the development of methodologies that consider the ethical implications when working amongst shifting configurations of public/private (Marino, 2020, p. 87), and privacy/safety. The internet governance consultations—the IGF, RightsCon and MozFest—which I have observed are held as open public forums (with ticketing). All of these events have some sessions available online either live or afterwards as an archive (see Appendix 3.e for screenshots what these archived sessions look like). Further, speakers’ names and attributions are widely circulated as part of marketing materials available before, during and after the meetings—therefore it is considered safe and permissible to quote and name billed speakers in most instances. Where speakers work on volatile issues or in situations where their work is considered particularly controversial or high-risk, they have been contacted and permission has been obtained for them to be quoted in the work. This opportunity is considered particularly important for those living under repressive regimes, for those who have changed their affiliations since events have taken place, and for activists who are part of communities facing violence and oppression such as ethnic and religious minorities and queer persons.

When it comes to audience members and people who spoke amongst attendees within sessions the situation is less clear still; whilst they were speaking openly these people may not be comfortable or safe being quoted, and as such they are only mentioned with national, regional, sector attributions, and where relevant organisational attributions (where possible with permission); names are not included to preserve anonymity unless specifically agreed with the speaker. Not all audience speakers give full names, and even when they do, cultural and linguistic differences do not always make it possible to note them correctly, making it difficult to contact everyone for permission. In some sections conversations with event attendees are mentioned, which were not scheduled as formal

interviews, these contributions are kept completely anonymous unless the individual was contactable for permission. Whilst on all occasions I wore a badge with my affiliation and position as researcher, and also introduced myself as such to those with whom I spoke, these very informal conversations (sometimes just a few words exchanged in the coffee queue) did not involve a formal ethical process of consent as carried out in formal interviews, therefore contributors cannot be assumed to be comfortable with having their comments identify them.

3.2.4 Pandemic shifts

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about several changes to this research project that I have been able to manage as part of the multi-sited research journey, which not to say that they have not been challenging. Originally, I had planned participant observation in-person at conferences in 2018 and 2019, followed by fieldwork in India, Pakistan and Nepal taking place in 2019 and 2020, which was held back by the long and complicated Indian visa process which I have described. The onset of the pandemic in early 2020 meant that travel to Pakistan and Nepal was off the table. It also meant a significant transformation for the internet governance consultations, which moved from being in-person focused, with some online capacity to completely online moving to online-focused with some in-person capacity. For the research topic this shift was of particular importance as it concerned the very object of study, so even as travel became impossible, an opportunity opened up to look into these changes and thus I continued my participant observation, now at the policy consultations taking place in online settings. This brought in options which has not previously been possible; whilst I could not afford to attend RightsCon 2020 when it had been planned to take place in-person in Costa Rica, the online replacement, which was free to attend was easy to participate in, and this was also the case for all events in 2021. By the time in-person events returned in late 2021 and in 2022 they came with very high quality online options, allowing me to continue even further.

When it came to activist collaborators I still wanted to work with the groups who I had contacted in South Asia, and put more focus into observing their representatives at policy consultations and holding interviews given I would no longer be visiting them in-person.

Being online meant that I had a broad scope to work with activists located in different places, rather than focusing on a single organisation as I had done in India, and I reached out to a number of people who I had met in the years prior who had shown an interest in what I was doing. At the same time, I reached out to the youth groups and activists that I had connected with at previous consultations. This saw the invaluable entry of the African and African diaspora youth activists into the project, which has been transformative.

Carrying out this research project through a global pandemic shed light on my expectations of myself, challenging the idea of an “always-capable-healthy-fit-mobile” researcher (Icaza, 2017, p. 39). It engendered limitations of the body, not just mine but of everyone involved, and everyone around me, in this passage of strange time. The tenor of the study has shifted significantly as I have come to acknowledge these vulnerabilities, underscoring feminist critiques of the epistemic violence done by the bodiless researcher writing from nowhere. As the pandemic passed around the world at different times it impacted all those involved in the research in varying ways. The issue of internet access took on fresh significance on policy agendas, as those with good access were better able to insulate themselves in certain ways. Able to work online remotely, order food online, socialise on video calls and generally insulate my body from the virus prior to vaccination, for me too the experience has shifted my understanding of internet access, amplifying stakes involved in this thesis.

3.2.5 ‘The internet’s double life’

As more of the research fieldwork has moved online, it has been increasingly important to consider what it means to carry out research *about* the internet *on* the internet. When it comes to internet access by any definition, I am towards the end of the spectrum that has the most. The only time this was compromised was during fieldwork in India where I could not pay for international data, and getting a local SIM was challenging due to administrative requirements.

I have used internet tools and services throughout this thesis, the most used I list here: Google Scholar, DuckDuckGo, Google Search, Zoom, Google Meet, researchgate.net,

academia.edu, Proton Mail (encrypted email), Telegram, WhatsApp, Google Scholar, and Google Mail. My browsers have been Brave, Mozilla Firefox and Google Chrome. My internet service provider for mobile is O2/Telefonica and at home has been Virgin Broadband and then TalkTalk. My hardware has been the Samsung S20 and the Samsung S21.

I share this small insight into how I have been connected because as Jac Sm Kee (2017, p. 5) warns, feminists cannot engage everyday online “without our feminist politics intact” and should apply the same radical lens applied elsewhere to internet technologies. Franklin (in Eriksson and Giacomello, 2009, p. 224) alludes to this in her concern with “internet’s double life” as a “a means and mediator for all manner of global, trans-local, and nonbordered interactions” in the practice of academic research. She shares experiences as a researcher engaged with the creation of the *Charter of Human Rights and Principles for the Internet* (2013, p. 178), noting that as much as the work was about the internet, it was also conducted through the internet. Researchers have yet to consider these implications in much depth, and I call for future engagements that more fully consider how we can take stock of what it means to carry out research on the internet, and the choices that we make in this process. The minimal information I list above contains a multitude of politics, much of which I have little awareness of, and it has only been the raising of my consciousness over the research period that has led me to change some of my choices.

3.3 Internet access activists

The design of this methodology began with a number of internet access activists who contributed interviews to the article I published with *Media Diversified* (Zamurd-Butt, 2017) which has been mentioned above. Interested in the role these groups and individuals were playing in negotiating access for themselves and their communities of work, I spoke to some of them again to connect with others who might be interested in collaborating, having me visit their projects and also observe them at speaking at events. I was introduced to a number of people, some of whom were not suited or available to take part, but who referred me on. At the same time I had begun to visit consultations and was also meeting

activists whilst conducting research online, for which the publication genderit.org⁵² was a significant hub in its feminist analysis of internet policy centring Majority World perspectives.

During preliminary work, and over the course of the research period, I made many connections with groups and individuals who were interested in what I was doing, and who were pursuing related aims. I spent time at consultations in sessions that included issues of justice for Indigenous communities, including data sovereignty, and concerns of accessibility, both at events and in technological design for persons with disabilities, I share insights from these parts of the participant observation in Chapter 4. I found particularly strong connections amongst youth activists who showed a great deal of interest in the research, and for whom access was a central concern. At worst, research can feel extractive and burdensome for collaborators who do not feel like the work is furthering knowledge which resonates with them, so it was an important methodological decision to ensure that the feeling (of interest) was mutual. As much as myself and the activist collaborators choose the margins, by virtue of being in these spaces all of us have degrees of access. As my positioning changes, so too does that of research collaborators who locate themselves in different ways in the different sites where we work together. It is not always easy to do justice to documenting this as it is such a personal process, but I do so where possible.

⁵² A project of NGO Association for Progressive Communications (APC). I flag this as APC will appear again through the thesis in various capacities.

3.3.1 Selecting collaborators

The two groupings⁵³ of activist collaborators are based around where they are located geographically, and their broad focus of activism. These aspects connecting the groupings, as well as the overlaps and connections amongst them meant that it felt useful to organise them together in this way. There is also variation between the groups, organisations and individuals that make up each grouping, from their politics, their identities—significantly all locate themselves (in terms of identity, politics and spatially) in the Global South (their overwhelmingly preferred term). This structuring happened after the fieldwork during the writing up, I say this to flag that I tried to remain open during the fieldwork to other (less immediately obvious) ways of organising the findings as they came up.

The variation amongst activist collaborators is key to the methodology, as Mignolo (2007, p. 498) asserts, inter-epistemic and dialogic work is essential to fill in the gaps in knowledge and “[reveal] the imperial complicity between the rhetoric of modernity and the logic of coloniality”. Though we are all different our characteristics of difference are not put under the microscope here to be disaggregated, as Black feminists (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991; Lorde, 1984), postcolonial feminists (Mohanty, 1986; Spivak, 1988) and decolonial feminists (Lugones, 2010) have argued, this type of dismemberment is violent and silences our experiences. Working together involves creating space at intersections (Tuhiwai Smith, 2013, p. 202). Lugones (2010, p. 747) calls this meeting at the “colonial difference”, the space where the colonial master narrative meets the myriad stories of resisters, a project which is always “subjective/intersubjective”, inherently communal, not couched in one experience but made up of differentiated experiences in relation.

Following the research through multiples scales and sites, in back-stage, off-stage and front-stage settings, whilst maintaining decolonial feminist ‘lines of relating’ has brought forth different types of relationship, and varied arrangements for collaboration; as such findings are not neat and tidy, but uneven. This bears restating as the organisation of the findings into the three chapters that follow may at times feel ill-balanced and at other times orderly. The following sections will outline who activist collaborators are, elaborating on their work,

⁵³ For clarity I refer to the two broader streams of work with activists as being with ‘groupings’ within which there are groups (informal), organisations (formal) and individuals (independent).

how they came to be engaged with the research, and how we have worked together. Discussions have been both informal (at events) or formal interviews (listed in Appendix 3.b).

3.3.2 South Asian feminist and queer activists

Preliminary work allowed me to meet a number of collaborators who were willing and interested to take part in this research who were located in Nepal, Pakistan and India. The South Asian region was appealing as a research site for a number of reasons: India's Free Basics controversy and the light this shone on the government's resistance to Silicon Valley; changes to Nepal's internet connectivity supply that saw the country move from reliance on solely Indian companies to adding Chinese supply (Sharma, 2018); reports of some of the world's largest 'digital gender divides' across the region (Kamran, 2022); widespread government internet disruptions and long-term shutdowns across Pakistan that led to the Islamabad High Court ruling them "illegal" (Bytes for All, 2018); as well as continual disruption across India (Katakam, 2019). Looking 'brown'⁵⁴ and being culturally connected to the region, as well as linguistically—in that English is widely understood, and I speak Panjabi and Hindustani—meant that I also felt well-suited to carrying out fieldwork in the countries.

The primary organisational collaborators which were observed and who contributed through discussions and interviews include: one, TechEverybody, an India-based organisation that has been active nationally and globally since the early 2000s on issues of internet governance, development and gender; two, InternetWitness, a Pakistan-based NGO that was founded in the mid-2010s and works on internet law and gender; and three, GenderOnline, a Nepal-based organisation created in the late 2010s and primarily concerned with queer communities and the internet. Individual activists who collaborated with this chapter include: Shama, an Indigenous Nepali trans woman blogger and activist working on LGBTQI and Indigenous rights in the Nepalese national context; and Pakistani

⁵⁴ For some 'brown' or 'Brown' has become a political identity; Silva (2010) links this to the post 9/11 period and relates brown identity to 'deviance from the norm'. Even now the term as a political identity remains under-theorised. For me it is a low-level identifier which serves the purpose here of saying that I look like I might be from the region.

feminist organiser and researcher Irum. Below I introduce each of these collaborators in more detail, providing an overview of how we worked together.

TechEverybody

TechEverybody is a non-profit organisation based in India, with offices in the north and south of the country and work spanning grassroots initiatives focused around gender and education, alongside research and policy analysis. TechEverybody's work is informed by political-economy and feminist thought, with the organisation active in global, regional and Majority World dialogue and activism on internet governance, rights, development and gender since was created at the turn of the millennium. Team members are regularly published in academic and non-academic publications and appear on panels and in discussion in global and domestic settings.

Among their sizable work, TechEverybody have produced research on internet access and access to ICTs in India more generally, speaking on these issues prominently in the aftermath of the Free Basics controversy in India during 2016. Their high-profile, prolific output and multi-functional work made TechEverybody particularly interesting for this research, as did their location and work on the Indian context. After reaching out over email, I connected with one of the team at IGF 2018 in Paris and we discussed me visiting their offices and projects. TechEverybody is engaged with numerous regional Asian coalitions and projects, as well as more broadly in 'South-South' exchanges. As such, the work being done for this thesis seemed a good fit in terms of their interests and it was arranged for me to visit their southern Indian offices and field sites.

I spent three weeks in India working with TechEverybody in 2019, supporting their team and observing their projects in different rural and urban locations. TechEverybody has three offices in the country which will be called "TechEverybody North Office" (located in a north Indian city, I did not visit this office), "TechEverybody South I", located in an urban setting in south India, and "TechEverybody South II", located in another urban setting, but with its work oriented towards rural communities. The two education programmes, below titled 'Teacher Training' and 'Girls in Urban Schools' were observed when spending time at the South I office. 'Women Internet Leaders', 'Digital Storytelling', 'Women's *Sangha* Meetings'

and ‘Displaced Indigenous Communities’ were all observed when with the TechEverybody South II team.

Figure 3.i Locations of TechEverybody projects	
Office	Projects
South I—urban settings	‘Teacher Training’ ‘Girls in Urban Schools’
South II—oriented towards rural settings	‘Women Internet Leaders’ ‘Women’s <i>Sangha</i> Meetings’ ‘Displaced Indigenous Communities’

Delays in my arrival related to discriminatory visa processes (detailed below) made planning for what I would do once in India incredibly difficult for both myself and for TechEverybody. For this reason, the itinerary was kept very open, worked up almost entirely in the days immediately preceding the trip. This required some adjustments on arrival as the region suffered severe flooding during this time, making TechEverybody staff visits to rural sites more difficult. In addition to my visit in India, I also attended sessions featuring members of TechEverybody at conferences, and followed the organisation’s work more generally both before and after my visit. Rather than formal interviews our discussions have been fairly informal and taken place opportunistically due to the team’s exceptionally high workload and stretched resources.

Visiting India for work with TechEverybody brought up unexpected challenges which delayed my trip by nearly a year. Whilst I am a British citizen, and my mum, born in Kenya under British Empire rule was also born with the same, my dad was born in Pakistan and was a Pakistani citizen prior to becoming a naturalised British citizen after migrating to the UK in the 1970s. The visa process for persons of Pakistani heritage visiting India includes a

range of additional steps to be conducted in person at a consulate, for which appointments cannot be booked and thus must be attended and waited for in-person with wait times in my experience lasting up to eight hours. The process for those looking to obtain a research visa also requires a range of additional steps, and given that consulate staff have varying levels of knowledge with regards to the complex visa classifications I found myself trying to get through a process which did not have clear rules or procedures, but was based more on which counter I was called to at the consulate.

Towards the end of the process, I was invited last-minute to the Indian High Commission in London for an interview on the same day, to which I rushed from work. Here I was interviewed by two men, officials, who asked about my research, my relationship with my Pakistani family and whether I planned to visit Kashmir. For most of the discussion it felt like I would not have my visa granted, but then, on what felt like a whim, my passport was stamped. TechEverybody were required to provide sponsorship for my visit, which involved me sharing their details including office address on my paperwork. When I finally arrived in India they informed me that the local police had visited them twice to ask about my visit, calling me “the Pakistani” and asking questions about what I would be doing there.

Whilst there is no knowing the reason for this particularly level of scrutiny and attention, it is notable that in addition to the consistently high tensions between India and Pakistan that characterise the region’s politics, my visit in August/September 2019 coincided with the revocation of Article 350 of India’s constitution which had granted special status to Kashmir, moves that were met with resistance and subsequently repressed with securitisation⁵⁵. I am hugely grateful to the organisation for their commitment to enabling my fieldwork, which has brought additional attention to their activism from the local authorities. This highlights the disruptive impact that fieldwork can have, and its unpredictable lasting effects—the organisation may face additional scrutiny or surveillance for long to come.

⁵⁵ This colonial move was met with defiant resistance across neighbouring areas and in the region that suffered brutal military intervention, ongoing securitisation, including limits and frequent disruption to connectivity and communications, as well as violent campaigns on social networks, endorsed by members of the ruling Bharat Janatya Party (BJP) encouraging Indian men to marry “Kashmiri girls” (Siddiqui, 2019).

InternetWitness

A Pakistan-based NGO focused on gendered experiences of the internet, particularly from a rights and legal perspective, InternetWitness is an organisation whose founder was becoming rapidly prominent in 2018 when the research began. They were of particular interest as their work on online violence against women in the national and regional context was a stark challenge to prevailing narratives of internet access as inherently liberatory. InternetWitness' work has faced significant challenges as they negotiate patriarchal social norms that limit women's freedoms, as well as a socially conservative political establishment engaged in censorship practices.

I followed InternetWitness' work and was able to attend talks by the founder at a number of events early in the project. Following this I met the founder Mehwish for an interview, and later another member of the team, Soha, at RightsCon in Tunis, and the two of us agreed that I would visit the organisation's office in Pakistan in early 2020. Again, applying to get a research visa to visit Pakistan began to raise issues that were compounded by my recent trip to India and the process saw several delays and complications. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic this visit was postponed, and then as matters became more serious it was cancelled as it was no longer viable within the research timeline. At this point a number of interviews had already been conducted in-person and online with members of the organisation in the period 2018 to 2020, allowing InternetWitness to remain a part of the project through these contributions.

GenderOnline

I came to GenderOnline after reading on genderit.org about a research project concerning internet access that they co-organised with feminist organisation, Loom. Speaking with the founder of GenderOnline, Dexa, during this time I learned that this was an organisation which had just started, and at this early stage they were still figuring out what they would work on next, who would be involved and how they were to be resourced. I had been interested in visiting GenderOnline but, as the founder put it, there was not much to see during this early time. I was then able to meet Dexa in-person at RightsCon in Tunis in 2019

and we continued to stay in touch about the organisation's projects which have a queer and feminist politics. The primary way in which they were involved is through these informal catch-ups at conferences and with formal interviews at the start and end of the project.

Individual activists: Shama, Irum

Using a pseudonym to protect her privacy, Shama identifies as an Indigenous trans woman blogger and activist working on LGBTQI and Indigenous rights in the Nepalese national context. She came to the research after being referred to me by Dexa. After getting to know about the research Dexa suggested that Shama's work and experiences would be relevant, and after some preliminary discussion Shama was able to contribute through interviews at the start and end of the project.

Also anonymised for the research, Pakistani feminist and socialist organiser Irum came to the research after I had observed her leading a session at RightsCon. She had previously worked with InternetWitness before deciding to work independently. The two of us also shared an online writing group, making it a bit easier for me to reach out, and Irum agreed to have an interview with me towards the end of the research period.

3.3.3 African youth activists

As I have mentioned, the second grouping of collaborators came to the project later, as part of the multi-sited journey. These activists are struggling with related concerns of access to those outlined above, in different configurations. Most significantly: gendered disparities including online violence against women (Iyer, 2021); government disruptions and shutdowns, particularly around elections and social unrest, in Tanzania and Uganda (Giles and Mwai, 2021); in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania taxes have been variously imposed on use of social networking tools; whilst affordability of data is a major concern (Woodhouse and van Wyk, 2021) that has seen zero-rating services proliferate across the continent.

There is huge variation in the geographic location of different collaborators, however they are highly-aligned in their work towards youth having a say in internet governance, and in issues of limited access in their communities of work. These activists locate themselves in a region of the world with the youngest population, the continent had a median age of 19.7 in 2020 (Rocca and Schultes, 2020) and it is from this perspective that collaborators speak when asserting their concerns. Over the research period the IGF has dialled up commitments to youth through the Youth IGF, whilst RightsCon has added a youth summit. Meanwhile Internet Society has continued to engage youth through its Ambassadors Program which appears in a number of places across Chapters 4 and 5.

All of the activists included have in common: firstly, their commitment to organising as youth, they self-identify with youth, and almost all are also young; secondly, the way that they find commonality amongst themselves and build relationships is through shared values and identity related to living in, being from, or having heritage from the African continent. I do not go into how this relationship-building occurs in detail, which feels private, however my connection to the continent was welcomed warmly. Lastly, the activists all locate themselves more broadly within the Global South.

This grouping is made up of the following individuals, groups and organisations: one, Digital Grassroots, an NGO that focuses on ‘Global South’ youth participation in internet governance which was established in 2017; two, an informal group of friends, Parte Afta Parte⁵⁶ who met at IGF 2019 in Berlin; and three, individual activists Sam and Pat, who I met at RightsCon in 2019. The following sections introduce these collaborators in more detail.

Digital Grassroots

Digital Grassroots is an organisation founded in 2017 by two young women after they completed the Ambassadors Program fellowship with Internet Society, and focuses on

⁵⁶ So named after the BigTril song of the same name released in 2019, which is also the name of the group’s WhatsApp group chat.

engaging ‘Global South’ youth with ‘internet governance’ through education schemes run online, and by bringing youth perspectives to “national, regional and global institutions of internet governance” (Uffa, 2021). Having met through the Internet Society Program the founders decided to develop a course on internet governance for youth across the ‘Global South’ which has been running since its first cohort in the organisation’s founding year.

Digital Grassroots’ approach is characterised by their social justice-led activism, centring values such as: care, intention, collaboration, openness and equity (Digital Grassroots, n.d.). The two co-founders are active at all of the selected internet governance consultations, where they deliver sessions focused on youth and internet governance from a ‘Global South’ perspective. I first met the founders at a session that they were running at RightsCon in Tunis, and after seeing them at another couple of consultations decided to ask them to join the research. We have kept in touch at through interviews held over video-call through the research period.

Digital Grassroots members face numerous challenges of access whilst advocating for the same. They are very much rooted in their (youth) communities whilst also practising transnationally and primarily online, setting them apart from organisations like TechEverybody which are more rooted locally, nationally and regionally. They have not requested anonymity and as such I refer to them with their real names throughout, generally just using their first names⁵⁷.

Parte Afta Parte

At an evening social at IGF 2019 I happened upon a group of people that all seemed like friends, I got chatting with them and ended up keeping in touch with this group of youth activists who had met through their attendance of the Youth IGF summit, which takes place prior to the main programme. I had introduced my research, which the group had found

⁵⁷ I use first names for all research collaborators throughout for consistency, be they real names or pseudonyms. Choosing surnames for pseudonyms would be very complicated, bringing up all kinds of questions around religion, caste and tribe, (to some extent also an issue with first names). To keep things simpler I have only given first names.

interesting, whilst I was also curious about their approach to organising and kept up with them about this.

I followed Parte Afta Parte as they collaborated on proposals to host sessions at the IGF over two years, seeing their experience of a successful application and taking part at IGF in Katowice, Poland in 2021. The group is made up of six men, two of whom, Art and Ade are from Kampala, Uganda; Kay from Dar es Salaam, Tanzania; Tony from Praia, Cape Verde; Hesus from Port-au-Prince, Haiti; and Jack from Abuja, Nigeria, as well as two women, Ria from eastern Brazil and Li from Accra, Ghana. All members are highly-educated, holding undergraduate and master's degrees in technical fields. With the exception of Art, who was in his mid-thirties during the research period, all other members of the group are in their early to mid-twenties. In my work with Parte Afta Parte I have been both a participant and researcher, in that I have contributed to organising, whilst also being an observer. In this regard I have kept my participation limited to facilitation support, helping to arrange meetings and format documents.

In precarious working positions, and sometimes sharing sensitive information, these individuals have had their details mostly anonymised, using a manner of identification that allows them to flexibly retain privacy where needed, whilst also being able to claim their knowledge and contributions, according to what serves them.

Individual activists: Sam and Pat

Sam and Pat, both of whom are mentioned by pseudonyms and with limited details about their geographic contexts to protect their privacy, are women who locate themselves as being from the African continent and the wider Global South. They are activists and also young people looking to build careers in internet policy. I met them at one of the research sites (the event and the year is redacted for their privacy) where they were hosting a session which I attended. Since they were speaking about their own experiences, I stayed back to continue the conversation and we ended up keeping in touch for some time before holding any interviews. Pat has a more technical background whilst Sam is more creative, both are highly-educated with master's degrees from well-regarded European universities. The two

agreed to be a part of the research in 2021 by sharing what was going on for them at the time, which happened to be their volunteer work with MozFest.

3.4 Internet governance consultations

3.4.1 Participant observation

I went about participant observation at the consultations by taking the following steps. Before attendance of an event the programme was reviewed and sessions were marked where they relate with any issues of access, prioritising for observation those sessions which included research collaborators, mention of decolonising politics, and thereafter variation within the issue area was sought. I took note of the how issues were billed by events, where they were categorised within programmes, and which speakers were invited. The events were then observed in person or online, looking at the content of what was said and who was speaking, as well as the spaces and conditions in which sessions took place. The notes were typed, organised using NVivo software, and then open-coded to look for key themes.

Taking an interpretivist approach to policy analysis the concern here is not a positivist one of whether policy approaches to expanding internet access can be evidenced (by whatever means) as effective or ineffective. Rather it is with opening up how the problem is represented (Browne et al., 2019, p. 1), by whom and from where. As I have outlined, the internet universality vision acts as a backdrop to the problem of *un*-universal access, but what assumptions underlie the vision that sees this particular universality? This particular historically-constituted, geopolitical and socio-technical setup? What practices and processes have made this representation of the problem dominant? (Bacchi, 2012, p. 7) What conditions do these assumptions reify and make natural? (Tuck and Gorlewski, 2016, p. 199) What is left unproblematic? Where are the silences? (Blackmore and Lauder, 2005, p. 99) This way of working reflects the view that policy is less about 'problem-solving' than it is about 'problem-setting', and further opens up that 'policy solution' approaches might actually shut down debate (ibid., p. 100). This approach involves considers how the problem

can be thought about differently, and how the dominant representation of the problem can be disrupted or replaced (Bacchi, 2012, p. 7).

Policy processes are seen as material-discursive, co-constitutive of internet governance consultations, with resources selectively distributed and contributing to what continues and what does not. This analysis involves an understanding that the normative frames the empirical, rather than policy processes being an exercise of 'neutral' empirical "inputs and outputs" (Fischer and Gottweis in Gurumurthy and Chami, 2016, p. 2). Working with the conceptual hook of access helps to keep this in view as access can clearly be seen as a policy area and as resource which is selectively distributed.

3.4.2 Site selection

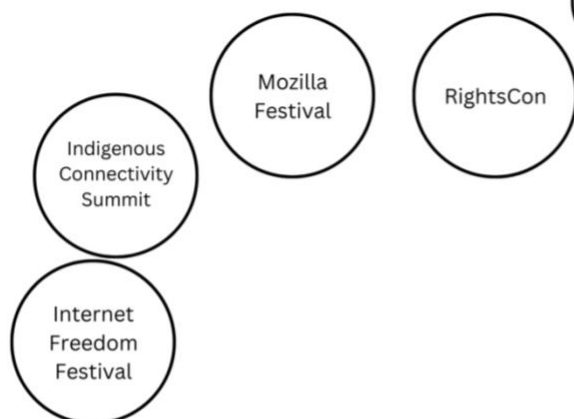
Conferences, summits, consultations, forums and festivals, gatherings of different kinds set out to discuss issues of internet and technology policy. Figure 3.ii is my map of the landscape of tech and policy conferences that were considered in the initial phase of work as potential research sites; brief information about each event can be found in Appendix 3.c. The longlist of options was selected based on research online and through discussions. I then visited these events to inform my final selections regarding where I would return in subsequent years. The selected consultations make rich fields of study to encounter emergent ideas, and the key organisations and figures who shape them, as well as indicating which kinds of ideas get the spotlight and which do not. Working in these sites allows for a foregrounding of body-politics (who is speaking) and geo-politics (from where). Occurring annually or at regular intervals they are a barometer of contemporary priorities for organisers. Participants attend conferences as individuals, carrying their own embodied experiences of access. At the same time attendees hold various affiliations, be those to causes, communities, governments, civil society, or businesses.

Figure 3.ii: Landscape of tech and policy conferences (potential research sites)

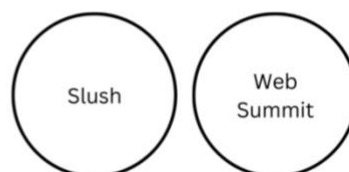
Technical sector



Intergovernmental & governmental



Civil society



Commercial

Research on internet governance, even with some of its broader definitions, is still limited in its purview, with a great deal of work focusing on national policymaking, legal structures, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) and the Internet Governance Forum (IGF). In looking at policy discussions in a broader context the work shows what a more narrow definition can exclude. A full list of the observed gatherings appears in Figure 3.iii, ordered chronologically, showing also preliminary visits to events that I did not continue to observe. The three selected consultations were chosen first and foremost because selected activists raised them as spaces where they would be, and as important gatherings for their agendas. Secondly, they provide varying perspectives to the

research including a ‘traditional’ site (IGF), whilst also developing new paths following the access topic.

Figure 3.iii Events visited for the research	
Event name	Location
MozFest 2018	London, UK
Freedom Online Conference	Berlin, Germany
IGF 2018	Paris, France
EuroDIG 2019	The Hague, Netherlands
RightsCon 2019	Tunis, Tunisia
MozFest 2019	London, UK
IGF 2019	Berlin, Germany
EuroDIG 2020	Online (was originally scheduled for Trieste, Italy)
RightsCon 2020	Online (was originally scheduled for San Jose, Costa Rica)
IGF 2020	Online
MozFest 2021	(Attended online) Hybrid online and Amsterdam, Netherlands
RightsCon 2021	Online
IGF 2021	(Attended online) Hybrid online and Katowice, Poland
MozFest 2022	(Attended online) Hybrid online and Amsterdam, Netherlands
RightsCon 2022	(Attended online) Hybrid online and Costa Rica
IGF 2022	(Attended online) Hybrid online and Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

When it comes to in-person events, the selected sites were also accessible for me as a self-funded researcher living in the UK, making these trips whilst also working for income. That said, after 2020 many events have moved to an online-only or hybrid format, making it possible for me to continue to engage. This section provides brief background information about each of the selected events, fleshing out their key characteristics and providing more detail about the rationale behind their inclusion in the research. The following chapter will involve more detailed research into each site's history, organisers, values, funding and programming processes.

Mozilla Festival

Mozilla Festival, also called 'MozFest' is organised by American non-profit Mozilla Foundation, founded in 2003 to lead the opensource Mozilla project. From 2011 to 2019 MozFest took place annually during October at Ravensbourne University located in Greenwich, South East London after its first edition was hosted in Barcelona in 2010. MozFest moved to Amsterdam, Netherlands in 2020, although this edition was cancelled, making 2021's hybrid event the first to take place in the new location⁵⁸. Having run for a decade, MozFest is a long-standing and large-scale event which proclaims a global scope inviting high-profile speakers including corporations, developers, designers, activists, academics, and journalists; organisers emphasise it to be an activist space above all.

With its roots in the 1980s opensource movement, Mozilla is a veteran organisation in the tech policy landscape and MozFest is a significant expression of its changing priorities. I have attended MozFest annually since 2015, for two years in a personal capacity, in 2017 as a journalist and subsequently as a researcher. The selection of research collaborators started with a number of activists who were in MozFest's orbit, making it important to include this gathering to follow their work. Having attended MozFest before any other sites, it was immediately evident to me that it held many similarities to RightsCon and the IGF, although

⁵⁸ Appendix 3.d is a map which shows the historical locations of each of the selected consultations.

it does not position itself within ‘internet governance’ as the other two gatherings do. As can be seen in Figure 3.ii I locate MozFest as between technical, civil society and commercial communities—it does not have much interaction with governments or intergovernmental organisations, fitting with the cyberlibertarian bent of its politics. This position in the landscape makes this a distinctive site, which given its high-profile, requires study.

Unlike the other two events below, MozFest does not have any themes or events billed as being about ‘access’ or improving access through the research period. Instead, issues under this umbrella are approached from different directions, raising questions of why access does not receive prime communications or marketing at this consultation, an issue which will come up in the findings.

RightsCon

RightsCon is a conference organised by California-headquartered non-profit, Access Now. First taking place in 2011 as the “Silicon Valley Human Rights Conference”, the event started off alternating between San Francisco and another city. After 2017 the meeting was held in different cities annually before moving to an online format, then hybrid format, with the in-person convening held in Costa Rica in 2021 and 2022 (and billed for the same in 2023). RightsCon has grown in size and scale with each edition, as has Access Now, which has achieved a high-profile on discussions of technology and society, having only been created in 2009, making it youngest organisation examined. Having received special consultative status from the United Nations Economic and Social Council in 2016 (Soloman and Micek, 2016), in many ways RightsCon’s practices mimic those of the IGF; outspoken on being a ‘multistakeholder’ event, covering a growing number of topics, and sharing ‘outcomes’ at the end of each event as is the case at the IGF.

The consultation’s most recent editions cover a huge range of topics with the largest programmes of all three events. Sessions take place over a number of days and attracting celebrity speakers; in 2022 then New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern was the first head of state to attend. In Figure 3.ii I have located RightsCon towards the middle, having more United Nations agencies connection than MozFest and a strong connection to civil

society, but slightly less of a DIY technologist focus than MozFest, and attendance from the technical sector than the IGF.

RightsCon 2018 took place in Toronto, Canada, and as such was out of budget for a visit that year, however the 2019 Tunis, Tunisia edition was more accessible. This space was also completely new to me for the research, and as such I am able to reflect in the changing ways I have interacted with RightsCon over the research period.

Internet Governance Forum

As discussed in the previous chapter, the Internet Governance Forum's (IGF) creation was recommended as a part of the Tunis Agenda for the Information Society, an outcome of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) process in 2005. The IGF has since had its mandate reviewed and extended, working in close relationship with the UN's Department of Economic and Social Affairs. The IGF is a year-long, annual process, the system also includes national and regional convenings – one of these, the European Dialogue on Internet Governance (EuroDIG) was one of the preliminary research sites that I visited.

Each global IGF is hosted voluntarily by governments around the world, who also pay all of the costs associated with hosting—which can run very high. The IGF has been subject to criticism deeming it a “mere talk shop”, (in DeNardis et al., 2020, p. 68; Gurumurthy, 2017, p. 7) however, its role as a site of internet governance is not generally disputed, what comes under fire is its effectiveness in taking policy discussions further. The IGF carries the authority and legitimacy which comes with UN affiliation and functions according to ‘multistakeholder’ processes, with representation from public, private and third sectors required. I locate the global IGF and selected regional IGFs on Figure 3.ii, closest to intergovernmental organisations and governments.

I attended my first IGF conference as a researcher and as such the space was completely new to me when I attended in Paris, France. Recalling how difficult it was to understand all the ‘UN-speak’ in Paris, it is useful to reflect on my own changing relationship to this space over the research period.

3.5 Summary

The decolonial feminist methodology outlined here generates discursive space around limited and limiting notions of internet access. Rooting the research amongst individuals and groups that locate ourselves as women, queer, persons, youth, and part of the Majority World, the work engages border-thinking and thus illuminates otherwise hidden workings of gendered coloniality, through bringing together varied vantage points. In this epistemological tradition I reject colonial research processes of extraction, working with activists through specifically developed 'lines of relating' in ways that recognise collaborators' agendas, expertise and agency. This approach goes further than tick-box ethics, this is about creating knowledge *with others*, which concerns *us all*. In this I recognise that I too have skin in the game and as such seek to resist the pull towards a God's eye view.

The sociality of the research contributes to a decolonising politics, allowing me to build connections with others who share experiences at the sharp end of gendered coloniality. This is a space of hardship but also one of creativity, friendship and fun, that cultivates decolonial habitus, way of being that fundamentally involves decentring ideas of how to behave, how to be and how to organise. Taking place over five years, the research has allowed for relationships to develop, whilst also acknowledging variously marginalised and precarious ways of making a living and doing research or activism require additional time, care and patience. Multi-sited ethnographic tools have permitted the flexibility required to be nimble between scales and follow connections, whilst negotiating the real-life difficulties of doing research within the borders. 'Pathfinding' along the research journey has allowed the project to move and change as the COVID-19 pandemic has unfolded across the world. It has combined the rigour of years of fieldwork with the ability to bring together views from varied vantage points.

As I have shown in Chapter 2, a dearth of multi-scalar research inhibits the view of the historical processes, geopolitical currents and sociotechnical relations which constitute internet access as a normative goal, policy area or experience. The multi-scalar approach offered here breaks down binaries between political-economy and culture-centred approaches, and between upstream-oriented internet governance research and

downstream-oriented digital divide and information and communications for development (ICT4D) research. Through this, the methodology confronts the most pessimistic visions of gendered colonial domination with the lived experiences of those resisting, creating and strategizing for their own futurities, all the while shedding light on how incumbent powerholders set agendas and magic-away options out of sight.

PART II

Here we begin in Chapter 4 with a close look at the three selected internet governance consultations: Mozilla Festival, RightsCon and the global Internet Governance Forum (IGF). Presenting these findings first sets the scene for each of these spaces, before bringing in activist collaborators in Chapters 5 and 6. Whilst Chapter 4 focuses on the idea of access in these sites, the latter two chapters follow activist collaborators as they move in and out of these spaces.

4. ACCESS IN/TO INTERNET GOVERNANCE CONSULTATIONS

This chapter looks at each internet governance consultation in turn, first reviewing how organisers position their values and identity, second, analysing funding sources, and third outlining their programming processes. Looking at these aspects across the three consultations traces the contours of approaches and politics, showing where they overlap and diverge. This sets a detailed scene and demonstrates that, even before getting to the content of discussions around access, the foundational discursive and material work undertaken by organisers.

Emphasising that *what is discussed* cannot be decoupled from *how it is discussed and by whom*, we then move to observations from each of these spaces. These have been collated over the research period as I have followed the theme of access through various discussions. Observations are analysed with a view to understanding how the ‘problem’ of access is framed, and by whom. I have organised discussions into four main themes: one, internet under threat; two, inequalities of access; three, inclusion moves, with regards to gender, accessibility, Indigenous peoples, and youth; and four, alternatives forms of access including meaningful access, internet commons, community networks and decolonising politics.

Findings show gatekeeping processes which limit the scope of what is ‘on the table’ for discussion at consultations, and what tends to be up for discussion when it comes to the issue area of internet access. They show glimpses of resistance politics upheld by Indigenous, disability, feminist and decolonising activists.

4.1 Mozilla Festival

4.1.1 Values and identity

Mozilla Festival (MozFest) is run by American non-profit⁵⁹ Mozilla Foundation which is headquartered in Mountain View, California, USA. The foundation also owns a commercial subsidiary, Mozilla Corporation, which allows the delivery of commercial products to raise funds that, according to Mozilla, are invested back into the organisation's social mission. Mozilla's mission revolves around the organisation's Manifesto (Baker, 2007), a ten-point list which was created in 2007, and remained largely the same until 2018 when an "Addendum" (Mozilla Foundation, 2018) was added.

The original Manifesto concerns itself with emphasising the internet as "an integral part of modern life", advocating for a global scale of operation that should "enrich" lives (point 3, Appendix 4.a). It considers "commercial involvement in internet development" to "bring many benefits", calling for "balance between commercial goals and public benefit" (point 9, Appendix 4.a). Beyond this there is no mention of how the internet is to be governed, or the roles of civil society, national government or international institutions. The document assumes the internet to be a "global public resource" (point 2, Appendix 4.a) without grappling with any questions around who is connected, who is not connected, and how experiences of connection vary. In this light, whilst the proposed purview is 'global', leaving no room for any other options, the contextual reference is not. The Manifesto calls for the internet to "remain open and accessible" (point 2, Appendix 4.a), assuming that it must already be so, in all contexts for all people. The value of 'openness', whilst rhetorically beneficial, masks that what is 'openly' available online is limited in terms of who has produced it, and from where, whilst not everyone is able to make use of these 'openly' available resources (Graham and De Sabbata, 2020, p. 120).

In 2018, to mark the twentieth anniversary of the organisation, Mozilla released the Addendum (Mozilla Foundation, 2018) to update its Manifesto, with four new

⁵⁹ A 'non-profit' is a specific type of United States organisational entity which operates for a social cause and as such does not pay tax.

commitments. The first of these relates to Mozilla's calls for an internet which "includes all peoples of the earth" (point 1, Appendix 4.b) extending and making explicit the expansionist vision of the Manifesto. It continues that Mozilla is committed to an internet where "a person's demographic characteristics do not determine their online access, opportunities, or quality of experience" (point 1, Appendix 4.b), a nod to the previously absent aspect of difference in experience. This reference to "demographic characteristics" suggests inequities of access can be boiled down to identifying factors which are in some way socially prior, rather than noting that inequities are socially generated and entrenched by sociotechnical systems, fogging up the view of where accountability is located.

Both Mozilla Corporation, which mainly develops opensource software including the Firefox browser, and Mozilla Foundation claim to be steered by the Manifesto and Addendum. In 2022 Mozilla Corporation announced its own venture capital fund, Mozilla Ventures, starting with 35 million USD to invest in "responsible tech" which has "the sort of values outlined in the Mozilla Manifesto baked in from day one" (Surman, 2022). Mozilla president Mark Surman, who leads the project writes this is a move to "push the internet—and the tech industry—in a better direction" maintaining that current systems are the right way to do this, including the venture capital financing apparatus (ibid.). This is notable given the criticism that has been levelled at venture capital financing for forcing companies to scale at extraordinary pace, and the implications this has for the companies and products that triumph (Riggs, 2017; Taneja, 2016; Zetlin, 2017).

Every MozFest has a thematic focus; in 2018 the theme was "Your Data and You", 2019 "Healthy AI", 2021 "AI in Our Everyday Lives and the Data That Powers It", and 2022 "Trustworthy AI". Festivals are marketed with a (sometimes dramatically) different visual identity with shifting terms of reference; sometimes change is made clear as in the case of the addendum or in the renewed visuals, other times it is very hard to track as each new year's festival homepage replaces that of the previous year, which is never archived in its full and final version. MozFest has seen a complete turn towards Artificial Intelligence since 2019. AI also appears in programme categories which organise sessions, "AI IRL (In Real Life)" and "AI Wellness" in 2021 and "Decolonized AI Futures" in 2022, as well as in session titles. Here the theme makes the statement, that Mozilla sees AI as the most important

discussion to be had, and thereby creates a discursive space where AI is either the explicit or implicit focus, an elephant in the room.

Over the research period, MozFest’s description of the festival changes every year until 2021 when organisers settle on one that returns for the following two years. In 2018 the website tagline describes the event as a

celebration for, by, and about people who love the internet, showcasing world-changing ideas and technology through workshops, talks, and interactive sessions (Mozilla, 2018).

This asserts that Mozilla considers MozFest to have a “world” level scope. It asserts that ‘loving the internet’ is a specific type of interest, emphasising the organisation’s foundations in an expression of North American, masculine, cyberlibertarian “early internet culture” (Phillips, 2019). The following year’s tagline showcases the breadth of attendees in this light, notably absent are the categories which are important to RightsCon and the IGF – business, civil society and the public sector (although these groups can map onto the groups that Mozilla prioritises too). Mozilla is seeking to emphasise a different type of gathering – one which does not sit comfortably with institutions. In 2019 MozFest is described as a

gathering of educators, activists, technologists, researchers, artists, and young people dedicated to creating a better, healthier internet (Mozilla, 2019).

Since 2017 the Mozilla Foundation has been publishing research on what it calls “internet health” defined as being an internet where “privacy, openness and inclusion are the norms”. The organisation adds that these are values that “Mozilla has championed from the beginning in our Mozilla Manifesto” (“Internet Health”, n.d.). ‘Internet health’ is measured along a number of axes which can be summarised with the following questions: “Is it safe? How open is it? Who is welcome? Who can succeed? Who controls it?” (Larsen et al., 2019). Health here is considered within a Western frame; discrete, unconnected to spirit, land and community. Good health, as an opposite to illness, is very difficult to argue against and its benefits are clear, this makes a metaphor such as this useful for bounded consultation.

Discussion about ‘internet health’, if not completely precluding challenge to fundamental structures certainly downplays it. The metaphor of health is an acceptance of systems as they are, with Mozilla advocating to turn the dials towards development in line with its own values.

In 2021, MozFest’s tagline brings back a claim to global scope, now setting itself as the “premiere”—the most important, the leading and first—as well as being a global stage for activists.

a unique hybrid: part art, tech and society convening, part maker festival, and the premiere gathering for activists in diverse global movements fighting for a more humane digital world (Mozilla, 2021).

The use of words like “diverse” and “humane” work to indicate Mozilla’s commitment to betterment without getting too embroiled in political stakes.

Opening sessions, in MozFest’s terms, the “opening circle”, is where organisers of all the internet governance consultations set their agenda and welcome attendees. These makes a useful snapshot of how each event is being positioned by its organisers. Looking at the two in-person MozFests that were observed in 2018 and 2019, both years see Mozilla president Mark Surman deliver a short address and introductions from “participation architect” Allen ‘Gunner’ Gunn⁶⁰. These take place alongside performances and speeches from invited guests. The third opening session is from 2021 when the festival took place online only due to the COVID-19 pandemic, following the cancellation of the 2020 festival, the 2021 opening circle was led by Mozilla’s global vice president, J. Bob Alotta⁶¹.

⁶⁰ Gunn runs a firm which works with non-profits on technology-related topics called “Aspiration” (“Team | Aspiration”, n.d.).

⁶¹ Alotta was recruited in 2019 to grow “diversity and geographical scope across [Mozilla’s] programs, with an emphasis on expanding [their] work outside North America” (Surman, 2019). They were formerly in a leadership position at the Astra Lesbian Foundation for justice, a US-based philanthropic, LGBTQI rights organisation (Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice, n.d.).

Speaking at 2018's opening circle, Surman described looking up what had been in the tech news nine years ago during the first MozFest, claiming that tech news back then was not interesting. "It was just about the new iPad", because "people liked what was coming out of Silicon Valley". The same year the festival's theme was "Your Data & You", invoking concerns around privacy and data ownership at the individual level, an issue that gripped mainstream press and news given the year's revelations around Cambridge Analytica's collection and use of data using shady methods and for hidden purposes. "Data" was a hot-button term at the time (perhaps coming to the end of its reign as such) and to flag it also served to show that the event was up-to-date and keeping up with innovation.

According to Surman, the MozFest community was already thinking about the issues which are now in the news during the first festival in 2009. In this sense the community is shown to have a role in terms of guardianship and seeing issues ahead of time.

If people have been reading the news they will think oh shit the internet is broken, but if you've been attending MozFest you think the internet is broken and there is something we can do to fix it, let's roll up our sleeves (Surman, 2019).

Other speakers from outside of the team, but with strong connections to Mozilla through its various initiatives⁶² add to this image. Opening MozFest 2019, the executive director of Kenyan non-profit company Ushahidi, Angela Oduor Lungati, attested to the event as being distinctive, seeing it as one of the "few spaces" which aligns with her company's goals allowing her to connect with "likeminded people" (Lungati, 2019). Ushahidi is a company which claims to bring together opensource with 'business for social good' and as such demonstrates the Manifesto's vision of an internet where commercial and 'public' interests are 'balanced' (point 9, Appendix 4.a).

During both in-person opening ceremonies there is an assertion of what kind of people are a part of the MozFest community: those who are optimistic about what technology and the internet can achieve, and who wish to "envision how they want to see the digital world"

⁶² Particularly of note is Mozilla's fellow programme that recruits diverse tech practitioners.

(Surman, 2018). As such in-person events see significant focus on guidelines for participation, mainly communicated by Gunner. Some of these are rules, others ‘best practices’: participants are encouraged to move around during sessions if they get bored; use simple language; not engage in ‘ideological fights’; listen and show respect for others (Gunner, 2019).

Surman emphasised that MozFest is a space of ‘fixers and doers’, stating that at the festival “people get together to ask what’s wrong, what’s right and what can we do about it” (“Opening Circle”, Surman, 2018). MozFest evokes a feeling that there are problems which need to be solved which can be dealt with in the room; Gunner (2019) indicated that attendees should take the time to speak with those whom they did not know to “build power laterally”, because MozFest is “a capacity building event”⁶³. In 2021’s online opening circle, following 2020’s cancelled event, J. Bob Alotta stated that organisers have had to let go of what “what MozFest *had* to be”, suggesting that organisers have had to rethink the event from its status as an in-person occurrence. The online version, according to Alotta, serves to “pathway our communities towards somewhere better” (Alotta, 2021). The use of “pathway” here is significant and indicative of Mozilla’s style: one, it indicates to build a path suggesting ‘going on ahead’ and a leadership role; two, it involves drawing lines, where is ‘on track’ and where is ‘off the beaten path’; three, the term implies a passive role in spite of the two former positions.

The Addendum to the Manifesto was launched in 2018, and with it Mozilla’s increasing interest in certain marginalised communities became more prominent. ‘Queering MozFest’ took shape as a strand of the festival, headed by Mozilla France cybersecurity team member, Stephanie Ouillion, whilst 2019 saw the launch of the ‘Neurodiversity’ space. Ouillion’s vision for Queering MozFest advocated for a “queer lens” to be applied to all aspects of the programme, to “help look at the world in a different way” (Ouillion, 2018). Leena Haque, a volunteer organiser, or ‘Wrangler’ in MozFest’s terminology, for the neurodiversity space was part of the Opening Circle in 2021 telling the story of how this

⁶³ There’s no specific definition given of this term however its commonly understood NGOs to refer to increasing an organisation’s ability to deliver its goals, so here it can be understood as MozFest is an event that seeks to increase the organisation’s capacity to work towards its Manifesto.

theme and her role has developed over time. Initially, she facilitated sessions in 2019 before being allocated a 'Space'⁶⁴.

Surman (2018) claimed that Mozilla has become more engaged with social issues due to increases in technology's impact, he claimed that the "world needs us more, and the world needs more of us". For the Mozilla director the political and social environment in which these 'problematic' technologies get produced is not really up for discussion; we just need to 'roll up our sleeves' to build technical solutions that are 'more humane'. In an illustrative juxtaposition to Surman's optimism, addressing the 2019 festival Egyptian youth activist Alia Elkattan said that she did not feel much hope for the future at the age of twenty-one, having seen her region confronted with ongoing humanitarian crises and political unrest. This heaviness of feeling and worry, located outside of technical 'fixability' whilst presented on a MozFest stage seemed quite out of place; Elkattan continued to end on a positive note, "but I am excited by spaces like this" (Elkattan, 2019). The activist also talked about feeling pessimistic for "other reasons which I won't go into when there are recordings happening". At MozFest's in-person occurrences there is filming and photography throughout by Mozilla's team⁶⁵, and every festival opening ceremony also begins with a large group photo with the mascot fox (Appendix 4.c). This points towards a tension between 'openness', a core value for Mozilla, and protection of those who might have different requirements of privacy and safety.

The opening circles reviewed show growing interest in positioning MozFest as an event that includes visibly different people and identities, in line with the Addendum's claims. Mozilla is prescriptive about how to participate, and in this clarifies who is the MozFest 'type of person', this discursive work is done with a friendly and informal tone of voice. An idea of global scope is furthered by the organisation of events according to a "global rolling structure" (Sarah Allen, 2021) from 2021 when the festival became 'hybrid' online and in-person; this means that events happen around the clock, through different timezones. The recruitment of Alotta is also significant in this regard, as they are tasked with growing

⁶⁴ The Mozfest programme is broken up into thematic 'Spaces'.

⁶⁵ Unless someone is wearing a yellow lanyard which indicates that they would prefer not to be included in filming or photography, but of course this cannot be guaranteed.

Mozilla’s work globally. MozFest is marked as a space where Mozilla can “rally citizens”, “connect leaders” and “shape the agenda”, the organisation’s three areas of work according to their website (Mozilla Foundation, n.d.). The community is made up of future-oriented thinkers who are able to prophesise nascent issues before everyone else. Mozilla is the glue, the supporter and the enabler but does not name itself leader, despite its influential position.

4.1.2 Funding sources

MozFest’s funding comes from four sources: the Mozilla Corporation, festival sponsorship, donations from individuals and organisations, and ticket sales. The majority of MozFest’s funding comes through the Mozilla Foundation, which has its own grantees and sponsors, as well as funds generated through Mozilla Corporation’s commercial operations and donated to the Foundation in a ‘social enterprise’⁶⁶ model. Whilst detailed information about Mozilla Corporation’s earnings is not available, the company is open about the majority of earnings coming from default search engine agreements on web browser, Firefox. Of these the most lucrative is with Google/Alphabet (Plohman and Wen, 2019) a deal which drew significant criticism from the Mozilla community at the time, who saw the relationship as counterproductive to Mozilla’s proclaimed mission (Collins, 2020).

Mozilla Foundation, unlike Access Now and the Internet Governance Forum (IGF), does not make the amount of revenue they generate from different sources or sponsors public. The depth of relationship (and likely exchange) has been gleaned by prominence. I have classified sponsors into three categories (top, mid and bottom), based on how they are presented in festival promotional materials. These scores have been used to calculate a proportional split of sponsorship by sector and region.

Figure 4.i: Mozilla Festival funding proportions by sector 2018 to 2022

⁶⁶ These types of arrangements allow the use of commercial activity to raise funds that then might get put towards some kind of ‘social mission’.

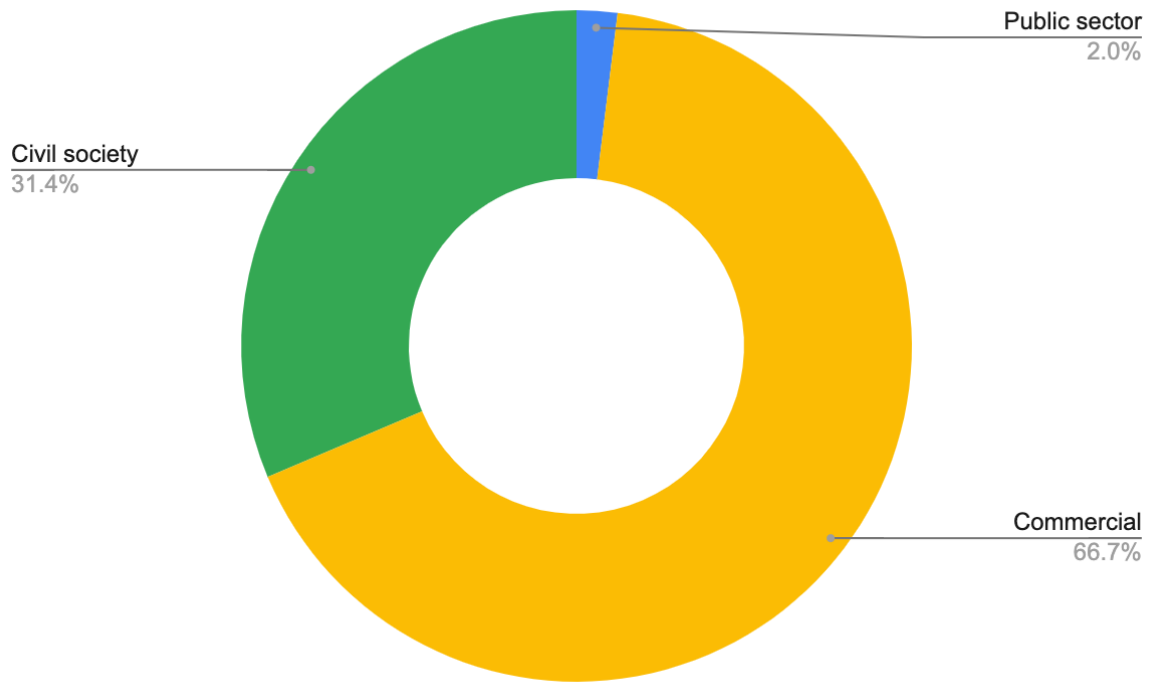


Figure 4.ii: Mozilla Festival funding proportions by region 2018 to 2022

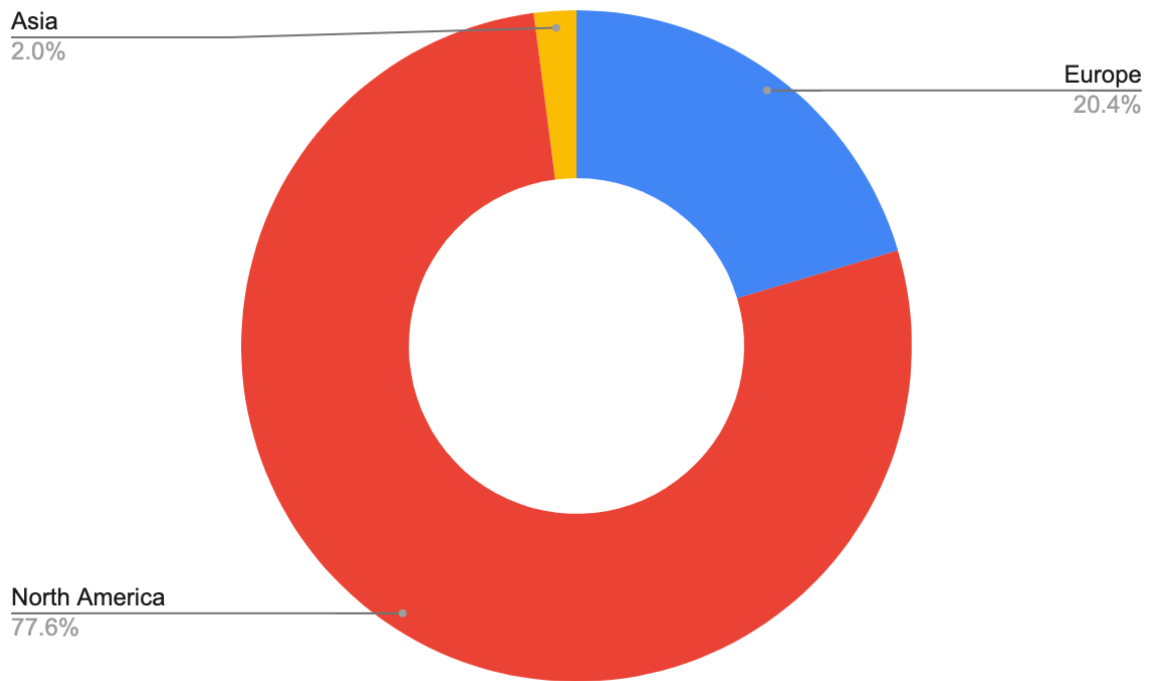


Figure 4.i shows that the majority of sponsorship funding comes from commercial, for-profit entities. Figure 4.ii shows the regions where sponsors are headquartered, with the majority in North America; both the African continent and Latin America are not present. Mozilla's mainly North American and mainly commercial revenue sources indicate that the organisation is very much plugged into patterns of regional concentration, whilst also demonstrating alignment with commercial interests. Certain funding sources, specifically Google/Alphabet, seem at odds with Mozilla's stated mission, whilst others that brand themselves 'social impact' businesses seem to make more sense; yet I would argue it is not easy to discern any difference. These commercial ventures vary greatly in how they fulfil their so-called social commitments, from simply selling a product that is deemed socially helpful to re-investing some part of their income into socially beneficial projects. The creation of Mozilla Ventures emphasises this a status quoist stance, upholding the venture capital system of financing tech⁶⁷.

In 2018 and 2019, MozFest was ticketed, with attendees paying for a day or weekend pass, priced at 30 GBP in 2018 and rising to 45 GBP in 2019 for the event in London. Discounted child rates (3 GBP) and elevated 'benefactor' rates (150 GBP) were also offered. A 'pay what you can afford' fee structure was put in place for the whole two-week online festival in 2021 and 2022. Within this, attendees could also choose to attend without paying anything. While the cost of tickets is not the only factor in whether or not people attend, it is an important element, bearing in mind that an online event still has associated costs of data, electricity and time.

4.1.3 Programming processes

MozFest's US-based staff work with a team of volunteers called "Wranglers"⁶⁸ who carry out most of the labour behind programming each festival. As the website puts it "Mozilla gives Wranglers driving lessons, and then hand them the keys to the car" ("The Wrangler Role",

⁶⁷ In original research about venture capital investment in the UK I found that VCs, who are majority white men from elite universities, are highly exclusive in whom they will finance—people like themselves (Zamurd-Butt, 2021).

⁶⁸ Wrangler is a North American term generally referring to staff who handle livestock on a ranch; it can also refer to a person that is quite conflictual, implying a hands-on, active and highly-assertive, boarding aggressive position.

n.d.). Some volunteers are recruited through a nomination process that has past team members suggest people for the following year (Mozilla Foundation, 2022), meaning they are usually near or in Mozilla's orbit. An open call is also publicised on the website, although selection criteria and processes are not made openly available. Looking through previous Wranglers listed on the website indicates that most have a connection to Mozilla, either as current or past employees, or as Mozilla Fellows ("Wranglers", n.d.).

Wranglers are meant to lend a wide range of perspectives from different fields and locations globally to the festival's organisation, working together remotely from around six months prior to the festival. They receive training which the Mozilla website calls "onboarding". Prior to the pandemic this occurred in-person; in 2018 the Wranglers were brought together for a weekend in Eindhoven, Netherlands, but after 2020 this has taken place online. During this intensive period the volunteers begin devising the 'Spaces' that structure the MozFest programme. Mozilla Foundation sets the annual theme of the festival and Wranglers work within this to design the Spaces with oversight of Mozilla staff. A call for proposals is then issued by Mozilla to invite applications for sessions. Wranglers are allotted to specific Spaces to which their expertise aligns; once applications come in, they are responsible for selecting from these applications to choose which sessions go ahead.

Session applicants, or in Mozilla's language 'Facilitators' who are selected then spend time with Wranglers to "revise and refine" their ideas (Mozilla Foundation, 2022). Wranglers also develop the timetable for sessions as part of their Spaces. An indicative schedule shown to would-be Wrangler applicants on the MozFest website of what their time contribution calendar will look like shows seven months of work, with more than 4 hours per week required for the last 4-5 months ("Schedule", n.d.).

Some of the selection process is published on Github, a Mozilla-run repository for software development and version control, in an ad-hoc way, however this is not complete and is not publicised in any communications. I requested programme archives and was directed to these records. Whilst guidance for submissions in the call for proposals is quite perspective it is not made clear how exactly decisions are made about what to include. Mozilla calls this process of organising MozFest "Federated Design", characterised by "power-sharing" and

“interdependence” (Mozilla Foundation, 2022). Interviews with collaborators, Pat and Sam in Chapter 5 see the two reflect on being involved as Wranglers and in other roles, contributing as volunteers towards the organisation and running of MozFest, shedding light on some of the downsides of this model that run counter to its promises.

4.2 RightsCon

4.2.1 Values and identity

RightsCon is an annual gathering organised by United States-based non-profit, Access Now which was founded in 2009 by the serving executive director, Brett Soloman, and activists Cameran Ashraf, Sina Rabbani and Kim Pham. Access Now’s history published on its website claims the organisation was created after the Iranian presidential election of its founding year was met with widespread national protests disputing the results. The founding team was involved with supporting activists’ communication in Iran in the wake of censorship and internet blackouts (Access Now, n.d.). Since then, the scope of work and reach of Access Now has grown significantly, with projects in addition to RightsCon including a phone helpline for digital rights infringements, policy development, advocacy, litigation and grant-making. Looking at Access Now’s mission and values is important to understand the organisation’s specific aspirations for RightsCon, since as with MozFest, RightsCon’s communications are transient and have limited detail beyond the annual event for that year.

Reviewing the Internet Archive to look at older versions of the Access Now website shows some expansion in scope early in the organisation’s history from looking at political participation from 2010 to 2012 in its initial years when it was just called “Access”, to expanding to “communications rights” between 2013 and 2014, finally shifting to a scope of work across five areas which it maintained from 2015 until 2022 largely unchanged (see Appendix 4.d) (Access Now, n.d.). Whilst RightsCon is organised by Access Now, it has a separate online presence and visual identity and does not claim to work towards the same goals on its website and or marketing materials. RightsCon is described as “the world’s

leading event on human rights in the digital age” (“About”, n.d.), which has a key difference to Access Now which “defends and extends the digital rights of users at risk around the world” (Access Now, n.d.). Although both depict novelty in the digital, RightsCon’s description claims it is the *epoch* that is dictated by the digital, and that the same human rights need to be applied here, whilst the latter, used by Access Now suggests that digital rights are in some way different to human rights.

RightsCon’s website content shifts depending on whether the conference is in its organisational phase, taking place or has recently ended. Celebrating ten years of operation in 2021, the website featured a timeline titled “a decade of shaping the future of human rights and technology” which shows the event positioned as a ‘shaper’, like MozFest. Examining opening sessions from 2019, 2020 and 2021 helps to show how the conference’s aims are framed and communicated year to year.

RightsCon is described by Soloman as a “platform” (Soloman, 2018), in a usage of the term which is notably contiguous with that of companies that run social networks (Gillespie, 2010, p. 352). This term elides the very shaping power that is enacted by organisers through RightsCon, bringing to mind an empty shelf onto which others fit their issues and ideas. This kind of positioning is illustrated in the way that the event relates with host countries, taking on visible forms of difference like décor or greetings that bely the underlying sameness of the organisation. Online gatherings in 2020 and 2021 were missing host country involvement, which helped to highlight this work of location in place carried out by RightsCon events when they move to a new city. In 2019 the consultation was hosted in Tunis, Tunisia, which was described by Soloman in the opening ceremony as being a part of the “Arab world” and the birthplace of the Arab Spring uprisings of 2010. Members of the Access Now Tunis office were brought forward to speak first, in Tunisian Arabic, spending some time in conversation with a government official. Some of the venue spaces were decked out in textiles and tents (Appendix 4.e). The event was also situated by Soloman as the first RightsCon in the continent of Africa with Kenyan writer Nanjala Nyabola speaking as a part of the session.

RightsCon describes itself as “the world's leading event on human rights in the digital age” (Access Now, n.d.); this indicates the scale of its remit as global, and its intentions to be at the forefront and leading edge. Claims to being global are shown in promotional materials that are decorated in multiple languages. Solomon’s 2019 speech saw him emphasise RightsCon as associated with United Nations institutions; discussing the 2005 World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) which had taken place in Tunis in 2005, he described this event as the “WSIS+13 and ¾”, riffing on the WSIS+10 review which took place in 2014. This follows from Access Now working for “special consultative status” accreditation from the UN’s Economic and Social Council for three years, achieving the status in 2016 (Soloman and Micek, 2016). Access Now’s stance suggests a critical position on the IGF which is not directly articulated, but comes up in ways that posit RightsCon as ‘ahead’, for example, in 2021’s opening address Soloman claims that RightsCon was where the term “internet shutdown” was “crafted” before being used widely by the United Nations.

His 2018 opening address saw Soloman state that “RightsCon is no longer a digital rights conference, but a human rights conference in the digital age”, a crucial change which exceptionalised this time period, and marked it as digital. This broadened RightsCon’s remit from issues to do with digital technologies to all human right concerns. Soloman recalled that RightsCon held its first events in Silicon Valley to try and raise the issues of human rights implications to tech companies, this has changed; in 2021 he said that Silicon Valley’s business model needs more than “tinkering at the edges”, it needs an “overhaul”.

Over time the consultation has also looked to cast its net more widely with different actors; in the observed events, much like the IGF, RightsCon uses the language of ‘multistakeholder’ participation with event promotion always indicating which sector participants are identified with. The “Outcomes Report” from each meeting breaks down attendees into sector-based categories, and the opening sessions in 2018, 2019 and 2021 saw the Access Now team talking about attendee breakdown in this way. Opening sessions also see speakers enlisted that represent these different stakeholder communities, indicating the commitment to visibly keep all groups engaged.

At 2021's ten-year anniversary opening address, Soloman claimed that RightCon's role was "empowering the grassroots as well as holding the powerful accountable". Organisers have increasingly communicated RightsCon's commitment to social justice. In the same year Soloman added that there had been change over time as RightsCon has been "required to look in the mirror on gender, on race, and on arbitrary power". The "Outcomes Report" also includes details of participants' gender, and from where in the world they attend. At the 2018 opening session in Toronto, Canada Soloman asked persons who identify with different groups to show their hands including: women and non-binary persons; people attending from rural regions (of Canada); and persons attending from the "Global South". The 2019 event saw RightsCon Director Nikki Gladstone mention that the majority of attendees that year were "female", and Soloman stated that "diversity is central to Access Now and key to this community". In 2020 the online opening session saw Soloman commit to an "antiracist" agenda for RightsCon which he claimed the event had not had in the past⁶⁹. In a talk which followed an introduction from E. Tendayi Achiume, UN Special Rapporteur on racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance, Soloman was keen to show RightsCon to be at the forefront of discourse regarding social justice using terms like "intersectionality" and "decoloniality", although not significantly engaging with the political implications of these theoretical frames (Soloman, 2020).

4.2.2 Funding sources

RightsCon is financially sustained through three sources: Access Now's organisational funding, festival sponsorship, and ticket sales. Access Now is vocal about transparency, and as such provides financial information about funding sources, amounts and what funding was granted towards. RightsCon is organised by Access Now staff, and as such it can be considered that funding going to Access Now is contributing to RightsCon, although some income is specifically ring-fenced for RightsCon alone. For the purposes of this breakdown I have extracted all core funding and all funding allocated to be for RightsCon and not taken into account funding towards other Access Now projects.

⁶⁹ During the summer of 2020 widespread uprisings were seen in the US and other Northern countries in response to the killing of African American George Floyd by a police officer. Diversity and inclusion initiatives became an organisational priority for many as activists put pressure on leaders to demonstrate their commitment to antiracism.

Figure 4.iii shows that very nearly all known funders are located within North America and Europe, with 0.02% of funding coming from Latin America. Of these North American and European funders, public sector donors provide nearly half of RightsCon’s funding during the research period through governments and their development agencies (Figure 4.iv). The Swedish, German and Dutch governments are all donors, however the Swedish development agency (Sida) donated 10.1 million USD between 2019 and 2022, making up a huge 44.42% of all RightsCon and core organisation donations to Access Now.

Access Now has a funding policy which states that the organisation

does not accept funding that compromises its organizational independence, including funding relationships that may influence its priorities, policy positions, advocacy efforts, regions of focus, or direct action work (“FUNDING”, n.d.).

Without disputing this claim, which would require additional evidence, the funding proportions clearly point towards alignment between the goals of the donor governments, which are overwhelmingly located in the Global North, and those of the RightsCon organisers. RightsCon’s may be choosing their agenda independently, this does not negate the importance of these funding relationships and what they indicate about RightsCon’s agenda and politics.

RightsCon also receives some income from selling tickets, however this has become less important over the research period as funding has grown. The physical gathering in Tunis saw tickets priced at 500 USD for civil society and academia, 550 USD for start-ups, 600 USD for governments, and 1000 USD for the private sector. RightsCon Online in 2020 was free to attend, since then ticket prices have returned, however there are also options to attend for free both in-person and online (RightsCon, n.d.).

Figure 4.iii: RightsCon funding proportions by region 2018 to 2022

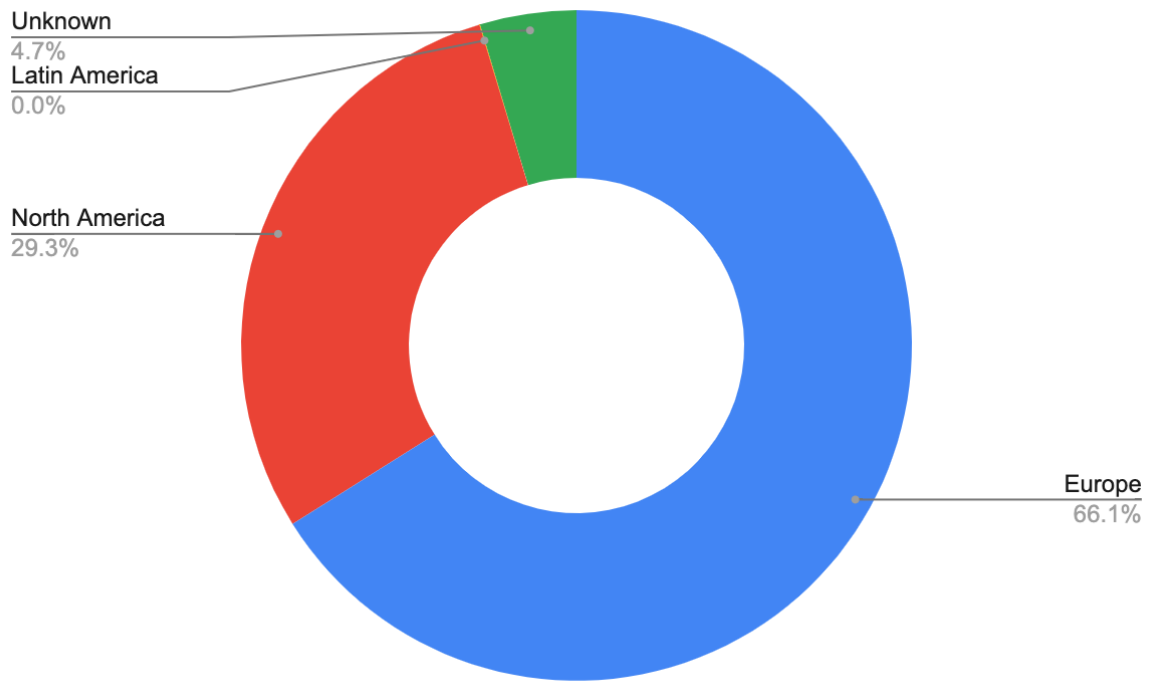
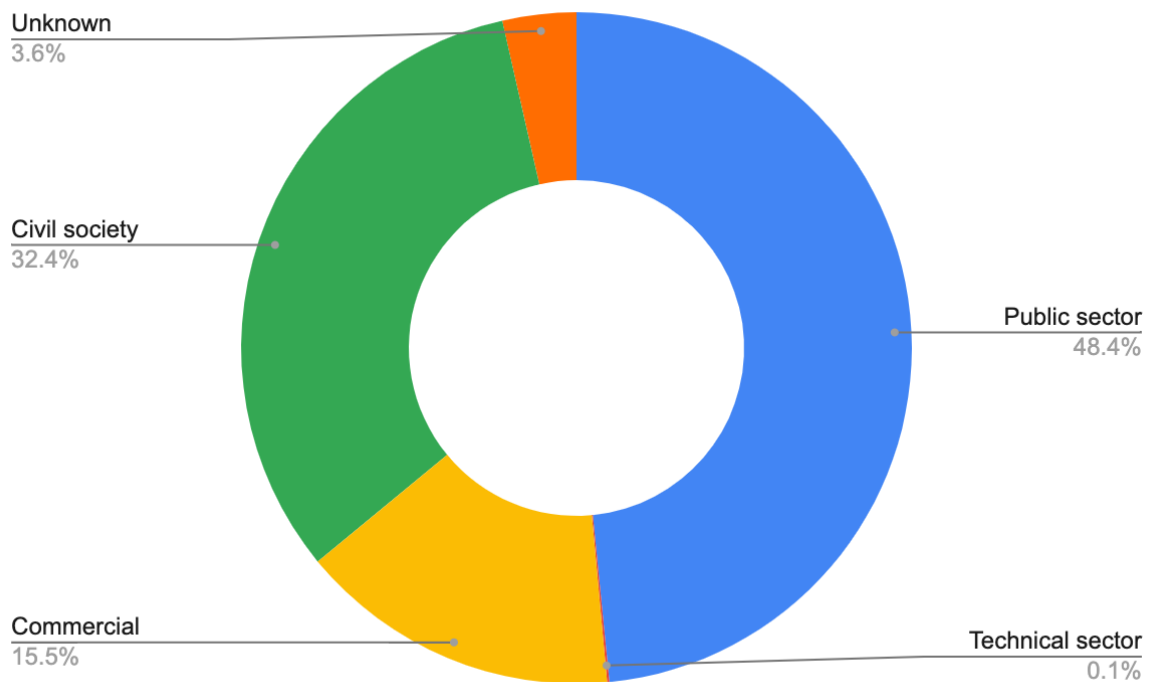


Figure 4.iv: RightsCon funding proportions by sector 2018 to 2022



4.2.3 Programming processes

RightsCon programming is managed by Access Now staff in offices located in different parts of the world⁷⁰ with headquarters in California, USA, and their invited “Programme Committee” of external advisors. The programme is developed from responses to an “open call for proposals” which is promoted on RightsCon communication channels. The call includes significant guidance including an overarching theme and sub-topics that the Access Now team wishes to address. In addition, a set of categories are set in the call, some adapted from previous events, some unchanged and some new, in 2021 these numbered twenty categories (Harper, 2021).

Since 2020 Access Now has committed to a “focus on redistribution of power” by engaging with “individuals and communities who are excluded from powerful spaces by design”. This assertion of RightsCon as a “powerful space” is notable as it suggests *powerless* spaces where the excluded reside. “Diversity” is a “core criteria for evaluating and selecting sessions” and applicants who wish to hold sessions are required to select speakers that include

not only regional representation, but also representation of communities in each region that are traditionally pushed to the margins or forced out of global convening spaces, such as Indigenous peoples, Black communities, and people with disabilities (Harper, 2021).

Further men-only panels are not accepted at RightsCon, whilst sessions are looked upon “critically” if they only include

perspectives from communities which perpetrate and benefit from systems of oppression, including but not limited to: colonialism, racism, patriarchy, classism, and land and resource exploitation (ibid.).

⁷⁰ Access now “have registered offices in Belgium, Costa Rica, Germany, Tunisia, and the United States, while engaging in Argentina, Australia, Canada, Ghana, India, Italy, Peru, the Philippines, the United Kingdom” (Access Now, n.d.).

Sessions are required to fit one of five formats. If selected, applicants are given training and access to resources to improve “session excellence”, indicating work to ensure sessions fit the RightsCon style. Further, each application also needs to include details of individuals that will fulfil set roles that RightsCon requires from each session team. These requirements make proposing a session a fairly prescriptive process which requires work to coordinate before and after application. Despite this, the calls elicit large numbers of applications, which RightsCon reports on⁷¹, including split by region and sector. The regional breakdown of applications (Appendix 4.f) shows a moderate shift from North America to towards other regions between 2019 and 2022 (Garrido and Harper, 2022; Harper, 2020, 2021)⁷². Although 46% of applications come from North America in 2019 this falls to 28.8% in 2022, whilst the proportion of applications from sub-Saharan Africa rise the most from 8.5% to 13.6%.

Given the much lower proportions of applications from Majority World regions, and the selection criteria prizing a ‘diverse’ programme, it is likely that proposals submitted from these areas face less competition after the application has been submitted, during the selection process. Yet only the most advantaged are able to reach to this point having the knowledge (about RightsCon), networks (to invite speakers), and the resources and access to coordinate and compile an application. It is perhaps for this reason that individuals from groups and regions that are underrepresented often find themselves at numerous sessions throughout the event with one exhausted Pakistani lawyer-activist in Tunis telling me she had appeared at no fewer than ten sessions throughout the five-day event.

⁷¹ In 2020 the organisation says it received 1138 proposals, with 349 making it into the final programme (Harper and Gladstone, 2020)

⁷²Not inclusive of applicants that did not disclose region.

4.3 Internet Governance Forum

4.3.1 Values and identity

As I have outlined in Chapter 2, the Internet Governance Forum's (IGF) creation was recommended as a part of the Tunis Agenda for the Information Society (UN and ITU, 2005), an outcome of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) process in 2005. This statement, now referred to as the Internet Governance Forum Mandate (Appendix 4.g), describes the role of the IGF, suggesting its structure and indicating that UN agencies—namely, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), International Telecommunications Union (ITU), and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)—should take leadership of the new entity.

Briefly summarised, The Tunis Agenda envisioned the IGF's role as facilitating dialogue on issues of internet governance between stakeholders, including exchange of information and best practices, informing stakeholders and enhancing their engagement, 'capacity building' in the 'developing world, identifying emerging issues, and looking for solutions to pressing issues (UN and ITU, 2005, para. 72). The IGF is tasked with striving towards these outcomes whilst working with "a lightweight and decentralized structure" that is "subject to periodic review" (ibid.). The WSIS+10 process which took place in 2015, following two five-year renewals of the WSIS mandate did not see significant departures from the existing IGF structure calling on stakeholders to "acknowledge the importance of and renew their commitment to the Internet Governance Forum" (UNESCO, 2015b, p. 6), and extending the Mandate for a further 10 years until 2025.

The IGF was designed to be a 'multistakeholder' consultation; the Mandate states that there is "special emphasis on the complementarity between all stakeholders involved in this process—governments, business entities, civil society and intergovernmental organizations" (UN and ITU, 2005, para. 73). Additionally, the IGF has been structured to include geographic representation across different continents, and monitors gender representation. Being a part of the United Nations system, the IGF inherits UN norms including those of anti-discrimination for women, to ensure parity in representation.

Although proclaimed to be ‘open’ for anyone to attend—the IGF does not have a ticket cost—registration is still required. Attending in-person also requires registration with government identification and in 2018 and 2019 required onsite airport-style security. I attended the IGF for the first time in 2018, and whilst I noticed the range of nationalities in attendance, the prevalence of UN agency attendees was very noticeable. The event feels very much like formal institution (see Appendix 4.h). Further, the use of acronyms and specialist language, and limited consideration about how events are designed makes IGF very variable in the degree to which a newcomer can engage with the content. The first event I attended in 2018 was a panel on net neutrality that had no fewer than ten speakers.

In practice, the IGF is a year-long, annual process, which includes ‘Intersessional’ activities taking place between annual meetings, shown in Appendix 4.i (I. S. United Nations, 2021a) that are issue and region-focused. These have more specific remits, but are important to note as intersessional activities relate with and appear at the annual IGF meeting in a number of ways, including largely the same participants. Although the Mandate remains constant, the IGF also sees many variations in its organisation annually which are built into the process. The UN Secretary-General appoints the Multistakeholder Advisory Group (MAG), fifty-five experts from across regions who are called to advise on the annual meeting programme and Intersessional activities, and each year one-third of this group is renewed, with an aim to maintain both continuity and change. The chair of this group also changes annually, selected by the Secretary-General. Host country, and relatedly, location also changes yearly with governments offering to host the IGF in their country, and in doing so also volunteering to pay the majority of costs associated with that meeting. This role allows host governments to play an important role in shaping the meeting and its theme and direction. Since its first instance in 2006, the IGF has been held in Europe eight times, Latin America three times, in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa twice each, and in the Middle East once (see Figure 4.v for a full list of IGF locations).

Figure 4.v: IGF host countries 2006 to 2022	
Year	Location

2006	Athens, Greece
2007	Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
2008	Hyderabad, India
2009	Sharm el Sheikh, Egypt
2010	Vilnius, Lithuania
2011	Nairobi, Kenya
2012	Baku, Azerbaijan
2013	Bali, Indonesia
2014	Istanbul, Turkey
2015	João Pessoa, Brazil
2016	Jalisco, Mexico
2017	Geneva, Switzerland
2018	Paris, France
2019	Berlin, Germany
2020	Katowice, Poland but held online
2021	Katowice, Poland
2022	Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

The IGF has a more structured and bureaucratic process of organisation than the other two consultations. Whilst having a clear Mandate, the IGF's values are expressed in more careful ways than the other two organisations. Since host countries fund the event, and put themselves forward to do this with certain goals in mind, the IGF has more variability in its priorities and framing in each new country. A ceremonial opening session takes place near the beginning of each IGF meeting, usually on 'Day 1', the first day of official programming which is generally preceded by 'Day 0' for fringe events. Given that the hosts of each IGF meeting are different, these are analysed separately, unlike MozFest and RightsCon which have the same hosts, organisations and leadership every year.

2018, Paris, France ‘The Internet of Trust’

The 2018 IGF was brought together by the Government of France and the UN Secretariat. High-ranking involvement from both parties was marked as a first, however this had come about as somewhat of a last-minute solution. The IGF struggled to find a host country for 2018 and it was after some delay in announcement that France was revealed to have come forward to take on the event, with the UNESCO headquarters in Paris serving as the venue. Illustrating how the host country can use their position to stake a claim in future discussions about internet governance, the French government used the IGF meeting as a platform for a series of events which took place under the banner of ‘Paris Digital Week’ with two new events being launched, Paris Peace Forum and the Govtech Summit. The theme this year was “An internet of trust”; to seek out trust suggests a less demanding request than noting how inequity has a role to play in allowing for the abuse of power. It forgoes questions of whether trust is desirable or possible when power is so differently distributed.

The opening address saw French President Emmanuel Macron speaking to an audience which had the space over capacity. His wide-ranging speech illustrated a move to bring internet governance into mainstream political discussion, and further to assert the EU’s position as leader, and France’s role within that. Macron painted the “Californian” model of “strong corporations” and the “Chinese” model of “strong government” as two extremes which had resulted in the need for a “new path”. The broad focus this year was cybersecurity, with Macron launching the “Paris Call for Trust and Security in Cyberspace”, a commitment to nine principles for all stakeholders to pursue, covering a range of areas and attracting signatories from across government, civil society and the private sector. The call was presided over by a series of working groups active on the various principles, and indicates how hosting the IGF can have outcomes that last past the meeting.

The UN’s Secretary-General António Guterres attended and addressed the meeting in person for the first time in 2018, having previously contributed by recorded video message. Guterres emphasised the importance of IGF and put forward three goals for development of the Forum, calling for greater multidisciplinary work, use of a shared language to allow better intelligibility, and greater inclusion of marginalised communities. Guterres’ ideas show that, as long as the broad principles of the IGF Mandate are being upheld, there is not

only room for development with each meeting, but an onus to show how improvements are being made year on year.

2019, Berlin, Germany ‘One World. One Net. One Vision’

Whilst France had come to the role of IGF host last-minute, 2019 had been selected by the German government well ahead of time in 2017, and this preparation was evident as soon as the baton was passed over at the end of the 2018 meeting. Here, a video was played to show the direction for IGF in Berlin mentioning accountability, legal frameworks, social life, human rights and politics.

The ‘One World. One Net. One Vision’ theme for this year was introduced by German Chancellor Angela Merkel who described her youth in the divided city of Berlin prior to the fall of the wall between East and West. This served as a powerful metaphor for what is described as the threat of fragmentation of the internet, which was to be a core concern of this meeting. It also indicates how a host country can choose to bring distinct national and historical identity to the meeting.

The German government’s plans included distinct contributions to the running of the IGF, and to the discussions taking place. With claims to strengthening the multistakeholder model, Berlin 2019 saw moves to engage “Global South” participation through grant funding; a specific session for parliamentarians to bring outcomes to national governments; a commitment to the inclusion of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) and a track of sessions for “High-Level” leaders from across sectors. In addition, sustainability and accessibility were considered to be an important part of the organising role. These initiatives can all be seen as moves towards the ‘One World. One Net. One Vision’ mantra, against purported fragmentation.

António Guterres once more appeared at this opening ceremony, asserting the central role of the United Nations and the IGF in maintaining the internet, and facilitating the discussions necessary to deal with threats and challenges, emphasising the urgency to

intervene now. Further, he echoed Merkel's views that fragmentation must be challenged, and this includes the 'digital divide' between those connected and those not connected.

2020, Online 'Internet for human resilience and solidarity' and 'Virtually together'

The 2020 IGF was held online due to the COVID-19 pandemic, although it had been scheduled to take place in Katowice, Poland—this marked huge changes in both organisation and agenda. Plans for the Polish government to host the IGF were moved to 2021, and 2020 became the first year the event was hosted solely by the UN's Department of Social and Economic Affairs (UN DESA). Perhaps as a result of this, the event was aligned closely with the UN Secretary-General's "Roadmap for Digital Coordination" (United Nations, 2020), a strategic report which was released in the same year with recommendations for the IGF to be further strengthened for its role in facilitating "digital cooperation".

The opening session saw a number of speakers from different parts of the UN set the scene, all emphasising that the pandemic has made the internet more important as it allows life, study, work and trade to continue even with physical distancing measures in place. As such, the 'digital divide' was flagged as an increasingly significant concern, and to be a key focus for this IGF. This can be seen in the year's theme regarding human resilience and solidarity in the wake of the pandemic, but also in the motto 'virtually together' referring to the online nature of the meeting. Whilst the COVID-19 crisis was a key theme, environmental sustainability also featured significantly in the programme indicating that the IGF was placing a greater focus on addressing the issue of the climate crisis.

As such, the 2020 IGF shows how the event is able to continue without a host country, and how leadership from UN agencies brings the programme closer to other UN initiatives. It also indicates that the IGF process is responsive to global events such as the pandemic. In each year's opening address, given as they are by high-profile leaders, it is evident that the IGF's role as a consultation on internet governance is re-asserted and re-emphasised, alongside its multistakeholder model.

2021, Katowice, Poland ‘Internet United. Free, open and indivisible.’

The 2021 IGF was held in a hybrid format, online and in Poland—standing in for the event that had originally been scheduled for Katowice in 2020 and then moved online. Joining by video, UN Secretary-General António Guterres emphasised the importance of the internet during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, adding that this global crisis had also “magnified the digital divide and the dark side of technology”, including the “spread of misinformation and manipulation of people’s behaviour”. He called for “cooperation” to “establish real rules to safeguard human rights and fundamental freedoms” and stated that “we must connect everyone to the internet by 2030”. Guterres highlighted the “Global Digital Compact” (United Nations, 2021, p. 63), a strategy which he claimed works towards these goals with governments, the private sector and civil society, following on from the previous year’s “Roadmap for Digital Coordination” (United Nations, 2020).

The President of Poland Andrzej Duda also joined through video message, asserting that “we all live in a digital world” and “we all seek an environment which can be secure, neutral and trusted”. He continued that the “global community” was responsible for deciding “how we design [the digital world] and how we organise it”. Referencing the COVID-19 pandemic, he argued that “digital transformation is simply a must for our global wellbeing”. Mateusz Morewiecki, Prime Minister of Poland followed, warning that whilst, “we all belong to a global digital community which can trigger further development in future”, this can also “become a trap and a threat”. To develop new ways of governing the internet was for Morewiecki the “greatest challenge faced by humanity and the United Nations”.

International Telecommunication Union (ITU) Director of Telecommunication Development Doreen Bogdan-Martin was also a speaker at the opening session this year. She framed the pandemic as an opportunity for the ITU to “bridge the digital divide” and “push connectivity to the very top of the global development agenda”. Whilst the ITU had measured “internet uptake” to have “dramatically increased during the pandemic” in what Bogdan-Martin called the “COVID boost”, she expressed an “urgent call to action to bring meaningful connectivity to all”.

2022, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia ‘Resilient Internet for a Shared, Sustainable and Common Future’

At the 2022 opening ceremony, United Nations speakers appeared first, with Liu Jinhua, Under-Secretary-General of the UN DESA problematising lower levels of internet access in African contexts. He claimed that internet and digital technologies were “engines of growth and providers of essential services” and raised concerns that unless dealt with the “unconnected are left further behind”.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres appeared by video message asserting that “the digital future must be human-centred”. Again, and with more emphasis, he referenced the Global Digital Compact, which revolves around the following themes:

connecting the unconnected; avoiding fragmentation of the Internet; providing people with options as to how their data is used; application of human rights online; and promoting a trustworthy Internet by introducing accountability criteria for discrimination and misleading content (United Nations, 2021, p. 63).

Guterres explained that the Global Digital Compact involves a process of “multistakeholder consultation” to develop shared principles that can be discussed at the UN’s “Summit of the Future” in 2024, with a view to framing principles around the digital broadly, including the internet specifically, that can be adopted by UN member states (ibid.).

The Ethiopian Prime Minister Aby Ahmed Ali spoke last, identifying himself as an “advocate for digitalisation”, having presided over the creation of the Digital Ethiopia 2025 strategy (Ministry of Innovation and Technology, 2022) that included the liberalisation of the country’s telecommunications sector and development of legislation around data privacy. Ali argued that “we find ourselves in a changing world order” with African nations “leapfrogging” in their digital development—this refers to missing the same steps that Europe and North America have passed through, such as the landline telephone and dial-up internet. Ali stated his belief that the internet is a “means of securing our ambitious targets” as a “developing country” and a necessity to achieving “full sovereignty”. He added that

African countries “should be able to influence standards in a way that corresponds with our values and enables us to participate in innovative, emerging technologies” calling for change from the status quo.

4.3.2 Funding sources

The IGF’s Mandate sees it remain part of the UN system, and as such receive some resources directly from UN DESA; this includes IGF staff being hosted at UN DESA’s Geneva office. Funding is gathered from voluntary donors and managed by the IGF Trust Fund. This money is used to pay for the IGF Secretariat, any costs associated with facilitating the MAG and costs towards intersessional activities between the annual global meetings. The costs of the annual global IGF are separate, as I have mentioned, these are covered by the government of the host country (listed above in Figure 4.v).

The breakdown of donors by sector shows that the vast majority of funding (65.9%) comes from governments and intergovernmental organisations. Nearly a quarter comes from the technical community⁷³, whilst much smaller proportions come from the private sector and civil society (Figure 4.vi). The largest donations over the research period are from the German government (1.6 million USD) and the European Commission (EC) (870, 005 USD), additionally, the governments of the Netherlands, Finland and the UK all give sizeable sums. The absence of the Swedish government is notable here, having been RightsCon’s largest donor.

The regional breakdown seen in Figure 4.vii shows that the most funds come from Europe, with about half that amount coming from the North American region, although only Mexico makes a donation amongst North American governments. ‘Distributed funding’ in Figure 4.vii refers to organisations like Internet Society and the Numbers Resource Organization (NRO) that draw their income from across global operations.

⁷³ In this thesis technical sector or community refers to ICANN, regional internet registries coordinated by the Numbers Resource Organization, the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF). According to the IGF’s usage the same term may also include non-technical groups like Internet Society who work on technical advocacy, as well as technical experts such as engineers.

Figure 4.vi: Internet Governance Forum funding proportions by sector 2018 to 2022

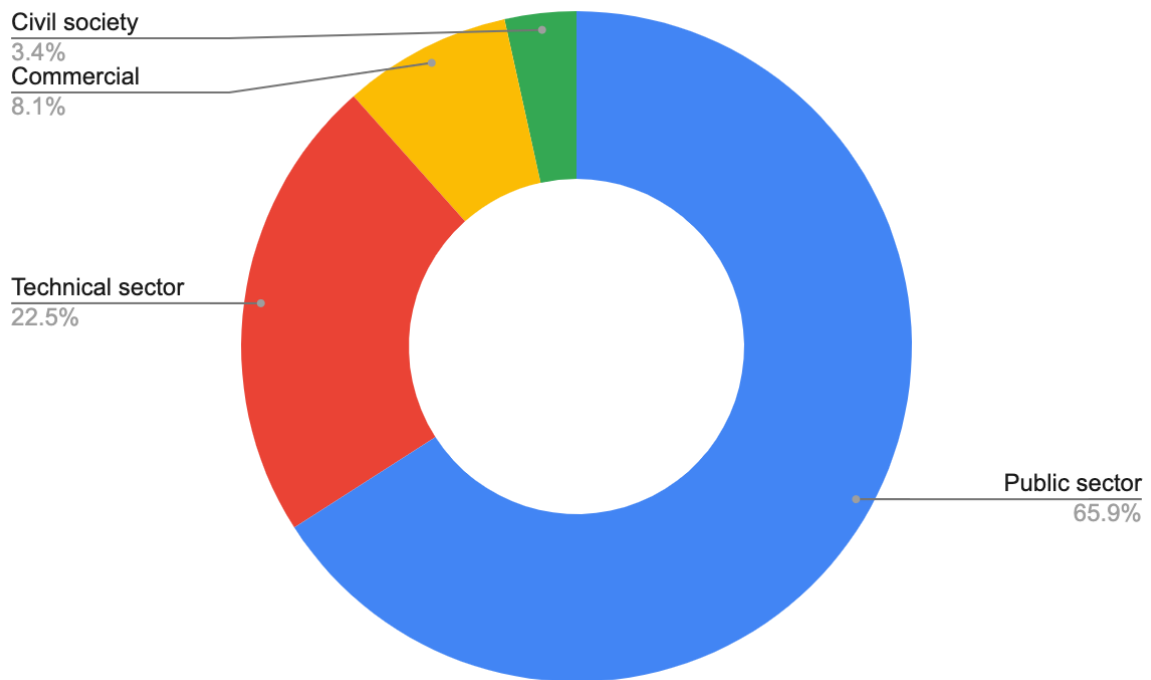
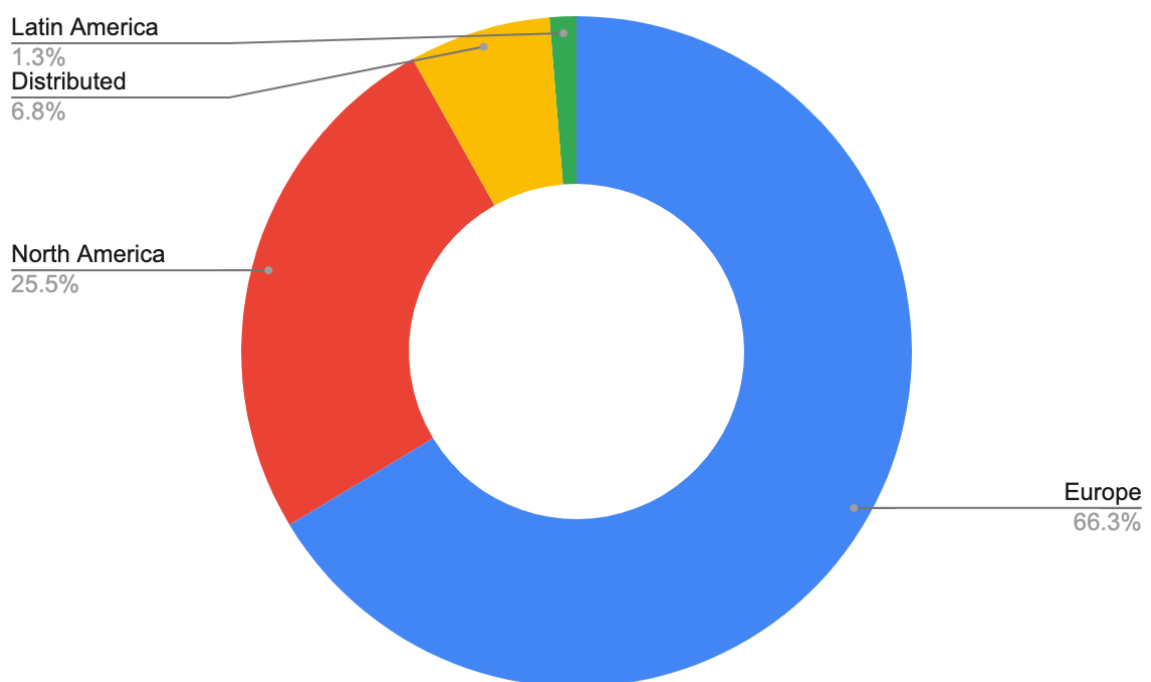


Figure 4.vii: Internet Governance Forum funding proportions by region 2018 to 2022



4.3.3 Programming processes

The IGF manages a year-long process, which culminates in the annual global meeting towards the end of the calendar year. National and Regional Initiatives (NRIs) which are part of the IGF take place throughout the year. The process of coordinating the global IGF begins with the appointment of the MAG in accordance with targets for regional and sector representation. This group is appointed by the UN Secretary-General to advise on the annual meeting programme and Intersessional activities which happen in the run-up to the global IGF. MAG members are chosen after a period when nominations are solicited and are expected to carry out their duties on a voluntary basis. MAG members are provided with translators by the Secretariat to enable meetings between persons from different contexts, however, the primary language of interaction and documentation is English.

Meeting regularly online and in-person several times during the cycle at the UN or ITU offices in Geneva, the MAG is involved in developing the programme after an open call is raised for issues to be submitted. The MAG's responsibilities involve: developing the programme; selecting from proposals; coordinating with facilitators before and after the sessions; and working with longer-term communities of interest which are named Best Practice Forums and Dynamic Coalitions⁷⁴ (Internet Governance Forum, n.d.). These activities are administratively facilitated and supported by the IGF Secretariat staff, who also carry out tasks that are not part of the MAG remit.

The organisation process for the global IGF meeting has deadlines throughout the year. Some meetings marked "Open Consultations" invite attendees to join online, with decisions and outcomes documentation published on the website for interested parties to review. The broad principles for how the process of organisation are carried out do not tend to change significantly with each year, however, changing circumstances, host countries and ongoing work towards general improvement of the IGF (a part of the IGF Mandate, see Appendix 4.g) sees some shifts in implementation. Processes are heavily documented, with

⁷⁴ Best Practice Forums are described as "intended to complement other IGF community activities. The outputs from this programme are intended to become robust resources and develop over time". Dynamic Coalitions are intended to be: "Bottom-up, multistakeholder, issue-specific groups formed on the basis of mutual interest and desire for collaboration by a set of IGF community members" (Internet Governance Forum, n.d.).

each year's outputs archived on the website and available for review and download even years later. Amongst these are transcripts of MAG meetings, placing the group and their process under a high degree of oversight, however, the volume of documentation and inconsistency in naming and filing can make it difficult to look for specific items.

Figure 4.viii below shows the 2021 process as described by the IGF Secretariat in the documentation of the MAG's initial meeting for this cycle. Showing the various stages of planning, the diagram also includes various calls to the community for inputs, In order from the start of the cycle these are: Call for Inputs (on the previous IGF); Call for Thematic Issues; Call for Workshops and Village Booths; and the Call for Remote Hubs (where people can gather to remotely access the global sessions). Participation levels in these calls are not high when considered as a proportion of attendees, for example, the Call for Inputs on the 2017 meeting in Geneva received 34 responses, a number which was considered consistent with previous years (United Nations, 2018). This may enable any substantive inputs to garner significant attention during the process.

Figure 4.viii: IGF organisation timeline (captured from I. S. United Nations, 2021b)



The “Call for Thematic Issues” was added in 2018, when a thematic approach to programming was implemented by the MAG for “more concrete, focused and cohesive discussions during the IGF annual meeting” (United Nations, 2018). These were efforts to avoid duplicate sessions and reduce the number of parallel sessions. The Call for Thematic Issues solicited significantly more responses, 347 in 2018 and 350 in 2018, dropping to 225 in 2020. The move towards less duplication of session topics, and a more fixed thematic programme is significant, with these processes working towards centralising discussions, rather than facilitating them taking place in smaller pockets which may not interact. The same impulse is also seen in selection of Workshops which are chosen by the MAG from applications. The process of Workshop selection remained largely the same between 2018 and 2020, with an initial screening by the Secretariat removing incomplete applications and subsequent MAG selection based on fixed criteria. Possible outcomes include: approval unchanged, approval with a revision to length or merging of proposals (United Nations, 2018), however, as Chapter 5 will show, the process does not always pan out as described.

4.4 Across the sites

4.4.1 Values and identity

MozFest organisers emphasise year after year in their opening circles that the problems they identify with the internet are solvable, and solvable at MozFest, a “maker festival” (“Mission: We’re building a better Internet”, 2021). This alludes to problems not being so grave as to need structural interventions, but more skin-deep issues that attendees can “roll up their sleeves” and fix. By contrast, the IGF and RightsCon are more institutionally-focused, with the latter positioning itself within the UN system having sought out ‘special consultative status’ accreditation, whilst also mimicking IGF language and processes as I have outlined. As such the IGF and RightsCon are more inclined towards engaging governments in policy-related discussions.

The IGF Mandate is less values-based and more procedurally-oriented than the Mozilla Manifesto and Addendum, yet it underpins and legitimates the IGF’s role as a space for

discussion, advisory and development of best practices (UN and ITU, 2005, paras. 72–80). The multistakeholder model prescribes that there is representation from all sectors (ibid., para. 73) but does not acknowledge differences and inequities of resource amongst stakeholders, a reason as to why the model has been criticised by scholars (Ali, 2018, p. 110; Gurumurthy, 2016) and, as will be seen in Chapter 6, by certain activist collaborators.

By contrast RightsCon has minimal long-term commitments beyond being global in scope and at the leading edge of discussions. As such it can be highly flexible and reach new and emergent issues quickly, thus having the advantage of shaping discussions first. RightsCon's focus on topical issues means it can be opportunistic with its open calls, choosing from thousands of applications to catch trends and limited transparency in programming processes enables this way of working.

Mozilla positions itself as “shaping the agenda” (Mozilla Foundation, n.d.), and MozFest as the most important and first of its kind “premiere” gathering of activists (Mozilla, 2021). RightsCon makes similar moves to power with organisers declaring it “the world's leading event on human rights in the digital age” (“About”, n.d.) and further “shaping the future of human rights and technology” (“RightsCon - Experience”, n.d.). These claims demonstrate barefaced moves to accrue power on the one hand, whilst on the other hand the same organisations claim they are working towards social justice (of their own definitions). In Access Now chief executive Solomon's words, Access Now has been “required to look in the mirror on gender, on race, and on arbitrary power” (Opening address, RightsCon, 2021) yet there has been no change to the organisation centring itself. Meanwhile, Mozilla uses tools like the “Internet Health” report to act as an arbiter of what direction the internet should be taking.

The most senior leadership of the UN appears at IGF opening ceremonies, asserting the role of the UN in governing the internet, whilst joining together agendas for internet norms and policy with other UN projects. This is illustrated in the opening ceremonies (2021, 2022) with presentation of the secretary-general's strategic report “Our Common Agenda”, which develops a vision for the next quarter century, and of which the “Global Digital Compact” (United Nations, 2021, p. 63) is one part. The 2020 online IGF is particularly demonstrative

of the shaping role that hosts play, given the focus on UN initiatives in the absence of a host country. Host country governments bring changing priorities to each IGF, with their own values and agendas that also reflect political currents and global and regional events. Macron and Merkel looked to assert European leadership against what they see as threats to the internet, focusing on security and fragmentation respectively. Ethiopian Prime Minister Ahmed Ali's address is usefully contrasted with Macron, who argued that, in the face of threats, the internet must "maintain its values". Ali demanded that African nations be able to "influence standards in a way that corresponds with our values". Macron was calling for a re-assertion of the status quo, whilst Ali calls for change.

4.4.2 Funding sources

The IGF has the greatest proportion of public sector funding (65.9%) followed by RightsCon which sees nearly half of its funding (48.4%) coming from governments and intergovernmental organisations (Figure 4.ix). By contrast, only 2% of MozFest's funding comes from the public sector, this is entirely from local government institutions in its host city Amsterdam, Netherlands. In these ways funding sources line up with MozFest's cyberlibertarian leanings, whilst reflecting RightsCon's success in positioning itself alongside the IGF in the eyes of certain governments. That said, RightsCon has not managed to get funding from the technical sector, who only contribute to the IGF of the three consultations, providing a significant proportion of funding (22.5%) (Figure 4.ix).

Looking at the IGF donors and host governments together reveals that European governments—specifically those of France, Germany, Poland, the Netherlands, Finland, Germany and the United Kingdom—have been particularly active. There is an overlap between IGF donor governments and those that support RightsCon. As shown by legislation such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (2016) and in view of the opening addresses for the IGF described above, some European governments seek to better influence internet governance, having long taken issue with US oversight and dominance (Singh and Gurusurthy, 2006, p. 878).

Whilst RightsCon is vocal about not compromising its values for funders, what this does suggest is a very high degree of alignment between its work and focus and that of key donors like the Swedish and German governments and the European Commission (EC). MozFest sees the largest proportion of funding coming from the private sector (66.7%) and nearly a third from civil society (31.4%). Demonstrating shared interests between them, Mozilla is a regular funder for Access Now on projects including RightsCon (“FUNDING”, n.d.). Whilst both MozFest (31.4%) and RightsCon (32.4%) receive significant proportions of civil society funding, the IGF only gets 3.4% from these sources. This is noteworthy, perhaps relating to the close meshing of relations amongst RightsCon, Mozilla and their mainly US-based civil society funders, from which the IGF is divorced.

Splitting funders by region shows that almost all funding for all the consultations comes from Europe and North America. European funders provide a greater proportion of funds to the IGF (66.3%) and RightsCon (66.1%) and North American funders put up a majority of funding for MozFest (77.6%) (Figure 4.x). The stark lack of funding from the Majority World in some ways backs up a view of purported ‘internet fragmentation’, not necessarily as a process of decline, but perhaps as an internet fragmented. Less attention is being given to these ‘world-leading’ consultations outside of the West than organisers would want, and whilst this does not seem to challenge their claims to global scope perhaps it is indicative of them having less legitimacy than they profess.

Figure 4.ix: Funding proportions by sector 2018 to 2022

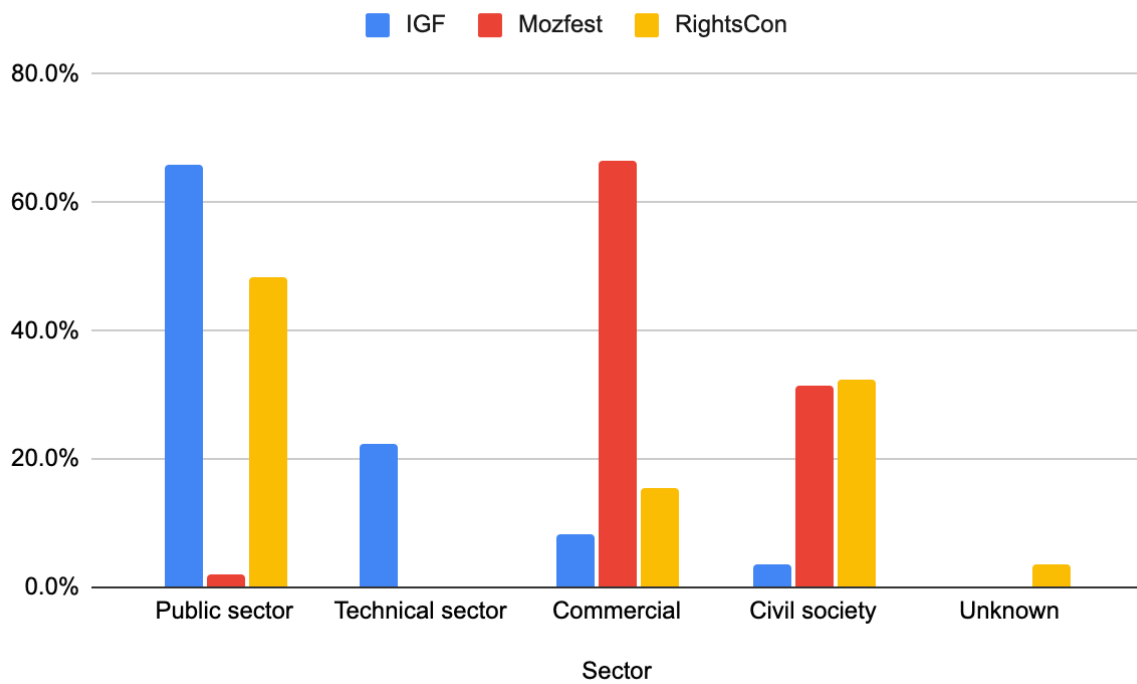
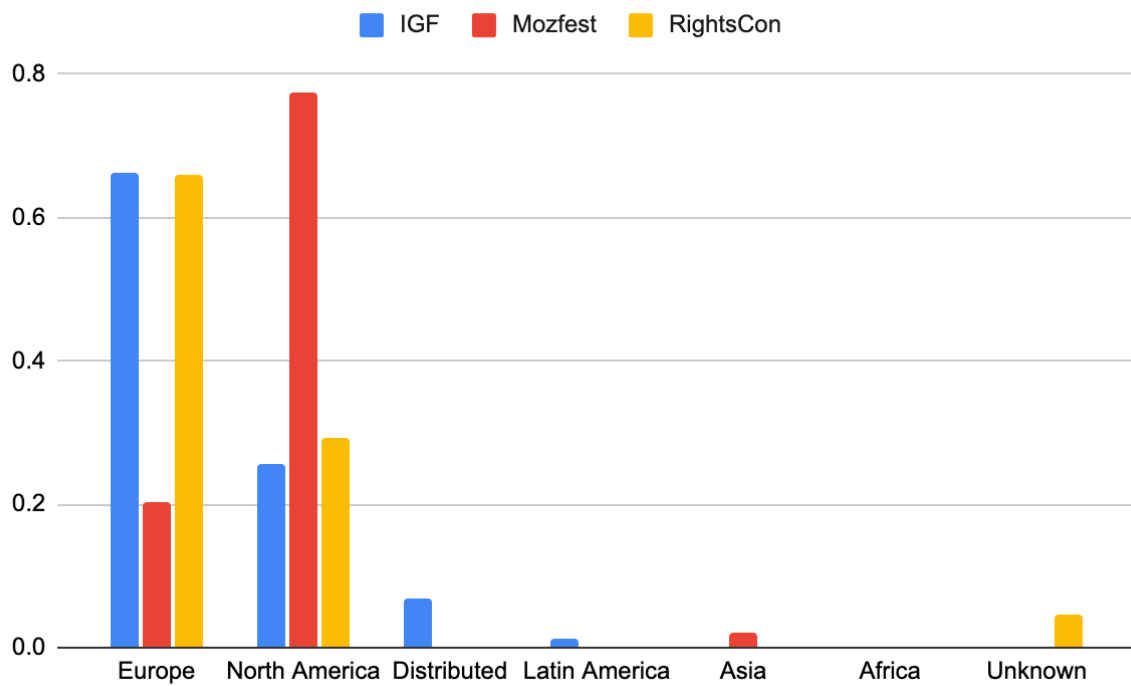


Figure 4.x: Funding proportions by region 2018 to 2022



4.4.3 Programming processes

Given the powerful positions these consultations have crafted for themselves within internet governance, their programming processes should be under strict scrutiny as these are the points where agendas are shaped without being seen. All three consultations claim to be led by proposals from potential session facilitators about what gets included on their programmes. In all cases an external group of volunteer advisors select from these proposals; for MozFest these are the Wranglers, for the IGF this is the MAG and for RightsCon the Programme Committee. These external volunteer advisors are selected in ways which do not have any oversight. In the case of the IGF, the MAG's meetings are documented and the proceedings are available to anyone online, however, for both RightsCon and MozFest their decision-making processes are opaque.

RightsCon claims to be taking measures to increase the proposals for sessions from across the "Global South". There have been marginal changes over the research period, the largest increase being a 5.1% uptick in proposals from sub-Saharan Africa (Garrido and Harper, 2022; Harper, 2020, 2021). By contrast MozFest takes the approach of putting its "Federated Design Principles" into practice, which organisers see as inherently democratising. As will be shown in Chapter 5, these principles can be contradictory in their practice. Whilst the IGF proposal process seems highly formalised, Chapter 5 also calls its efficacy into question.

The IGF is guided by the UN's Mandate and as such has less scope for flexibility year on year with regards to the programme itself. The most notable changes come in the form of the host country's interventions and theme, which play a significant framing role, whilst the agenda of the UN Secretary-General also receives priority place. The IGF has Dynamic Coalitions and Best Practice Forums which connect issues across years, structures which do not exist at either of the other events. These support continuity over time and allow groups to organise with more confidence at the IGF, as sessions for them are always guaranteed.

4.5 Policy analysis

Having looked the values, funding sources and processes that shape MozFest, RightsCon and the IGF, the next section moves to the theme of access specifically. Drawing on participant observation conducted at each consultation over the research period, I consider varied modalities of access and how they come up. Each of the sections—internet under threat, inequalities of access, inclusion moves and alternative forms—represent dominant frames which shape access discussions across the consultations.

4.5.1 Internet under threat

All of the consultations included programming that mark the internet as being under threat, an assertion which is undergirded to varying degrees by the idea that the internet as it *has been* is preferable to what it might become. In his 2018 address at the Paris IGF, French President Macron (IGF, 2018) painted the internet as being “under threat” of “fragmentation”, “cyber-attacks” and “extremists”, as well as threats to its “values and ideals”, as net neutrality is compromised and “platforms” change from “gateways to gatekeepers”. He continued that “in the name of freedom we have allowed enemies to advance” and whilst there is a need to have an internet which is “open for all” this must “maintain its values”. Macron asserted guardianship against dangers posed by the values of “enemies” and their visions of the internet.

In a similar vein, conversations emerge about an internet under threat of ‘fragmentation’⁷⁵—referring to a perceived process of decline in terms of openness and global interoperability—particularly as internet blackouts are recorded more frequently. The opening ceremony of the IGF in 2019 saw UN Secretary-General António Guterres mark the “creation of walls” on the internet as a major issue to be tackled, “the internet”, he claimed, “is fragmenting”. German Chancellor Angela Merkel followed the address using the metaphor of the Berlin wall to describe what she saw happening online. She claimed that

⁷⁵ Defined by DeNardis (2016, p. 2) as “geopolitical, technical and economic approaches poised to shift the Internet toward more of a segmented rather than universal system” encompassing moves towards “cyber sovereignty” by governments, including zero-rated services and enclosed propriety systems.

“the consequences of a broken-up internet would be a weakening of global infrastructure” with the “vision of the founding father of the internet turned upside down” (IGF, 2019).

The IGF’s themes during the research period are notable for their insistence on the unity and oneness of the internet. Merkel called for multilateral action to “stop states cutting themselves off” in line with the 2019 IGF’s motto, “One Net. One World. One Vision”. This strong expression of universality brooks no room whatsoever for different visions.

Contrasting this with 2021’s “Internet united” shows the latter to have a bit more discursive space for different experiences to come together. To be united implies that there are many to begin with, although it still reflects a preoccupation with fragmentation and a concern with countering this. These two themes alone indicate what might be ‘off the table’ at the IGF; differentiated visions and aspirations.

Frane Maroevic, representing the policy coordination organisation Internet & Jurisdiction Policy Network described increasing complexity in “policy alignment” at different levels to be a contributor to fragmentation: “There is regulation of the internet by governments and legislation, but at the same time by companies of platforms, then regulation on the internet by communities”. He added that a “divergence of standards is making people have different internet experiences” with the possibility of interoperability issues as countries block content in different ways and people unclear on which rules apply (“One size fits all? Global norms as a threat to inclusion”, IGF, 2020).

Kenyan tech policy expert Nanjala Nyabola questioned the fragmentation framing. In conversation with Taiwanese politician Audrey Tang, Nyabola asserted that it is “not possible to know how tech will play out” in a given society without contribution from analysts who are situated within that society. Whilst for her access is important, it cannot come at the cost of “being intentional about the kind of behaviours and spaces we wish to create”. Nyabola challenged the notion of there being only US or Chinese models for governing the internet, asking “what does inclusive ownership look like? What should a company be able to get out of a country without contributing?” These are questions that get little attention when the greatest threat to the internet is marked to be one of fragmentation.

Internet disruptions⁷⁶ enacted by governments, including localised blackouts, national blackouts and slowing down connection speeds became an increasingly prominent issue over the research period. Access Now, and therefore RightsCon, were particularly vocal on this topic, appearing in different sites as part of a campaign titled “#keepiton”. In 2018 Access Now co-hosted a session and exhibition with non-profit Netblocks. The exhibition showcased stories of people that had experienced internet disruptions, showing how their lives had been impacted. Alongside these personal stories speakers emphasised economic impacts and losses experienced through such events globally.

In the same session, thinking about what could be done in the face of disruptions, Alp Toker from Netblocks—who focus on tracking internet disruptions—shared that telecoms companies have, on occasion, shared information about government shutdown demands with his organisation, allowing for a record of requests to be logged. A representative from Internetshutdowns.in, who monitor these events in India, where the largest number of disruptions in the world are recorded (Skok, 2023), described the importance of publishing information so that people know where disruption is occurring. This helps to counter some of the disorientation that arises when there is no warning or transparent information available. Other speakers flagged that disruptions and shutdowns also impede access from the outside in, making it harder for the world to see what is happening, hampering efforts by activists and journalists. Marking how impacts are differentiated, social justice advocate Esra'a Al-Shafei emphasised that wealthier groups are more able to circumvent disruptions, with less wealthy groups more likely to be pushed offline or onto government surveilled local tools (#keepiton, Mozilla Festival, 2018).

At RightsCon 2019, the session titled “Changing practices of internet manipulation” saw speakers problematise the “normalisation” of internet disruptions by governments in the “name of national security” and “morality”, as is the case with justifications related to exam cheating and pornography. Policy analyst Aditi Chaturvedi argued that litigation has thus far

⁷⁶ I use the term ‘internet disruptions’ to cover the whole range of interventions that are enacted, however, ‘internet shutdown’ is the most prevalent term across the consultations.

been ineffective in India with “ambiguous colonial laws” being used to enact the controls, making them lawful. Panellists agreed that economic impact is not the most important consequence of shutdowns, however they argued that this should be measured and used as a way to convince governments against disrupting the internet. Toker added that this strategy is less effective in informal economies as the impact of the internet is less clear, and because the lasting impacts of a shutdown on the economy are hard to measure.

In response to speakers questioning why companies comply with requests to disruption of the network, a representative from US telecommunications company AT&T shared that government pressure for shutdowns is extreme, with staff forced to switch off services by “armed soldiers”. According to the speaker, governments preclude companies from revealing when these events are taking place. However, they added that telecommunications companies are now banding together to report such events and building “networks of trust” and publishing the redactions when they are unable to explain what has happened due to government pressure. Most panellists looked to litigation as one of the only ways forward, however, an audience member called to reconsider the “the nature of the services we use” asking “how we can think about independent infrastructures” which avoid both the problems of being US-run or government-manipulated. Also speaking at RightsCon 2019 Charlie Ngouno, chief executive of development NGO AfroLeadership called for Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to provide a guarantee of service so they are incentivised not to be pressured by governments, additionally suggesting that people must litigate the ISPs for not providing the service. This sidesteps the technical and political complexities of asking if an event is a government enacted shutdown or not. This tactic was greeted with a high level of criticism for pressurising ISPs (“Censoring without getting caught”, RightsCon, 2019).

‘Throttling’ or ‘internet slowdowns’ refers to limiting internet speeds to a crawl to make usage just as impossible as a total blackout, but with less detectability. Jonathan Camfield from Internews noted that since many times disruptions occur in places with existing infrastructural issues it makes it very difficult to prove what is happening, making advocacy much more challenging. Lawyer Mishi Choudhary shared that campaigners were calling for the Indian Supreme Court to mandate that the government must announce shutdowns,

however the government has been resistant to this with COVID-19 creating further impediments to these demands.

Media Matters for Democracy, a Pakistani activist group, hosted a session titled “Strategic litigation against network shutdowns” at RightsCon 2020, where speakers discussed how litigation is difficult in Pakistan. Lawyers who advocate against shutdowns lack personal safety, whilst courts are reluctant to hear cases against the government. Researcher Jan Rydzak described shutdowns as a “new topic” that requires more attention as the trend continues to “accelerate” and here Alp Toker appeared again, claiming that shutdowns are “spreading fast”. Lawyer Nighat Dad challenged these views arguing that in the Pakistani context internet disruptions had been going on for some time to the extent that “people have got used to them”. Dad added that “towns, provinces and regions have been offline for years in conflict zones” and further the “leftist party website was shut down during the most recent election”, against which a legal complaint had been filed.

The fragmentation threat is one which United Nations secretary-general Guterres, and French and German leaders Macron and Merkel all highlighted, a narrative that works at the world scale and identifies threats of fragmentation as a clash of values. Discussions at RightsCon and MozFest, led by activists, move a level down—disruptions contribute to the envisioned fragmentation—however these groups are more concerned with and connected to downstream impacts. Activists vary in their approaches to counter these events, whilst most support litigation, this has been shown to be less than effective. Some wish to use tactics that press corporations such as ISPs, a minority view, with most open to using the language of economic loss to try and dissuade governments.

4.5.2 Inequalities of access

There are few discussions that explicitly relate limits on access to internet governance processes and consultations, with limits on access to the internet. Activist collective Digital Grassroots advocate very strongly on this position, problematising a lack of representation of Majority World youth in internet policy discussions and institutions. Screening their short film “*On this Side of the Web*” at MozFest 2021, the collective used the film to showcase

Majority World youth perspectives on what they saw to be issues of internet governance through the paradigm of “digital citizenship”. The activists asserted that to move towards a “healthy internet” there must be recognition of “marginalised and underrepresented communities”, continuing that

there cannot be a truly universal internet without attaining distributed ownership that stems from ensuring all internet users are involved in processes that shape the digital future (On this Side of the Web, 2021).

The film saw Digital Grassroots develop on what they described as Internet Society’s vision, that everyone should be able to “connect, share, speak, choose, innovate and trust on the internet”⁷⁷, adding that this must come with “connecting to the international and national policy environment” (*On this Side of the Web*, 2021). Digital Grassroots’ position on this issue, which is explored further in Chapter 5, is distinctive in the research sites, where access to governance and access to the internet are treated quite differently, by different groups and in separate spaces of discussion.

The need for internet governance initiatives that work at different scales comes up regularly in the sites, however, it is notable that in these discussions ideas of representation and accountability are less apparent. Policy researcher Yohko Hatada noted a tension between global regulation and cultural differences, arguing that the “lack of meso-level players in the internet ecosystem is problematic” and adding that there should be “dominant regulations” using the airline industry as a model for this approach (“Regulatory approaches for guiding ICT innovation - flash session”, IGF, 2019). Fabrizio Hochschild Drummond, an advisor to the UN’s secretary-general echoed this view at RightsCon 2020 stating that “at the national level policymakers are catching up somewhat, but there is a massive deficit of global policies”. He called for a move to a “humanitarianism model” which the “UN can coordinate” with a “cross sector platform of money and resources to reach everyone” (“Global connectivity: where are we heading to after COVID-19?”, RightsCon, 2020).

⁷⁷ It is notable that the language used by the group uses the same terms of references as organisations with whom they have worked, specifically Mozilla, as shown by the use of the “healthy internet” metaphor and Internet Society whom they cite.

Moves to formalise policy processes as they connect between levels may limit potential for opportunistic, grassroots activism. At 2021's IGF, Innocent Adriko, part of the Uganda Youth IGF, called for youth activists to "engage our government people" at the global IGF, since the global event has "more gravity and resource" than national and regional events. He expressed concern that people in his geographic context would be "left behind because the government we have are not willing to do what needs doing" ("Our Internet Voices: designing inclusive spaces", IGF, 2021). At the same session, Lily Edinam Botsoye, who is part of the Ghana Youth IGF, suggested that youth activists should engage at global, national and regional levels to have their views heard, maximising all IGF channels.

Differences in participation in internet governance consultations between governments have been marked by the German government as an issue which deepens inequalities between the Global North and Majority World. As hosts of the 2019 IGF in Berlin, the German government paid 16.4 million USD towards supporting political representatives from Majority World nations to participate in global IGF meetings that year and the following year in 2020 (Internet Governance Forum, n.d.). This was with a view to making attendance of elected government representatives a key facet of the global meeting and continued until the end of the research period, with subsequent IGF's holding "parliamentary tracks" in the programme. At the opening of IGF 2019 Peter Altmaier, Minister of Economic Affairs and Energy in Germany, suggested the formation of an "Internet 20 Group", a multistakeholder advisory instrument for digital ministers and heads of state.

Remarking on these initiatives to increase attendance of Majority World government representatives at IGF 2019 (in a session titled "Landlocked countries: turning weakness into an opportunity"), Mohammad Najeeb Azizi, chair of the Afghan Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (ATRA) stated that there needs to be support from the IGF on education of governments before such work can be affective.

One of the most difficult things to do is working with government ministries and agencies to promote ideas of ICTs. For us to strive within the government sector education will have to be taken seriously (Azizi, 2019).

Azizi was echoed by Adil Sulieman, the representative of the African Union in attendance, who asserted that there needs to be “capacity building for members on internet governance, and this is going to be all member states”.

The location of in-person policy consultations has a role to play in participation, although the extension of online and hybrid events complicates this dynamic. Mary Uduma chair of the African IGF’s coordinating MAG stressed the importance of “internet governance”⁷⁸ events being held locally, noting that when the African IGF was held in Chad there had been 70% local attendance. However, she added that businesses were less interested in attending, with limited participation from US-based companies in particular, despite their “prominence in the African internet landscape”.

Researcher Agustina Del Campo found that multistakeholderism is better practised at the global level than national and local levels. She claimed that local decisions were not being made in a “multistakeholder way” which had implications for “inclusion”, adding that there needs to be research done to understand how to connect different levels of “policy dialogue and policy-making”. Alex Walden, human rights policy lead at Google/Alphabet agreed that, in his experience there was a “lack of multistakeholder dialogue at country level”, which he claimed created a tension with what was happening at the global level (“One size fits all? Global norms as a threat to inclusion”, IGF, 2020).

There is a feeling and perception, based on feedback and experience amongst a number of speakers from Majority World contexts, that issues which impact their communities are not taken seriously enough in global fora. Amba Kak, speaking at the 2018 MozFest in a session titled “Digital Rights in Asia”, stated that she finds it difficult to bring up the data and privacy

⁷⁸ The use of the term “internet governance” here is worth noting, there will of course be many internet policy or tech policy events happening in every locality but connection to the IGF seems to make this different for Uduma.

infringements of the Indian government's Aadhar biometric system in global internet governance settings, as if talking about India is somehow parochial. The Aadhar system is, she argued, a topic of global magnitude, not just for its impact on Indian citizens but for its legitimating influence and precedent as a government-run biometric identification system. Nanjala Nyabola made a similar point, claiming that conversations around digital technology have been centred on the Global North, yet problems that have only recently appeared here have been evident in her context, Kenya, for some time⁷⁹ (in conversation with Audrey Tang, RightsCon, 2020).

Whilst these feelings, that 'Majority World issues' do not have 'global relevance' are likely also present at the IGF, they are not seen expressed as readily. Given that the IGF is a part of the United Nations system, it may be that participants who locate themselves in the Majority World or Global South feel more entitled to discuss their concerns within an institutional setting, however, even if present, other factors have a role to play in how to what extent these views are heard. "Landlocked countries: Turning a Weakness into an Opportunity" (hosted by ATRA at IGF, 2019) was given a time slot late in the day during the "pre-events"⁸⁰ and just a handful of attendees turned up, leaving the large room mostly empty. This underscores the role of timing and scheduling, which themselves are also connected to relations with other members of the IGF community.

In 2018 and 2019, net neutrality was a key issue area on which concerns around inequality converged as Majority World countries saw zero-rated services abound during the late 2010s, offering free but limited access. The IGF's Dynamic Coalition on Net Neutrality in 2018 developed a mapping tool to monitor and compare the ways in which net neutrality is differently limited globally. The tool represents these differences based around answers to questions including: "Is there net neutrality regulation?" and "is zero rating permitted by the national regulation or tolerated by the national regulator?" (UN IGF DC on Network Neutrality, 2022). Representatives at the Dynamic Coalition meeting in 2018 called for the IGF to work towards developing international standards around net neutrality to harmonise

⁷⁹ Chapter 2 references this argument of Nyabola's from her book *Digital Democracy, Analogue Politics* (2018).

⁸⁰ During "day zero" of the IGF, before the start of "day one" programming.

the varied approaches appearing at national levels, which they charged with being “disruptive to the global network”. The map flags that global corporations behave differently across their countries of operation, a concern which was also raised by Julie Owuno, who conducted research to compare how corporations behave at home and abroad, finding that that privacy policies in sub-Saharan Africa are either absent or “totally unclear” (“Digital Rights in sub-Saharan Africa”, Mozilla Festival, 2018).

Geographic factors are marked as a reason for a lack of infrastructure, minimal connectivity or vulnerable connectivity by commercial providers. During the 2019 IGF session titled “Electricity, Community Networks and Underserved Communities” this was the heart of the discussion, which saw Emani Lui, founder of Pacific ISP MakaNet raise the geographies of the region as distinct and in need of specific approaches, for example that of Vanuatu which has “more than 60 islands with different landscapes and most of them vulnerable to disasters”. At 2020’s IGF Rubin Nelmini, representing engineering firm Tetra Tech, emphasised the importance of electrification, which he said “has yet to expand into some rural areas of the world”. Nelmini stated that slow electrification of certain regions points towards entrenched inequality and impasse conditions that force anyone engaged in efforts to expand internet access to “look carefully at local political dynamics”.

Infrastructural concerns make up the vast majority of discussion around inequalities of access between rural and urban areas, with language and literacy being discussed to lesser degrees. Cultural differences appear rarely; when they do appear, it tends to be from the perspective of access to knowledge for rural communities. Jan Gerlach, public policy manager at Wikimedia Foundation, described his organisation as a “social movement” with a “mission to go to every single part of the world” (“Fostering digital social innovation in the Global South”, IGF, 2018). A lack of relevant content online was posited by Gerlach as a reason for why some people have yet to connect to the internet, and he claimed that Wikimedia was working to change this by accruing more knowledge from places that are less well-documented so that “all humans can share the sum of human knowledge”, a “huge task before the 300-strong team based in our San Francisco office”. IGF 2021 saw a similar sentiment echoed in the Youth Summit by Anusha Alikhan from Wikimedia who stated that “on Wikipedia stories about the Global South are limited” as she sought to encourage more

contributions. By contrast Santiago Amador, a government representative from the Latin American and Caribbean region contended that the intentions of rural people differ online, raising a question to Wikimedia’s assumptions that everyone has the same intentions (“Inclusion online, diverse knowledge, new rules?”, IGF, 2019).

Strong criticism is levelled at both telecommunications companies, for not investing in rural areas, and governments, for not taking action to enable access for rural communities as a priority. The “Main Session on Digital Inclusion and Accessibility”⁸¹ at IGF 2018 saw the lack of internet access in rural areas framed as a central concern, with claims from different participants that governments are not regulating and legislating effectively to enable rural communities to have sufficient access to the internet. Telecommunications companies tasked with expanding network infrastructure argue they are disincentivised by reduced profits caused by the costs of developing infrastructure in rural areas, lack of electrification, and challenging landscapes that are less densely populated, and thus yield fewer customers. A speaker representing multinational telecommunications company Telefonica discussed the ways in which the firm has used creative measures to deploy fibre, for example, by hanging it from trees instead of burying it underground in “hard to reach” areas. They added that Telefonica works in parallel with community networks and supports them as “an equal part of the solution”. Panellists welcomed these actions and invited Telefonica to share these “success stories” to other major providers around the world, who they claimed to be resistant to taking action to connect rural and remote areas (Workshop on Innovative Approaches to Connecting Underserved Areas, IGF, 2018).

In other settings, telecommunications companies were met with more criticism, seen to be maximising profits with urban populations at the cost of rural populations and “not meeting their responsibility” as argued by IGF Colombia representative Julian Casabuenas (“NRIs Collaborative Session: Access and digital inclusion”, IGF, 2019). Corporations responded to this by pushing culpability to national and local governments, who they claimed are not creating regulatory environments conducive to commercial plans to grow rural

⁸¹ Conference themes are allotted a “Main session” at each global conference, in 2018 the one of “digital inclusion and accessibility” took place in one of the largest auditoriums during the middle day of the conference with attendees coming and going throughout.

infrastructure. Maarit Palovirta, representing the European Telecommunications Network Operators' Association claimed that whilst her sector delivers a large proportion of Europe's infrastructural investment, the barriers are very high for rural areas and include additional costs such as licenses, local government coordination, fees and taxes (Palovirta, 2019).

Rural connectivity problems were described to be more acute amongst landlocked countries which have to negotiate with neighbouring governments for access, and less wealthy nations which have to bear the costs of extending undersea cables. Poncelet Ileleji from the Gambian IGF highlighted the limited coastline of Gambia means that internet in the country is reliant on back-ups from Senegal, contributing to high costs. Ileleji called for the government to give tax privileges to telecommunications companies to encourage them to work in rural areas ("NRIs Collaborative Session: Access and digital inclusion", IGF, 2020). Imran Ahmed Shah, president of IGF Pakistan took a different approach which was harder on corporations, suggesting that telecommunications companies investing in, and benefitting from, urban markets should be compelled to spend 10-15% of their urban investment in rural areas ("Electricity, community networks and underserved communities", IGF, 2019).

The idea that those who have connected later, or who are yet to be connected, are disadvantaged does not appear widely. Jan Gerlach from the Wikimedia Foundation asked how to get people who come online later to be involved in not only policy-making but "norm creation" ("Inclusion online, diverse knowledge, new rules?", IGF, 2019). Developing on the same issue a year later at the IGF once more Gerlach claimed that the internet "promised democratisation" but "northern countries dictate standards", once again asking how norms could be created nationally when "top-down terms of service end up applying US norms globally" and calling for projects that support localised norm creation ("One size fits all? Global norms as a threat to inclusion", IGF, 2020).

In the same session, Frane Maroevic representing policy coordination organisation Internet & Jurisdiction Policy Network asserted that the "strongest set the rules" online, with legal precedents set in wealthier nations reappearing in different contexts. He gave the example of the German regulation of social networking websites and applications,

‘Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz’ (Bundestag, 2018) or shortened as ‘NetzDG’, in English the Network Enforcement Act 2018, purportedly put in place to tackle hate speech, misinformation and disinformation online⁸². Maroevic’s claims have been copied in countries around the world, and although he did not see the law leading to censorship in Germany there is concern it will be “misused” in “places like Turkey and Brazil”. Simultaneously he argued that the EU’s General Data Protection Regulation (European Union, 2016) legal framework too has been “re-used” by countries outside of the region, and whilst Maroevic did not doubt this may suit Europeans by having other countries aligned to GDPR policy, it may not be the best approach for those places.

Inequalities of access are raised to varying extents, be that participation in internet governance processes across scales, disparities in infrastructure along Global North/Majority World or rural/urban lines or differences that shape influential norms and legal frameworks. However, it is evident that a lack of multi-scalar engagement makes it hard to see the ways in which these inequalities relate.

4.5.3 Inclusion moves

As I have indicated when looking at the values behind each consultation, inclusion measures targeted at different groups have become increasingly prevalent over the research period. This section looks over some of the most common points of identity along which these measures converge across the consultations. Whilst the organisers behind each event profess these moves to be oriented towards social justice, inclusion here is considered in light of Kemil’s (2020, pp. 76–77) claim that such measures seek to “neutralise difference” and Hamelink’s (2004, pp. 282–283) assertion that groups and regions are not included on their own terms.

Gender and women

⁸² The bill has been met with some criticism, Reporters Without Borders who campaigned against the law expressed grave concern that the fines on social network companies would incentivise “excessive content removal and censorship and could set a precedent at the European level” (Reporters Without Borders, 2017).

RightsCon and MozFest have made visible commitments to inclusion of queer persons and issues relating to these groups over the research period. The “Queering MozFest” programme began in 2019, seeing MozFest committing to adding a “queer lens” to their work. That year, the festival saw a person dressed up in a unicorn suit walking around as a reminder of these efforts. The same year, RightsCon Tunis declared all bathrooms to be “gender neutral” by placing signs over the existing men’s and women’s signs. This was insufficient support or guidance for the community who seemed to judiciously use the facilities in accordance with the original signage, creating an unclear and thereby more uncomfortable experience for queer participants.

The IGF has a Best Practice Forum (BPF) on “Gender and Access”. Founded in 2015, this is a space in which interested individuals and organisations share ideas around a given issue, with different thematic focuses year to year. From its start until 2018, these themes were: online abuse and gender-based violence (2015); barriers for accessing the internet (2016); identification of the needs and challenges of diverse women’s groups with respect to internet access (2017); and how ‘supplementary’ models can support women online (2018). From 2019, themes included explicit reference to queer persons; how women and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex (LGBTQI) persons can “take part in the digital economy” (2019); and a review of “women and gender minorities” participation in internet policymaking from a feminist perspective (2020). The BPF has since been inactive.

As well as showing more visible engagement with issues relating to queer persons, the BPF’s changing topics reflect conflictual politics, as women and queer persons experience abuse and violence online yet are simultaneously cast as awaiting integration into the digital economy. A panel held on the “Digital Inclusion of Marginalised Groups” at IGF 2019 saw senior women speakers from the private sector argue for opportunities for women to get jobs or run businesses that make use of the internet. Inger Paus, Chief Executive of the German Vodafone Foundation and managing director of the Vodafone Institute think tank flagged that “only 5% of tech start-ups are owned by women”. Fatoumata Bâ, chief executive of investment firm Janngo said that as a former entrepreneur and now a venture capitalist she sees a lack of funding support for women’s businesses. She shared an anecdote that demonstrates her ideas of success in which women in Nigeria were given

tablets to sell their self-made products online, with the donor receiving a proportion of revenue from sales. For Bâ this “empowers women with income”, and Paus agreed that it is “changing the power balance”.

A session hosted by NGOs Alliance for Affordable Internet and Web Foundation at IGF 2021 titled “South-South strategy on facing digital gender inequalities” picked up these concerns, with Anna Rodriguez from Alliance for Affordable Internet emphasising the “cost of excluding women from the internet” which is “worse in Africa and Asia Pacific” where the “gender gap in access has not closed over the last decade”. A range of gendered difficulties for connecting women were raised amongst speakers: lack of privacy; surveillance by family and partners; lack of access to devices; affordability of devices and reliance on men’s income; a lack of skills; the prevalence of online abuse against women; and social stigma around women’s use of the internet (“South-South strategy on facing digital gender inequalities”, IGF, 2021).

At the other end of the spectrum, and less prevalent, critical feminist perspectives question the logic of “giving women gadgets and looking for success stories” as Zoya Rehman from Media Matters for Democracy described. Here Anita Gurumurthy argued that the capitalist marketplace produces “behavioural reductionism” around access to make women into “desirable objects of the digital economy”. She continued that without contextualised projects and benchmarking about what the “right to digital equality” means for women and marginalised genders “closing the digital divide is just further neoliberalisation which is pinkwashed”.

Whilst gender and inequality in internet access is widely discussed, there is limited discussion about the implications of women and marginalised genders coming online later than men or developing digital skills after men. Chennai Chair from Web Foundation shared that women are coming online later, and that men join the internet younger, as well as flagging that fewer Africans are online than other continents (“Inclusion online, diverse knowledge, new rules?”, IGF, 2019). Talking about her context in Nigeria, Tope Ogundipe, an independent consultant on digital inequalities, found that the pandemic brought more people online, however, as they looked to explore online they were “experiencing barriers,

especially fraud and crime”. She argued that additional measures are needed to support women online in her context including cyber security policies and skills training for “online hygiene” and security, alluding that bringing people online comes with significant responsibility, and if this is not met they may be put at risk.

Speaking at the BPF on Gender and Access session at IGF 2020, researcher Anri Van Der Spuy, who has been a part of the BPF since its early years, recalled that it was difficult to “get gender on the IGF agenda”. Although she felt this had improved, she still found that gender issues could be siloed with advocates experiencing specific barriers, for example, the group was targeted by trolls at the time of Gamergate⁸³ in 2015. Over the years since the creation of the BPF on Gender and Access in 2015, Van Der Spuy found that intersessional participation had decreased, she worried that only holding annual events could lead to tokenism. By contrast she recalled that initially the BPF Gender worked in a “bottom-up” process which involved collecting “valuable data and anecdotal evidence of the challenges that formed the digital gender gap”.

Bishaka Datta, executive director of feminist advocacy and research NGO Point of View claimed there has been “inadequate” gender reporting at the IGF. Speaking at the session titled “Effective policies for inclusive and prosperous digital transformation—what’s needed?” at IGF 2018, she stated that there had previously been more measurement, but found that this has reduced with “more than 50% of attendees not reporting gender”, and gender minorities not included in reporting (“Effective policies for inclusive and prosperous digital transformation—what’s needed?”, IGF, 2018). Bumi Durowoju from Microsoft expressed a similar feeling, claiming that to decrease inequalities “between men and women in terms of getting online” there needs to be “improved representation of women in policy design and programme design, as well as the inclusion of gender in qualitative metrics and evaluation plans” (“Main Session on Digital Inclusion and Accessibility”, IGF, 2018).

Gustavo Paiva, Vice-Coordinator of the Brazil IGF called for sessions to be held for LGBTQI persons at the IGF to act as an invitation for these groups to take part, he claimed this

⁸³ A campaign of hate against feminist activism in gaming and more broadly in digital technologies.

would be an important step for groups that have been “made to feel rejected in the past”. Chris Buckridge, Head of External Relations for the Réseaux IP Européens Network Coordination Centre (RIPE NCC) agreed, however, Buckridge felt that work must first be undertaken before inviting groups in—to prevent them experiencing harm—and suggested the sharing of “inclusion best practices” between organisations to help with this. Speakers in the session touched on barriers to LGBTQI participation, raising in particular the binary gender selection registration form at the IGF. Participants agreed that there also needs to be space for LGBTQI persons to talk about issues that do not relate to their gender or orientation as these perspectives are necessary on all topics.

Accessibility

Of the three consultations, the IGF sees the most significant work towards accessibility year on year, enabled by the Dynamic Coalition and Best Practice Forum. Sessions concerned with accessibility for persons with disabilities were poorly attended at the IGF meetings in Paris (2018) and Berlin (2019), later online events also saw comparatively low numbers of attendees. The Dynamic Coalition (DC) on Accessibility and Disabilities carries out intersessional work and held sessions at the IGF during the research period that included close examination of accessibility at the IGF. The 2018 DC meeting saw participants raise significant issues about accessibility to the venue, with one attendee who had mobility requirements describing how public transport to the venue had not been accessible, and that even after arrival at the UNESCO building the bathroom had not been accessible, meaning she had been forced to ask for help, an understandably distressing experience. Another attendee who had a visual impairment described how using his disability access pass to get through the queues for entry to the venue (which had built up due to strict security processes) had been particularly challenging as there were no provisions for assistance. He continued that the registration for the IGF did not have questions about disabilities, which meant that the organisers did not plan ahead to have adjustments and processes in place. He stated that the “IGF lacks knowledge on accessibility and only rich people with resources can attend”.

The move to an online IGF has had variable implications for accessibility of the conference. Disability rights activist Mohammed Shabir Awan, who has a visual impairment, shared how online events mean that he is able to participate more fully, and more easily, with less restriction over which events he can attend (“DC on Accessibility and Disabilities, IGF, 2020). However, provisions have been limited, as one speaker noted, pre-events which take place before the IGF’s official ‘day 1’ did not have captioning of audio, and further, captioning was not available at all in languages other than English. Judith Hellerstein, a member of the DC for Accessibility and Disabilities, raised that the online schedule was difficult to use for persons who use screenreaders, as software was not able to detect headings in the page content. Gunela Astbrink, a member of the MAG, shared that the BPF on Accessibility is supporting the development of a new IGF website to ensure its accessibility, with a view to the IGF being a model to other UN agencies. She added that this initiative has been strengthened by the source of the website funding, which is the UK government, who have accessibility requirements for the donation. Judy Okite added that inclusion initiatives must also be in place at national and regional IGFs, suggesting it might be easier to start at that scale. Okite had developed a survey to circulate amongst NRIs to understand their accessibility and was looking for support to circulate this.

The IGF in 2019 held a session titled “Internet accessibility empowering persons with disabilities” which was notably poorly attended, with about a quarter of the capacity of the room in use. The conversation involved considering how principles of “universal internet design” could be elaborated to ensure accessibility for persons with physical impairments, learning disabilities and learning difficulties⁸⁴. Panellists were in agreement that the IGF community should be doing more work to make the internet accessible for these groups.

Jorge Manhique, a program officer at Disability Rights Advocacy Fund who works in Malawi and Rwanda, stated that there needs to be involvement of persons with disabilities in the design of national policies for internet access to ensure they are inclusive, and that the resources for this should come from “universal service funds”. These are funds collected by

⁸⁴ Learning disability involves “reduced intellectual ability and difficulty with everyday activities – for example household tasks, socialising or managing money – which affects someone for their whole life”, a learning difficulty like dyslexia or dyspraxia does not “affect general intellect” (Mencap, n.d.)

government, often financed by mandatory contributions from telecommunications, towards expanding internet access (Thakur and Potter, 2018). Participants in the session agreed that accessibility is not just for persons with disabilities but makes internet services easier for everyone to use; although speakers argued for different avenues, with some looking to opensource software and others asking for government incentives to encourage companies or even developers directly. Shabir Awan argued that persons with disabilities need to be included early in design processes adding that when people approach him with a product which is complete, asking how to make it accessible he tells them to “tear it down” and start again, adding that “inclusive principles cannot be retrofitted”.

The following year’s RightsCon in 2020 saw a session that presented “The Africa ICT Accessibility and Disability Indicators” developed by the NGO Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa. Paul Kimumwe from the organisation described how the COVID-19 pandemic had made the need for work on accessibility more acute as people were made to look online for services that would have previously been in-person. Kimumwe stated that the guidelines were adapted from international accessibility standards for the African context where “disability rights are still developing”. He argued that companies do the “bare minimum” whilst Judy Okite from the Association for Accessibility and Equality in Kenya added, contending with technical and audio difficulties for the online session, that “many companies commit to doing work but at implementation they fall down” with “useless solutions” such as “captions in English when Kiswahili is being spoken”. She feels that “not including persons with disabilities in conversation leads to these oversights”. For Okite this work is pressing because disability impacts most people as we age, “sooner or later we will all have disabilities, ten years from now we will be the ones suffering”.

IGF 2020 too included a session looking at themes of accessibility as services moved online during the pandemic, with speakers marking complex and uneven differences. A doctoral candidate who is hard of hearing shared his experiences of online classes which enabled audio to be plugged directly into his hearing aid. Whilst this was a benefit, the downside was that if video was switched off he could not use lip-reading. Another participant described inequalities between children in education being exacerbated by remote school classes where the provision in the home is so varied (“Accessibility – closing the gap”, IGF, 2020).

Neurodiversity was a theme which was introduced to MozFest in 2019 when some focused sessions were added to the programme. By 2021 Leena Haque, a Wrangler for the space, was invited to the MozFest opening circle to talk about the theme and described how she had been involved in facilitating those initial sessions which had led to the development of the space. Prathamesh Chavan, a part of opensource software development company Red Hat led a session titled “The State of Tech for Neurodiversity” where attendees were invited to draw for thirty minutes with a view to demonstrating everyone’s cognitive differences before introducing a product specifically designed to help persons with dyslexia remember passwords.

“Neurospace”, another session which took place during the same year, saw researchers Vishal Kumar Pandey and Yash Chaubey, who were flown to London, UK from India to deliver a workshop, experience significant difficulties in sharing what they saw as “best practices” for supporting neurodivergent persons in workplaces. The presenters used what was described by audience members to be “derogatory” language to describe neurodivergent persons, for example, comparing neurodivergent persons to “normal people”. When challenged they seemed confused, and it felt as if the different use of language played at least part of the role in the problems that ensued. After this went on for about fifteen minutes there was a mass walk-out from the session; the audience of about twenty people had been majority persons with learning difficulties and disabilities who felt shocked and hurt by the facilitators.

I felt quite conflicted as the language used by the facilitators was certainly hurtful—I have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and dyspraxia—yet I would add that festival organisers had not adequately assessed the speakers. Speaking to the other attendees I found they were very upset, voicing that they had attended in search of a supportive space and found the opposite. Richard, who identified as a British man living with schizophrenia, felt that he needed to leave and go home. After some time, a senior festival organiser circulated to find out what had happened. After hearing what attendees had to say, he apologised and said that nothing in the application by the session facilitators had indicated the session would be this way. When asked if anyone with expertise in the area had been on

the programming team and he said no, there had not. This suggests that in this year MozFest’s visible commitment to ‘neurodivergent’ communities lacked depth or investment.

Accessibility for persons with disabilities seems to be most consistently addressed at the IGF, enabled by the capacity for activists and persons with lived experience to organise and work towards goals over time. By contrast the highly visible accessibility initiative at MozFest feels more like tokenism, lacking transparency regarding who is responsible and how the initiative has even come about.

Indigenous peoples

Discussion around access for Indigenous peoples does not see many dedicated sessions, although there is also mention in conversations concerned with access in rural areas. When this topic does appear the conversation is often infrastructural. At the IGF 2018 National and Regional Initiative (NRI) session—where speakers from national and IGFs congregate—titled “Access beyond Mere Connectivity”, Dustin Philips from the United States IGF spoke about First Nations speakers at IGF USA raising the infrastructural absences and shortcomings they were facing. Thinking about how to overcome this, the First Nation speakers had said that they “need to be at the centre” of policymaking to support their communities online and that “beyond access” there needs to be provision for developing literacy in the use of online services and tools.

The workshop “Innovative Approaches to Connecting Underserved Areas” (IGF, 2018) saw rural, remote and Indigenous communities represented with panellists agreeing that to improve connectivity in “underserved communities” approaches outside of those currently being used, namely, telecommunications companies providing connectivity through commercial incentives, would be needed. A participant from the region of Manitoba, Canada described that the climate and landscape in their context makes fibre expensive to fit, which deters companies who are not interested in paying these costs. The same participant posed community networks as an important tool for access in areas such as these, making use of spectrum; yet community network projects become embroiled with

distinctive cultural and political dynamics in these contexts, as Jane Coffin, a senior representative of Internet Society shared from her experience (“Equitable, sustainable community led networks”, IGF, 2019). Where funded externally, community networks may require data to be collected about the project to report to funders. This creates tension where members of local communities resist having data collected.

At MozFest 2018, the session “What Languages Do We Use Online? The Role of Indigenous Language Digital Activists” saw Rising Voices, a part of journalism non-profit Global Voices, focused on “digital inclusion” showcase a project called *Activismo Lenguas* (Language Activism). This project sees young people from Indigenous groups in Latin America invited and supported to produce Wikipedia pages in their own languages, in a bid to underscore the importance of linguistic diversity online and build examples of how Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities can work together to achieve this. Speakers raised points of resistance, for example, opposition to adding languages to Google Translate. The speaker felt this was a “colonisation of our language and culture”, adding “we opened our lands up, we don't want to open everything else up”. Since many language scripts do not have them, the process of generating an ISO639⁸⁵ code for a language was shared. Session hosts encouraged members of communities to request the code and shed light on the process which they described as requiring work, yet also being essential for the survival of languages, adding that this work could also support the resurgence of endangered languages.

RightsCon in 2019 saw two sessions held under the topic of “Indigenous Data Sovereignty” as what the RightsCon programme bills as “Solve My Problem” sessions that are designed to bring together diverse stakeholders to discuss a specific issue, which in this case was the tension between “open data principles”⁸⁶ and Indigenous Data Sovereignty (IDS) principles. Alejandro Mayoral Baños outlined Indigenous Data Sovereignty as including four elements: one, a recognition that IDS derives from rights to govern Indigenous resources; two, IDS has

⁸⁵ The International Standardisation Organisation (ISO) is responsible for processes that manage scripts online.

⁸⁶ These can be summed up as follows, that data should be: (1) open by default, (2) timely and comprehensive; (3) accessible and usable; (4) comparable and interoperable; (5) for improved governance and citizen engagement; and (6) for inclusive development and innovation (opendatacharter.net, 2015).

its genesis in traditional roles for the use of community-held information; three, it is positioned within a human rights framework; and four, these principles uphold that knowledge belongs to the collective and is fundamental to the identity of Indigenous peoples.

The session brought up different avenues to maintaining Indigenous Data Sovereignty; the use of intellectual property laws was problematised due to the need for registration to an individual or corporate entity, as any data is inherent and “mixed in” with other information, making it very difficult to extract and isolate for a formalised process. It was raised that it is a challenge to agree a route within communities that are heterogenous and share diverse views. Wikimedia representatives mentioned that perhaps the public domain could be an option for maintaining records of this data, however this was met with the response that “not all Indigenous knowledge is for the public domain, it is for the collective” by a presenting speaker⁸⁷. Facilitators of the session described Indigenous knowledge as being created in distinct ways and called for Indigenous technology that would enable the sharing of this between and amongst communities globally. Participants launched an Indigenous Working Group and committed themselves to contacting different regional and international Indigenous networks to invite members to policy consultations such as RightsCon. At the closing ceremony of RightsCon 2019, Access Now executive director Brett Soloman articulated that these sessions were RightsCon’s first foray into Indigenous issues, and further that, having proven successful, would lead to a more integrated space in the programme for Indigenous groups.

The following year, RightsCon Online in 2020 saw “Indigenous” emerge as a theme, and fourteen sessions were programmed in relation to it. One session saw Jessica Rosenworcel, Commissioner of the United States Federal Communications Commission in conversation with Darrah Blackwater, a Navajo Nation advocate for Indigenous spectrum⁸⁸ rights. Blackwater was at the time of the conference walking a route across Colorado to draw attention to the “digital divide” amongst Indigenous communities in the US. She described

⁸⁷ This speaker’s name is redacted to protect their privacy.

⁸⁸ Spectrum refers to the range of frequencies available for communications technologies that are licensed by governments.

lack of “connectivity” for these communities, and how under COVID-19 conditions this had specific implications, widening the “homework gap” that Indigenous children experience when they cannot access internet-based resources at home. She called for “tribal spectrum sovereignty” to build community networks⁸⁹, for Blackwater “spectrum is a national resource like oil and gas” (Blackwater, 2020). Earlier in 2020, when COVID-19 was creating significant disruption in the United States, Rosenworcel claimed that the government had opened up a window for First Nations peoples to claim 2.5GHz spectrum before it was offered to companies, Indigenous communities were suffering from the impacts of the pandemic. Rosenworcel claimed that she was “calling for more time for tribes to claim spectrum” because she feels that “not connecting everyone is an economic loss”, with which Blackwater agreed. The activist added that it was not simply the case that Indigenous peoples need the internet, rather the “internet needs Indigenous ideas, we are coming back to Indigenous ideas for healing, ceremony and for the environment”.

At the IGF, discussions regarding Indigenous communities tend to fall within discussions concerned with connecting rural areas. At RightsCon, there has been an explicit process to integrate these groups into the programme. Discussions see several sites of resistance come up: protecting community knowledge; preserving community data; conserving culture and languages; various struggles to be involved in policymaking; and struggle towards autonomy through community networks and demands for spectrum allocation.

Youth

Youth attendees across the consultations advocate strongly to organise on their own terms, yet this often involves having to engage with different youth schemes put in place as ‘inclusion’ measures. As I will open up further in Chapter 5, youth are at times side-lined on broader topics that do not relate directly to youth. Yet here is a strong feeling amongst youth activists that their specific experiences of the internet, as well as their significant stake in its future directions, makes them crucial participants in internet policy discussions.

⁸⁹ There is more detail on community networks later in the chapter, for now it is useful to say that it refers to locally organised groups, often supported by NGOs or external organisers that put in place and manage technical infrastructure.

Valerie Yiega from Youth IGF Kenya seeks to encourage young people to take part in internet governance discussions, stating that “each young person can bring who we are and what we do”, continuing that she has learned from being involved in the Digital Grassroots collective that “young people need to be there for each other” (“Designing inclusive spaces”, IGF, 2021). Jackie Akelo also from the Kenya Youth IGF agreed, adding that youth can bring specific skills such as their activity on social media, which can be used to target leaders and bring more youth into policy discussions.

Akelo called for governments to enlist youth in looking over draft policies to add their perspectives and expertise. Gabriel Karsan, an activist from Tanzania spoke directly to other young people; “bring who you are, leadership begins with you, who you are as an individual”. He described his experience of making use of fellowship programmes how going from one to the other has allowed him to continue to be present at internet governance consultations. The most significant benefit of this, according to Karsan, had been building solidarities and relationships with others.

Most of us have benefited from fellowships, and then I have done more. Most of us are friends, even arranging the sessions was from being friends not being part of some corporate org. We need to be open to dialogue, open sharing, always being able to build voices—we have responsibility of representation (“Designing inclusive spaces”, IGF, 2021).

Here it is clear that Karsan is calling for working within existing systems, making use of resources as much as possible, *as well as* doing things in another way that is more relational, based around friendship and not behaving like “some corporate org”, calling for youth to “bring who you are”. At the same time the fellowships and opportunities which are available are limited and met with far more demand from young people than is provided for, according to Noha Ashraf Abdel Baky, an Egyptian engineer who appears in Digital Grassroots’ film. She finds that there is a lack of resources allocated to engage youth in internet policy in her context, with few grants and funds available. For this reason, she goes

on to say that “in the Global South youth don't hear about what is happening” (“On This Side of the Web” screening, Mozilla Festival, 2021).

Whilst I go into more detail on youth organising in the following chapter, it is important to note here that youth advocate to participate at consultations on their own terms. This indicates resistance to being pigeon-holed, but also illustrates what I call a decolonial habitus, whereby the method of organising is a significant part of the activism itself.

4.5.4 Revisions to access

Meaningful access

There was a notable increase in the use of the terms “meaningful access”⁹⁰ and “meaningful connectivity” over the research period. This term was first observed mentioned by Carlos Rey Moreno, a member of Association for Progressive Communications (APC)⁹¹ at the “Main session on digital inclusion and accessibility”⁹² (IGF, 2018). Here Moreno states that:

equally important to support internet access is also to ensure that people have a meaningful access that can affect their lives for the better. It is, therefore, important to focus on not just technical aspects but also human aspects of connectivity.

This highlights a continual tension within all spaces, but drawn out in particular at the IGF, between moves to consider internet access in terms of connectivity—the technical capacity

⁹⁰ It is not clear from where this term emerges in internet governance discourse, in the literature it has some precedent as ‘meaningful access to information’ in libraries and legal scholarship (Anderson, 2016; Garrido and Fellows, 2017).

⁹¹ Association for Progressive Communications is membership organisation comprised of civil society organisations and individuals from across all continents. Their mission is to “create a just and sustainable world by harnessing the collective power of activists, organisations, excluded groups, communities and social movements, to challenge existing power structures and ensure that the internet is developed and governed as a global public good” (“About APC | Association for Progressive Communications”, n.d.). APC has funding from a wide range of sources, these include European governments, United Nations agencies, tech corporations and grant funders.

⁹² Conference themes are allotted a “Main session” at each global conference, in 2018 the one of “digital inclusion and accessibility” took place in one of the largest auditoriums during the middle day of the conference with attendees coming and going throughout.

for the internet to switch on to some degree—and a more expansive conceptualisation, bringing in social factors.

The following year at RightsCon in 2019, Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI)⁹³ hosted a session titled “Defining meaningful access: an expanded approach to connectivity”, led by Teddy Woodhouse. The focus of the session, which had fewer than ten attendees located in a room which was not big enough for many more, was to gather ideas to build a framework for “meaningful access”. During the discussion, attendees emphasised that no such framework can be socio-politically agnostic by taking the market-based system as fixed. However, despite these criticisms the eventual framework would be narrow and pragmatic in its scope, whilst also seeing a move to ‘meaningful connectivity’ instead of access. According to A4AI, meaningful connectivity is comprised of four minimum technical standards: “having a 4G mobile broadband connection; a smartphone; a fixed wired or wireless connection at work, home, or place of study; and using the internet every day” (Thakhur, Woodhouse and Jorge in Belli et al., 2020, p. 38).

An online session at 2020’s IGF titled “Community Networks at Times of Crises and Pandemics” saw Sonia Jorge, director of Alliance for Affordable Internet promoting the framework, asserting that there needs to be a move from seeing internet access as a “social good” to a “basic right”. This was in light of how people have been differently impacted by the pandemic in what she called the “divide” between the “poorly connected”, who are still counted as connected, and the “hyper-connected”.

Nicholas Echaniz representing Argentinian NGO AlterMundi⁹⁴, an Association for Progressive Communications (APC) member, was critical of the framework responding that there have been many previous versions of “meaningful connectivity” including “networks of

⁹³ Alliance for Affordable Internet is a membership organisation that includes corporations, governments, academia, civil society and grant funders advocating for “the policies needed to reduce the cost to connect and make universal, affordable internet access a reality for all” (Alliance for Affordable Internet, n.d.). It is part of and receives funding from the World Wide Web Foundation, whilst also having its own global sponsorship from Alphabet/Google and the Swedish government (Alliance for Affordable Internet, n.d.).

⁹⁴ AlterMundi describes itself as a “group of militants of free community networks and free software, who joined forces to form an NGO that facilitates the deployment of these networks in digitally excluded areas, contemplating the particular characteristics of our region” (translated from Spanish AlterMundi, n.d.)

determination” and “internet co-creation”. For Echaniz, what was not sufficiently considered by this and related discourse was that, rather than ‘access’, the discussion should be about the “co-creation” of the internet. He continued

usually we think what we need to do is provide access to everyone, and this access is mostly some concentrated information silos. [At AlterMundi] we believe we also need to de-concentrate the internet.

Echaniz argued that there is a difference between community networks, that “make the network meaningful for the local community” and connectivity from a “big telco”. Jorge responded that the framework too was “co-created” to contribute to “what people want” and that community networks are “complementary networks”. This exchange underscores Jorge’s position, which is not explicitly stated, as one which upholds the market-based setup of internet provision, as well as showing that of AlterMundi which is supportive of non-market options.

Valensiya Dresvyannikova from the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions criticised this formulation of meaningful access from the perspective of public access. She argued that everyone would not have individual devices for some time, making public access essential, especially for vulnerable groups including women, persons on low incomes and persons of colour, who make up most public access groups in the United States. She added that libraries which house public access are multifunctional spaces where staff can also help to build skills and support personal cost saving, noting, however, that public access spaces were hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic and require further policy support (“Community Networks at Times of Crises”, IGF, 2020).

During the 2021 IGF Youth Summit, which took place ahead of day zero of the IGF, a working group focusing on challenges to “universal access and meaningful connectivity” described barriers as: reliability, speed, cost, devices, digital literacy (across age groups), gender, disability, linguistic dominance of the Global North, safety (from harmful content), security (from crime) and knowledge equity and equal representation in internet governance processes. The working group’s idea of what they call meaningful connectivity is expansive,

going further than A4AI. Significantly they demand changes to internet governance processes as being necessary for universal access and meaningful connectivity, as outlined their Action Points (Appendix 4.j.) Some of these issues refer explicitly to youth representation, whilst many are broader in scope with an eye to global power inequities and how they can be addressed (points 1 and 2, Appendix 4.j), including accessibility for all, particularly those with no income or low income (points 4, 7 and 8, Appendix 4.j).

Internet commons

Conceptualisation of the internet as a commons, or a digital commons, appears at the fringes of discussion as a radical strategic goal, and has since 2021 also been taken up as a central part of the UN's Global Digital Compact (2021) process. Advocates for a more radical notion of the commons have organised as the Internet Commons Forum since 2019. In 2020 the group held a meeting at the global IGF where researcher Mélanie Dulong de Rosnay defined the commons as a

radical approach to organise collective action with social institutions to govern the reproduction of resources, articulated through interrelated legal, sociocultural, economic and institutional dimensions.

This is a model which centres collective benefit and collaborative governance of resources. She continued that 'digital commons' include

data, information, culture and knowledge created and/or maintained online with principles that foster access and counter enclosure.

Speaking at the Internet Commons Forum meeting in 2020, Renata Ávila Pinto added more specificity by sharing how commons principles have fallen prey to business interests. She stated that people across the Majority World "are the ones that should have been emancipated by internet but have been deprived from this", adding that the "corporatised internet has instead boxed these populations in, defaulting into consumption, surveillance and control". Recalling that she has been an activist in this field since she was 18 years-old,

Ávila Pinto traced how early advocacy for equal access to knowledge in the Majority World has transformed into “open data” norms which have allowed companies to “gather all the information they needed to produce profitmaking applications”. She reflected that “we were naïve in the first decade of the internet, things were going well because of hope”.

Ávila Pinto described this hope as having three aspects: one, the hope that connecting globally would create positive change; two, the hope that “platforms were outside corporate logics”; and three, the hope that there would be promising political applications for the internet in Majority World societies. She called for a return to this hope which she called “the future of our past” through advocacy for a digital commons. Ávila Pinto’s strategy involved bringing this idea to institutional settings: the World Trade Organisation, which she tactically noted will be headed by “a woman from the Global South”, Ngozi Okanjo-Iweala; the World Intellectual Property Organisation with a view to bringing back the principle of “open knowledge” not just “open data”, and finally Ávila Pinto called for action at the level of cities to partner with local governments to develop creative ways of working on knowledge sharing⁹⁵.

Again at the IGF 2022, speaking at another Internet Commons Forum convening, academic Luca Belli viewed the commons model as one that centres communities by allowing them to be “protagonists” who can “choose how they use technology” and in this sense have “network self-determination”. He continued that

the great difference between the commons and the other systems and models of governance is that the commons requires the community to understand and care about the shared interests, the shared resource that is managed, which sometimes cannot be economically quantified.

⁹⁵ Ávila Pinto is chief executive of NGO Open Knowledge Foundation, who state: “‘Open knowledge’ is any content, information or data that people are free to use, re-use and redistribute—without any legal, technological or social restriction.” They draw the distinction between knowledge as not personal and being useable by anyone, and data (Open Knowledge Foundation, n.d.).

Belli added that the value of commons have been “ignored by mainstream economics or governance studies”.

Parminder Jeet Singh from IT for Change argued for a transition from “openness” to “commons”: terms he finds tend to be “used interchangeably”. The commons, he continued, “need a legal system to keep them safe” as well as laws that mandate sharing of data kept behind walls in corporate settings. For Singh this is “not a theory or utopia” and he emphasised being realistic. Speakers agreed that the commons paradigm has been hard to push forward, and this they felt was likely related to distrust of the model by governments. Without government buy-in they agreed that the system is highly vulnerable to hijacking by companies and “commons washing”, where they use the term but do not embody the principles (“Internet Commons Forum”, IGF, 2020).

As mentioned earlier, 2022’s IGF saw discussions addressing the UN’s Global Digital Compact, consultations for which aim to develop “shared principles for an open, free and secure digital future for all” (United Nations, 2021, p. 63), a global normative framework for internet governance. The Compact takes as its starting point that the internet is part of the “digital commons” which is in need of protection (ibid.). Speaking to the Internet Commons Forum, Association for Progressive Communications member Anriette Esterhausen saw the Compact as an opportunity to “harmonise” values and principles in a broad sense, through conceiving of the internet as a commons, valuing in particular that the Compact be developed in an “open way”.

The implications of the commons becoming a part of mainstream language at the IGF remain to be seen. This might indicate a normative shift on the one hand, although, without requisite changes in legal frameworks and trade agreements this does not feel likely. On the other hand, it may mean a depoliticization and co-option of the term.

Community networks

Community networks are a topic that has seen rapidly growing interest over the research period, with particularly focussed discussions taking place at the IGF. Community networks

are generally viewed as a 'solution' that can be used to connect areas which have not been connected to fibre networks by telecommunications companies. These tend to be rural, remote regions with geographies that would require significant infrastructural investment.

In the session "Innovative Approaches to Connecting Underserved Areas" taking place at IGF 2018, panellists were all individuals engaged directly with community network development. The importance of community consultation and collaboration was emphasised by all speakers as being a key to successful "internet development", alongside the education and training of local people to maintain the network and ensure sustainability. The speakers raised that insufficient "backhaul", which refers to a point of access to the internet from which a community network can develop, and lack of access to "spectrum", which refers to the range of frequencies available for communications technologies that are licensed by governments, are factors which can significantly inhibit community networks. They advocated for governments to open up spectrum access for the purpose of "community connectivity".

Mozilla Fellow Bruna Zanolli shared experiences of connecting five community networks in Brazil during a session at MozFest 2019. For her this work is necessary to resist "colonial legacies of communication". Zanolli explained "when we state that the internet is a colonial space it begins with the infrastructure". Showing a map of internet connectivity, then a telegraph map and then router activity, Zanolli indicated that the same places are unconnected. She continued that "we shouldn't ask how can we connect the next billion but how can they connect themselves". The benefits of a community network, for Zanolli in places like the remote Amazon, where she has worked, are that they can facilitate local intranet, which avoids having to deal with the expense of data unless absolutely necessary. Communities have more control and can connect to the global internet more selectively, a capacity which is particularly important for Indigenous groups (Zanolli, 2019).

Association for Progressive Communications representatives highlighted gendered aspects of community network development, noting that these are an important tool for connecting rural areas where populations include "more women than men" ("Workshop on equitable, sustainable community led networks", IGF, 2019). The session brought up the specific

challenges that rural women in different Majority World contexts encounter in developing and maintaining community networks, with six women speaking, each of whom has been involved with their own network. The panellists argued that traditional measures of internet access fail to identify the benefits that women experience as creators of community networks, which go beyond economic benefits.

At IGF 2020 the session titled “Community Networks at Times of Crises and Pandemics” ran on the premise that during the COVID-19 pandemic internet access has become more important, and community networks should be considered as a key method by which unconnected communities can be brought online. Here Jane Coffin, senior vice president at Internet Society stated that to connect everyone the internet must work “in a pyramid with a broad base of networks”, these should be developed “with not for people”. Coffin shared her belief that there was work to be done to help governments and corporations realise that “community networks are not strange”.

At the same IGF 2020 session, Senka Hadzic from Research ICT Africa shared that after not having not released spectrum for a decade, the South African government became more flexible during the pandemic and made more spectrum available for a temporary period. She argued that this led to “no benefits for end users” as it was “no cheaper and did not connect more people”. Hadzic stated that community networks require much more after spectrum allocation is freed up, adding that in spite of challenges spectrum must be assigned to localities to prevent being taken up by urban areas. Carlos Rey Moreno saw a conflict emerging from the pandemic over who connects rural areas as the primacy of telecommunications companies faces challenge. Moreno stated that changes could already be seen amongst Latin American contexts in discussions over complementary access development, whilst the African Union had recommended that countries adopt community networks to expand connectivity (Moreno, 2020).

For Nicholas Echaniz from AlterMundi, community networks are an opportunity to move from “internet access” to “internet co-creation” to “de-concentrate the internet”. He described having been involved with the development of fifteen community networks in Argentina in projects that were funded by Association for Progressive Communications and

Internet Society leading to changes in government policy. Internet Society representative Michuki Mwangi shared that rural fibre networks do not pass “commercial viability boundaries” which means that there need to be alternatives and complementary methods for backhaul channels in rural areas, calling for the development of a global framework that countries can adopt to resource community networks with public money (“Workshop on Community Network, Electricity and Digital Inclusion”, IGF, 2020).

There is a spectrum of approaches to community networks, ranging from using them as workarounds for lack of infrastructure to more political arguments. The latter views see community networks giving local communities more control over their relationship to the internet, whilst also upskilling communities so they are involved in internet co-creation.

Decolonising politics

Proponents of heterogenous decolonising politics are present at all of the research sites, however, when it comes to the explicit language of “decolonising” this is much more readily visible in programmes at MozFest and RightsCon. Decolonising politics are targeted at different issues including powerful corporations, as well as US and Chinese influence and Global North influence more broadly.

MozFest 2018 saw a session on “Internet Imperialism” which featured artist Gretchen Andrew who argued that Google/Alphabet has become the arbiter of definition because when people search for a term and look at the images that come up, this is what defines the term. She thinks that this usually benefits companies and their products over “people” and “communities”. Her work involved trying to take over the image search results for the phrase “made for women” by setting up profiles and pages on various websites. At Mozfest 2021, researcher Sarah T. Roberts claimed that “tech has colonised the public sphere”, giving the example of YouTube’s branding as a “library”. “Real libraries” she continued, “do not collect data or spread disinformation”, arguing that there must be work to “stop ceding spaces and imaginaries to tech companies” who get to “define the problems and the answers”.

Corporate dominance is also criticised at IGF 2020 where researcher Deborah James asserted that “COVID-19 exposes and exacerbates big tech’s influence on our lives”, which is why she feels there has been increased call for changes to trade treaties, the World Trade Organisation and the ways in which “tech behemoths” are being under-regulated. Nandini Chami from IT for Change argued that the “Californian ideology is losing ground, replaced by calls for regulation of big tech” continuing that “anti-statism and techno-utopianism” used to be unquestioned dogma even in digital policy circles. Researcher Sofía Scasserra agreed that in Latin America the “digital colonialism” of US and Chinese companies prevents the building of local technologies as they “get bought up by big companies”. However, Chami added that there must be a move away from criticising “big tech” in terms of monopolies or human rights, views she finds have been “subordinated to capitalist logics”. Similarly, Chami argued that “data nationalism” as resistance to foreign companies needs to be avoided in favour of being “people-centred” (“The Digital Justices Conversations”, IGF, 2020).

MozFest 2019 saw a session titled “Decolonising Tibet” where activists shared their experiences of using the internet to create community around Tibetan diasporic art, particularly through their blog “*High Peaks, Pure Earth*” whilst dealing with censorship and surveillance by the Chinese government. The session involved discussing strategies for maintaining these connections even whilst using tools like WeChat which have oversight of governmental agencies. This is a session that could not appear at the IGF considering the critical stance on Chinese colonialism in Tibet.

At RightsCon 2020 Harry Halpin, representing company Nym Technologies, hosted a session titled “Resisting cybercolonialism and authoritarianism with privacy technology” inspired by an article by Nym co-founder George Danzeis who, according to Halpin, has since joined the “dark side at Facebook Libre”. “Cybercolonialism” is defined by Danzeis as forcing a “a choice between foreign cyber-domination and technologically staying in the 20th century” (“The dawn of Cyber-Colonialism”, 2014) and it is this tension that the session took as its starting point, with Halpin asserting that activists are reliant on tools which are compromised by surveillance. He reflected that “perhaps we were naïve to think that the internet was going to democratise the world” arguing that “liberation will not come from

the Global North but from Mexico, Kurdistan and Africa and the Global South, they will build new types of technology”. Renata Ávila Pinto appearing here again agreed:

We were idiots believing this narrative of internet for good, internet for development, internet for democracy, internet for media diversity. It was very naive for many of our communities to believe that this was the ultimate goal.

She continued that it is “our moral duty as progressives” to change direction, as only half the world is connected and the damage can be undone with “decentralisation and autonomy at its core”. Ávila Pinto feels that

we have neglected basic pieces of infrastructure, we have innovated very little on the physical layers and technical layers—we need funding, public policy and global consensus to get that fixed.

Over the research period Artificial Intelligence (AI) has become an increasingly prominent topic across consultations, becoming a focus for decolonising activists too. At MozFest 2021 Nighat Dad argued that AI gives corporations and governments with power “infinitely more” adding that the “knowledge of the Majority World is being transferred to the West and then developed through Western design”. As part of this she criticised the “free labour” involved in “sitting on panels” when “we don’t know what decisions are being taken” adding that it is very rare for a Woman of Colour to have a say in AI.

Decolonising politics are prominent in sessions that focus on languages and knowledge online. At RightsCon in 2020 the session titled “Challenges for linguistic minorities on the internet” saw speakers challenge Wikimedia Foundation, who host many of the conversations around this topic, and their aim to “house the sum of human knowledge”, as Wikimedia representative Jan Gerlach put it. Viviana Range representing NGO Fundación Karisma spoke to argue that “Wikipedia is unfit to house, for example, oral knowledges and by excluding this will always privilege knowledge from cultures with written traditions”. Andrea Itxchiu from Comunicadora Comunitaria added that “for many of us who use internet we don't get a say in how its run” continuing that we “need to reimagine internet

using the idea of decolonising the internet”. Conversations around language in Itxchiu’s experience are “mostly closed and technical” meaning that not everyone can participate. Itxchiu called for more space to train developers from their contexts so that they can create Indigenous-led technologies. However, they continued, this is not without contention as Indigenous communities have difficult relationships with technologies that are made with materials which hurt the environment and “create wars and conflict in our spaces”, adding “we cannot separate speaking on the internet from denouncing these actions”.

4.6 Summary

Both IGF and RightsCon emphasise multistakeholder participation in their processes of organisation along the lines of the recommendations of the Working Group on Internet Governance (WGIG) (2005, p. 4), that is with representation from governments, the private sector and civil society. Additionally, both report annually on representation from these groups, with RightsCon’s reporting mimicking the format established by the IGF. MozFest does not make an explicit claim to multistakeholderism in this regard, although organisers do articulate the communities they wish to bring together to include artists, technologists, makers and activists (Mozilla, 2021). IGF tends to seek multistakeholder representation at the level of the session, RightsCon generally aims for the same but also allows for this to be balanced across the programme, meaning there can be some sessions that solely feature commercial, governmental or civil society participants. Feminist and Majority World activists have sought greater representation in these spaces leading organisers to instigate demographic allocations alongside the sectoral allocations described above. Session proposals for both consultations are required to show representation in their line-ups and a lack of regard on either side can be detrimental to proposals in the selection process.

The research has shown that these allocations practised broadly, as in the case of MozFest, or specifically in what is termed multistakeholderism, fail to ensure a range of perspectives are heard on what WGIG aspired to be “equal footing” (2005, p. 11). The instrument for internet governance consultations which came from the WGIG, IGF, makes little provision to ensure diverse views are aired equally; in fact the IGF system studiously ignores stark power differences between participants and their implications for consultative processes. As such

it is a fictive notion that actors who hold radically different positions within the colonial matrix of power can somehow become equal in this forum. Multistakeholderism thus offers a mask of broad participation and consultation, effectively acting as a cover for the maintenance of power asymmetries in internet governance (Ali, 2018, p. 110). In this light it is not a surprise that policy analysis work shows limited deviation from visions of a market-based, Global North-led internet at the consultations.

None of the consultation organisers consider or take measures to acknowledge different levels of influence at play amongst actors. Sessions run by youth and newer entrants, including women, receive less attention and attendance. By contrast those who are well-networked, with longstanding participation are able to benefit from unrecorded benefits such as better scheduling and timing decisions for their sessions. These are the intricacies of the first mover advantage enjoyed by Global North companies, governments and civil society, which none of the consultations look to problematise. To call this into question would, after all, involve problematising the positions of the three consultations themselves. MozFest and RightsCon assert themselves as ‘shapers’ of the agenda on internet governance and policy, and as “premiere” and “leading” meetings. At the same time, they communicate as facilitators and ‘platforms’ obscuring their own moves to power. By contrast, the IGF is able to rely on the legitimacy conferred it by the Mandate and its association to UN agencies.

Hard-won calls for representation can play a role in maintaining the status quo. Incumbent powerholders work strategically, choosing not to attend certain sessions, thereby undermining or cancelling them, or they can be in the room to shift discussions in their favour. Women, Majority World and marginalised representatives may be selected by governments, corporations and civil society actors that have little investment in social justice for these groups. This is particularly apparent with the appearance of women corporate executives who are interested in integrating rural women into digitally networked capitalist processes. Similarly, certain figures appear numerous times across all of the consultations as they fit the requirements of appearing different whilst not veering discursively far, thus conferring a sort of legitimacy to discussions for the group they are representing.

Mozilla Festival and RightsCon are not required to be accountable, since there is little transparency in how they are run. These events also do not build in ways for communities to retain a space year on year, and build on their work over time. The IGF Mandate requires the IGF to continue to develop its processes and instruments, with an onus to show how improvements are being made. The Best Practice Forums (BPFs) further enable this by bringing together communities of interest that can be sure they will have a space to meet. Dynamic Coalitions (DCs) play the same role for specific topic areas, enabling continuity.

Facing activism and critique, the organisers of consultations have made skin-deep changes to how issues are discussed, reflecting similar dynamics in the literature which I have already flagged. Scholarship has shifted from considering internet access in terms of a binary on/off configuration, with moves towards taking into account social factors of inequality and their relationship to the technical (van Dijk, 2006; Warschauer, 2002), leading to a move from ‘the digital divide’ to ‘digital inclusion’ (DiMaggio and Hargittai, 2001). This is born out in observations at internet governance consultations where the idea of “meaningful connectivity” and the related idea of “meaningful access” have been promoted by A4AI, and have circulated increasingly over the research period.

These shifts in scholarship and in the research sites may show some surface-level difference, yet they still centre technical access, embodying technosolutionism. The idea of what is ‘meaningful’ does not touch the multifarious, gendered inadequacies or disparities of power shaping contemporary world communications. The meaningful connectivity tool rather intervenes as an overseer of what consumers should be able to expect. Without denying that for some these minimum standards may be beneficial, it is certainly not the case for everyone. Updates like ‘meaningful access’ cultivate market opportunities blinkered from concerns with global social justice. These moves illustrate the claim I have made in Chapter 2 that access is fundamentally a limited concept which serves to invite as benevolence, latter-connected peoples to a space set up for consumption, not creation, with redistricted autonomy or opportunity for collective benefit (Ávila Pinto, 2018, p. 18). Targeted efforts to include specific groups that come up at MozFest, RightsCon and the IGF are similarly

restricted in their imagination, with very little serious discussion that reconsiders the geopolitical set-up of the internet as a whole.

Visions of internet universality map onto precursor models of so-called development—even the minimum standards for meaningful connectivity are paltry in comparison to Northern connection quality—blatant double standards are commonplace. Majority World participants look to highlight the specific challenges of their contexts including the behaviour of Northern corporations who fail to acknowledge local needs, and perhaps in this way find solidarities. As will be discussed more in Chapters 5 and 6, multistakeholderism inhibits the conversations that can happen without incumbent powerholders in the room, and delegitimises spaces where these actors choose not to show up for their own strategic reasons. Efforts to include specific groups at consultations illustrate tokenism, as demonstrated by Brett Solomon’s ‘show your hands’ exercise at RightsCon Toronto in 2018, and by MozFest’s backfired attempt at a neurodiversity programme. These give an impression of visible difference without relinquishing control. Yet as shown by the mass walk-out from the MozFest session about neurodivergence, there is resistance and opposition to tokenism.

Among the groups that illustrate the insufficiency of access agendas are Indigenous communities and persons with disabilities who open up other visions of futurity. Indigenous activists at the consultations assert their right to have control over their relationship to ICTs generally, and to the internet specifically. Even in this decoupling of ICTs from the internet, which allows for localised networks, decolonising perspectives open up options outside of received wisdoms. Indigenous participants insist on community knowledge being reserved for the collective, rather than being drawn-up into a global knowledge store, stopping Wikimedia’s claims to innocence in their tracks and taking seriously, based on historical precedent, that these are processes of extraction (Tuhiwai Smith, 2013, p. 41). Activists with disabilities reject being an afterthought in design practices, demanding they be included at the earliest stages. This spans the creation of online tools and services generally, tools for online participation in internet governance consultations specifically, and options for participating in these events too. As such, disability activists’ demands provide a clear line that breaks down offline/online binarization.

By contrast, the prevailing narrative regarding women's access to the internet, particularly in the Majority World, involves facilitating women's participation in the capitalist economy in ways that are continuous with the Information and Communications for Development (ICT4D) paradigm (Gurumurthy, 2017; McCarrick and Kleine, 2019). Whilst there are certainly feminists at all consultations that reject this developmentalist model (as well as those that support it), it is extremely rare to see discussions where alternative visions for gender justice can be articulated and worked towards. Efforts to increase representation of women at internet governance consultations have been very successful. However, as a member of the BPF Gender noted (IGF 2020), a decrease in intersessional work endangers grassroots engagement, perhaps fostering tokenism when it comes to the annual meeting. Another member flagged a decline in gender reporting from participants at IGF. These changes reflect what Ahmed calls a process of "overing" (Ahmed, 2013), whereby an issue which has been ostensibly 'dealt with' gets put aside. Even with diverse genders represented there remains a need for far more nuanced feminist discussions that go beyond simply having some women in the room. The visibility of women in these spaces can easily be weaponised to foreclose such discussion, leading to diminished development of feminist options for internet access outside of market orthodoxy.

It tends to be only in the circumstances of rural and Indigenous communities where activists and NGOs are able to negotiate some discursive room for local agency over what connectivity should look like as an 'exception to the rule'. These are models that are far distant from being taken seriously as mainstream options. The option of community networks has become more prominent over the research period, generally offered as a 'complementary' way to connect rural areas. Inequalities in rural and urban access see finger-pointing between government and corporate representatives. Some telecommunications companies welcome community networks, since they do not find connecting rural communities to be sufficiently lucrative. However, regulation of spectrum is found by commercial and NGO advocates of community networking to be limiting; conversations rarely include government representatives that can impact national policy around this. An influential group of advocates for community networks have become

increasingly vocal about their utility for rural and Indigenous populations, bolstered by their connection to the Association for Progressive Communications.

Having examined the gatekeeping processes that manage the selected consultations, and considering some ways in which terms are set and agendas are shaped with relation to access, in the following two chapters I turn to youth and feminist activists and their experiences navigating and negotiating these terms.

5. AFRICAN YOUTH ACTIVISTS

5.1 Introduction

The United Nations, the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) and their global development objectives centre access to the internet to be a cornerstone of economic development in African nations (Chair and De Lannoy, 2018, p. 14). Increases in mobile internet access play a major part of the “Africa Rising” narrative which has been a significant part of development rhetoric since the turn of the millennium, relating to economic growth on the continent purportedly ‘taking off’. With a view to ‘correcting’ depictions of an African continent which is somehow backwards, (Wyche and Olson, 2018, p. 42) this narrative carries many of the same hallmarks of othering, dressed up in fresh techno-determinist clothing. As the world’s youngest region (Rocca and Schultes, 2020) young Africans are brought into market-making strategies as leaders of the charge, with the ITU marking them as ‘early adopters’ of internet services and applications ahead of their elders (Chair and De Lannoy, 2018, p. 14).

In this chapter, research collaborators are demonstrated as charting their own paths within these broader politics, through not only their advocacy, but equally through ways of being. The activists recognise, as decolonising scholars have theorised, that the continent is seen as a lucrative market and an “untapped source” of minerals, labour and culture (Iyer et al., 2021, p. 6). They organise in the face of these politics as groups that converge around a number of shared identities, as persons who know about and are optimistic about the internet, as youth, as Africans, and as persons who locate themselves within the Global South or Majority World, sharing a decolonising politics which stakes a claim as “co-authors” of the internet’s goods (Mavhunga, 2017, p. 18).

Youth participation initiatives have become more prominent over the research period, at the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) in particular, which has hosted a global Youth IGF programme annually since 2011. At MozFest there is a “Youth Zone” targeted at children and young adolescent attendees, whilst at RightsCon there is a Youth Summit taking place

over a day before the main conference as of 2022. Within the IGF system 'youth' refers to persons aged between 13 and 35 years-old, however, it is important to note that the identification 'youth' can be self-identified or defined by others as individuals' age might be 'young', but they may not identify with a 'youth' position (Tjahja and Fonseca, 2023, p. 2).

Youth can face significant challenges when it comes to accessing internet governance consultations including: administrative and visa requirements (like getting a passport or the first visa to travel to a given location); gendered restrictions relating to travel and internet use; the costs of devices and data if participating remotely; and the need to organise attendance for themselves, rather than it being arranged by an employer, with young people three times more likely to be unemployed than over-35s (Chair and De Lannoy, 2018, p. 13). Youth who are also new to these spaces have to contend with challenges of finding information about ongoing discussions (Tjahja and Fonseca, 2023, p. 5) and seeking out people to connect with. Further, the transitory nature of youth identity, and thus activism, can lead to issues in continuity (ibid., p. 6). Youth is a transitory identification, and the point at which individuals choose to change how they identify varies relating to many factors such as education, life experiences and family situation (ibid., p. 2). Whilst the activists engaged in the research continued to hold this identification by the end of the study, they regularly alluded to a time when they would no longer be youth. As such, organising as youth has a particular time-sensitivity to it, which other identifications, that are more stable over time, do not have.

This chapter presents three cases, each of which follows a particular group of research collaborators as they engage with the organisers of MozFest, the global IGF and RightsCon. As well as operating across different sites, these cases also bring together varied scales: activist groups range from independent individuals to formalised collectives, intervening as part of organising teams (Pat and Sam), as applicants looking to take part (Parte Afta Parte) and as session facilitators and hosts (Digital Grassroots and Parte Afta Parte).

5.2 Pat and Sam: volunteering with Mozilla Festival

The first case looks at the experiences of Pat and Sam⁹⁶ who are young women looking to build careers in tech policy as they volunteer with Mozilla Festival (MozFest). The two share experiences of being part of the organising team of MozFest, as part of processes that are outlined in Chapter 4. The two describe their experiences and negotiations for access for themselves and for their communities in these roles. Following Sam and Pat ‘off-stage’ from MozFest, after the events have ended, allows the two interviewees to share their experiences having had some time to process them, whilst they reflect on what was happening ‘back-stage’ at MozFest 2021. The discussions bring up a range of contradictions behind an organisation which visibly associates itself with social justice taking, as shown in the previous chapter, whilst assuming a ‘shaping’ and ‘leading’ position that accrues power rather than cedes it.

5.2.1 Workload for MozFest volunteers

Both Sam and Pat describe a very heavy workload involved with being a Wrangler in 2021, over and above what they were expecting based on information from MozFest staff (2021a). They note that due to all the work, from training, to organising and the festival itself, being carried out online they had to fit responsibilities around their usual at-home and work routines, rather than disengaging from everyday activities to travel elsewhere. What had drawn both interviewees into the role had been what they saw as an opportunity to connect with likeminded people and promote their own projects. The two see MozFest as a ‘unique’ space where they can support their communities—other young women and people from the Majority World—to gain better understanding of internet policy, and further make useful connections to pursue their interests and careers. They see their role to involve bringing more young African women, and young people from the Majority World, into the community now that they have some access themselves.

⁹⁶ As I have mentioned these are pseudonyms which were selected by each of the activists for themselves.

Pat and Sam describe a tension between wanting to make the best of being given this role by Mozilla, and at times feeling overwhelmed by having to balance MozFest responsibilities with other demands of their work and lives—especially against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic (2021a). Both interviewees are reliant on project-based incomes and so felt a pressing need to maintain earnings alongside delivering the MozFest work. Reviewing the professional profiles of other Wranglers, which are held on the MozFest website, indicates that these issues are likely to affect some Wranglers more than others; many carry out the work as a part of other paid employment (“Wranglers”, n.d.). The role is voluntary, with an honorarium of 1200 USD, less the transfer banking fee applied to make transfers out of the United States paid after the festival has taken place. “I did not think [the honorarium] was proportional”, shares Sam when describing the fee and the workload (2021b). Pat states that “a lot of us earn differently, in different parts of the world” with reference to what she sees as inequity of earnings between Wranglers and the US-based Mozilla staff (2021b). She adds “the staff are really nice people and it feels like adding to their burden to bring that up” as a reason why she did not feel comfortable raising what she saw as her labour being under-paid relative to that of the San Francisco team whilst they were working together.

MozFest’s website describes this way of organising as their own distinct “Federated Design Principles”, defined as

MozFest is shared by design. Mozilla gives Wranglers driving lessons, and then hand them the keys to the car. In turn, they chart a map that Facilitators use make the schedule come to life. Those Facilitators then take participants on a ride that inspires them to take action in their own local communities. And the Volunteers are the mechanics that ensure our adventure runs smoothly each step of the way
(“Wranglers”, n.d.).

This description of how the process of organising the festival is envisioned underlines the strong rhetoric inclusion, alongside the assumption of leadership by Mozilla. The idea that Wranglers need “driving lessons” from Mozilla before they can have the keys undermines that Wranglers are the ones designing the festival and sharing their knowledge and labour for minimal payment. The illusory notion of ‘handing over the keys’ masks the shaping

role Mozilla plays with regards to which topics are selected and how they get addressed. Mozilla is dictating the agenda through choosing who gets “the keys” and by giving “driving lessons”, and through selectively sharing the spotlight and their resources.

As well as being a Wrangler, Pat was also selected as an ‘Ambassador’. These are individuals who are tasked with “diversifying” the MozFest community by bringing in people from different contexts. To be considered as an Ambassador requires an application through the website and according to Pat, those who work within target communities, and with broad networks are selected. Ambassadors have to “write a blog and publish weekly on social media and this is not paid but done in our own time”, says Pat, who feels that these responsibilities should have been taken on by the paid Mozilla staff, “this would not compromise on the goals of drawing in particular communities” she adds (2021b). Sam feels that “the Wrangling process should have ended once we selected the sessions and the staff could have gone further with the organisation”, referring to the scheduling duties she had to take on. When it became clear that there were expectations with regards to these additional duties Pat describes thinking about the possibility of quitting, in the end she felt she could not go through with it though, sharing that her thought process was “we have a contract, we can’t pull out” (2021b). Sam adds “It was a lot of work, they always tried to make it a soft landing but I don't think it was. I was overwhelmed and I realised I could not participate in the festival” (2021b). Pat was unable to attend the sessions that she wanted to during the festival because she was either working as a Wrangler, struggling to catch up on other paid work or just too exhausted (2021b).

Mozilla is in a powerful position, being well-resourced with funds and benefitting from its long history of operation and the benefits of reputation. Both interviewees describe putting in a huge amount of work to continue to exist in Mozilla’s orbit, Pat feels that without unpaid work and trying to break into networks like that of Mozilla “you really can’t get into [the internet policy] space” (2021a). Pat chose not to take another Wrangler position in 2022, as she did not feel able to give up the time required, however, she remained involved as an Ambassador in 2022’s festival (Email from Pat, 2022). She was also selected to receive

a grant from Mozilla through another scheme to which she applied, to carry out a creative project. This indicates how staying in Mozilla's orbit can lead to further opportunities, however, this remains contingent, needing more application and selection processes. Sam stayed on as a Wrangler in 2022, finding that the recruitment of more Wranglers that year helped distribute the workload somewhat, yet made the whole process feel less communal with some members "only attending meetings" and not contributing further (Email from Sam, 2022). In the absence of pay, community and visibility are important ways in which the work is justified for Sam, when these were diminished by adding more Wranglers it shifted how she saw the position, and how she made sense of taking it on.

5.2.2 'Inclusion' processes

Mozilla's communications increasingly commit to including better representation of groups that might have been historically excluded at the festival, particularly since the Addendum was added to the Manifesto (Mozilla Foundation, 2018), a strategic shift I discuss in Chapter 4. Sam finds Mozilla to be "big on inclusion" and suggests that the Wrangler structure of the festival has been put in place to enable inclusion of issues that might be missed by staff who do not experience them: "organisers of Mozilla Festival understood they could not understand [my] region so they brought in people from those places to share". Acting as the intermediary between communities from her context and Mozilla staff left Sam feeling confused about her responsibilities.

At the start it was confusing. The community was usually Northern American and European and it wasn't clear which of your opinions would be welcomed. You have to be true to yourself and think about reflecting your community. It was largely up to me [to bring up my communities] but if not then it was not addressed (Sam, 2021a).

Sam felt worried about how hard she could push the conversation, and ask for what she felt necessary, dominated as it was by "Northern American and European" voices. She notes that when she did speak up about something she was "mostly met with support" by other Wranglers also located in Majority World contexts, however the cultural underpinnings of organising meetings felt uncomfortable, with an adversarial tone required of her. Sam felt it

was “triggering” when she had to “defend or represent [her] region”, which was frequently, since there were not many people speaking from her context and thus sharing her concerns.

When it came to inviting participants, given that the event was solely online, Pat felt that much more consideration needed to be given before seeking to invite people to participate for whom there are limits with regards to software operability on their mobile devices and cost of data. She detected amongst the MozFest team a desire to think about having all kinds of people take part, but “a lack of imagination” when it came to considering the varied circumstances of life under which they may live. She advocated for a ‘connectivity fund’ to make attending more affordable where data is costly. Sam found that US-based organisers made assumptions based on their own experiences that inform the design of the online sessions.

Even in organising people they were thinking about all these new platforms but no one considered people from underrepresented regions. This was not thought through, I needed to think about connectivity on mobile for people from my region. Everyone in the organising community already had good connectivity. In my work I want to bring more diverse people online—those who would not ordinarily be. I would think would the average Global South person be able to do this? (Sam, 2021b).

As an Ambassador Pat is responsible for bringing people she knows to hold sessions at the festival as facilitators, however, she felt uncomfortable inviting members of her communities to MozFest, fearing they may not be treated as she would like. Pat was concerned that if she invited a prominent figure from her region for a session they may not be known by the audience, resulting in low session attendance. Whilst this was fine according to the Mozilla ethos, which as I have mentioned in Chapter 4, emphasises informality and carrying on regardless if the session has few attendees or many, Pat did not feel comfortable asking busy and high-status individuals to volunteer their time only for the festival staff not to have sufficiently promoted their event.

The people who came from our region were mostly people I know, this was good but also bad. I felt like it was up to me to bring my community to this space, I felt a bit of

pressure to bring people into the space. Having someone who is already doing a lot have to stay for one session for only a small number of attendees, maybe because it was not promoted enough by staff made me think whose responsibility was it? We were told it did not matter how many people turn up (Pat, 2021b).

Pat and Sam feel like they are being put into awkward positions in their work, be that being called upon to represent vast and heterogenous contexts amongst fairly homogenous groups, or being asked to take on the social implications of inviting people they know into a space with different cultural values.

5.2.3 Session selection for MozFest

The session selection process is the responsibility of the Wrangler teams for each thematic area, or Space using MozFest's language, which are made up of two to three people. For Sam, the selection process as it was in 2021 seemed to benefit some applicants over others.

When selecting sessions we had to think about how people scored. People who submitted applications got given a score on their idea. That's not equal, that's not fair. People from US and Europe will of course submit 'better' ideas. If we take the best 25 or 50 that will not be inclusive of African regions. We need to consider regions, I said, to make it more inclusive. I don't think that has happened. Selections at least in my space were still based on 'quality' submissions. The staff claim not to control [the selection process] but the Wrangler still has to check with the core [Mozilla staff] team (Sam, 2021b).

There is no consideration within the scoring system of its cultural situatedness; this is immediately apparent to Sam, who argues that formalised application processes benefit applicants familiar with these types of systems, whilst disadvantaging those who operate in culturally different ways. In 2022, Sam's Wrangler team—whose Space was focused on decolonisation—chose not to accept any applications for sessions by applicants in the Global North, and only selected those run those who identify as “Black, Indigenous or People of Colour”. This saw fewer applications being submitted overall, less than half what

Sam had seen the previous year when she was part of a Space which had accepted applications from all regions.

Sam feels that the issues prioritised by Wranglers located in the Global North, and Mozilla's staff team do not match with the interests of her community and region. Whilst she feels that in her context "topics related to access", including "digital skills, infrastructure, and inclusion issues" are major priorities, these are treated as if they had "already been dealt with" by Mozilla staff who want to focus on Artificial Intelligence. As outlined in Chapter 4, MozFest has focused on Artificial Intelligence as a theme since 2019. Here the rhetoric and the actions of Mozilla staff seem to go in different directions. On the one hand, staff encouraged Sam and others to bring issues relevant to their regions, on the other they seemed disinterested in taking them forward, impelled by wanting to look at "something new". Sam finds these moves to be perplexing as she understands Mozilla to be targeting Majority World audiences in particular, yet, despite it being "obvious" to her that the pressing issues in her context are around topics like "access and shutdowns", Mozilla continue to "push AI and blockchain".

Sam and Pat feel that working with Mozilla, and the opportunities this affords, plays a significant role as they look to establish their careers in internet policy. They value the visibility they get from volunteering as Wranglers, and Ambassadors are a part of festival marketing. The two communicate that, having built relationships with Mozilla, they have been able to access further opportunities and see the organisation as a "friendly face" to whom they can turn when they need something. The organisation's affable brand and personable staff mean it is difficult to criticise Mozilla. Doing so first requires significant work to bring to light the organisation's moves to power. Given the central position Mozilla takes, the organisation is able to manage limited opportunities for people to be included, where inclusion refers to playing along with Mozilla's California-brewed cultural norms and cyberlibertarian-leaning politics.

5.3 Parte Afta Parte: submitting proposals to IGF

The second case focuses on the informal 'Parte Afta Parte' group⁹⁷, looking at how they work together in 2020 and 2021. Following Parte Afta Parte 'back-stage' and 'on-stage' at the IGF gives an idea of how much work members have to put in just to be present at the consultation, and how having some forms of access, such as funding to attend, does not immediately lead to having access when it comes to speaking with people outside of the youth group. Whilst Parte Afta Parte's 2020 and 2021 proposals to hold sessions at the IGF do not receive a response, the pair of sessions they propose in 2021 do eventually take place when they find out last minute that the sessions are on the timetable. Whilst the IGF shares proposal selection process in granularity, as outlined in Chapter 4, the experiences of the research collaborators suggest that implementation in 2020 and 2021 may not have been in line with this process.

5.3.1 IGF 2020, proposal rejected

As I have outlined in the methodology, members of this group met at IGF 2019 and kept in touch primarily over a WhatsApp group chat which is named Parte Afta Parte. Having got to Berlin through concerted efforts to get funding and support, the group had bonded over the challenges that they faced even once inside the doors. These are summed up by Kay, a computer science graduate from Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, who feels that at the IGF "youth voices are confined to the youth section". Kay was frustrated that his and his peers' insights on topics that are not linked explicitly with 'youth concerns' were not being heard. I had seen that Kay was a very vocal participant in the sessions on access that I was observing, which I mentioned to him. Kay says that although he was speaking up, he did not feel people were responding to what he had to say. Ria, a journalist and feminist activist from eastern Brazil, felt frustrated that although there was a fellowship scheme in place to bring youth like her to the IGF, once here people were not willing to take the time to speak to her, adding that more senior attendees "are busy looking for funding or networking with other

⁹⁷ To reiterate from the methodology, the group includes two women, Ria from eastern Brazil and Li from Accra, Ghana, and six men, two of which, Art and Ade are from Kampala, Uganda; Kay from Dar es Salaam, Tanzania; Tony from Praia, Cape Verde; Hesus from Port-au-Prince, Haiti; and Jack from Abuja, Nigeria.

people like them". Ria felt it was uncomfortable to try and converse with others when they were less focused on trying to connect with people they did not know, "they don't have time for people who aren't useful" she stated. Kay and Ria's experiences reflect concerns that are raised by researchers Tjahja and Fonsenca (2023, p. 5), who document youth at the IGF as feeling disrespected, ignored, not taken seriously and assumed to be "inexperienced".

In March 2020 the group started to chat on WhatsApp about submitting a proposal to hold a session at IGF 2020, a few weeks ahead of the deadline, during a period when many parts of the world were in lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Finding times to work together online involved coordination of participants' study, jobs and professional projects alongside timezones and differences in how they were able to access the resources, and software online which was being used to draft the application and converse amongst the group. The application itself was written and submitted just before the proposal window closed.

The session proposal was titled "She Net: Women's participation/leadership for a united Internet for all" and conceived of as a 90-minute roundtable event, in accordance with the IGF's prescriptions around session type and length, for which there are limited options to select from. The roundtable session in this context had some fixed speakers who would be invited, young women from different regions and across academia, civil society and the private sector, whilst there would be scope for participants to contribute on the day as well. The IGF requires proposed sessions to have 'multistakeholder representation' so having these sectors represented was mandatory to requirements, rather than being a design choice, however the group struggled to propose speakers from the public sector as no one felt they knew anyone they could ask.

Discussions amongst the group showed a strong consciousness with regards to presenting the youth activists' ideas in ways that would be appealing to the Multistakeholder Advisory Group (MAG), who, as I have outlined in Chapter 4, are responsible for selecting from proposals. This informed the use of specific terminology with a hope of increasing the chances of being selected. Further, the roundtable format was selected because it allows experts and those less familiar to the field to engage in "direct dialogue" to overcome the

problems many members of Parte Afta Parte had faced when looking to connect with more senior attendees, the group hoped to create space for an “equitable exchange” with the view that “all have something to offer” (She Net Proposal, 2020). The writers of She Net hoped to look at the “persistent hurdles women face in [gaining access to] full participation and leadership of tech companies and global institutions of Internet governance” (ibid.). Organisers chose to centre lived experience by only inviting women speakers who would be asked to share their “experiences from different backgrounds and speak to the issue from where it affects them the most” (ibid.).

Parte Afta Parte’s premise in this work is that creating women leaders, specifically “across business and institutions of internet governance” is significant for improving conditions for women. They define internet governance broadly, writing:

We define internet governance to include all of the decisions made on how the internet is run by the varied stakeholders involved—from telecoms and tech companies to technical bodies, to governments and international organizations. For adequate multi-stakeholder governance, meaningful inclusion is required in every sector and this is the issue we are addressing (ibid.).

The proposal asserts that for “adequate multi-stakeholder governance” there needs to be “meaningful inclusion” of women in all of the described diverse areas of decision-making. In particular the selected speakers were to be asked about

multi landscapes of access to the Internet in each region, acknowledging meaningful connectivity and strategies against digital hiatus (ibid.).

This line gives an insight into the group’s conceptualisation of internet access as having “multi landscapes” differing by region. Further, it shows a commitment to prevent “digital hiatus”, a slowing in connecting more people. Further, the proposal offers that speakers will acknowledge “meaningful connectivity”, a term which, as shown in Chapter 4, has become increasingly prominent during the research period, here referring to connectivity which enables women to pursue both personal and collective aims.

Several weeks after the submission of their application, the group was disappointed to learn that IGF 2020 in Poland had been cancelled and was now to take place online. This was a blow as a big part of their motivation to submit a proposal had been to travel and get together again in-person. She Net did not appear on either the list of accepted or merged sessions, the latter referring to session proposals that the MAG chooses to combine together. Parte Afta Parte members were not contacted with any feedback on their proposal and did not receive email contact to let them know the outcome. In this sense the outcomes from this application were reflective of the comments that the collaborators had shared about IGF 2019 and youth participation. Perhaps, they discussed afterwards, if they had they looked to be included in the youth programme rather than the main programme they may have been more likely to have got the session accepted.

5.3.2 Our Internet Voices reaches Katowice

In 2021 Parte Afta Parte again decided to try submitting a proposal together to hold a session at the IGF. They conceived of a pair of sessions under the same title, “Our Internet Voices”, one of which would take place during day zero, the day before the ‘official’ start of the conference, and one later on in the gathering. The professed aim of Our Internet Voices was to consider the implications of internet governance consultations such as the IGF moving online during the pandemic, and potentially further into the future. In their proposal Parte Afta Parte members noted that these discussions were much needed because:

It's not enough to assume that online events will be more inclusive, they need to be designed with inclusion in mind (Our Internet Voices proposal, 2021).

Recognising that whilst online events may open up participation for those unable to travel to a given location due to a lack of funding, difficulty getting visas, or cultural and familial commitments—significant for many of the activists themselves—it was considered important not to take this as a given in all instances. In video-call meetings with the group, which were held to plan and organise the application, discussions touched on how women and minoritised groups facing persecution are unable to speak as freely if joining as remote

participants at home. Members felt this may be due to repression in their domestic space, or in their geographic context more broadly. Similarly, group members raised that it was easier to share ideas in-person with greater confidence that the discussion would not be recorded and distributed. The two Our Internet Voices sessions were designed to take place in hybrid online and in-person format, catering to audiences attending the physical gathering in Katowice, Poland, as well as those joining remotely. The proposal outlines specific measures taken to enable equal participation:

Online and on-site participants will each have a moderator supporting them through the session. Given the topic we will be able to hear from each group about their experiences of the session to enrich the discussion in a very concrete way (Our Internet Voices proposal, 2021).

The format of the session was designed to enable online and onsite participants to demonstrate and speak from their experiences of joining the session that day. The group put together a list of speakers for a panel discussion, and developed questions to ask them, the main question for the session was: “who is included and who is excluded when events are held online?” Within this they hoped to consider how “exclusions can be countered to enable meaningful participation” which goes “beyond tokenistic representation” allowing for different groups to share their views and aspirations. Parte Afta Parte members hoped to encourage a more measured approach to the adoption of software and tools being used to hold online events, which they perceived to have been selected in a time of emergency without the opportunity to fully consider the implications in terms of protecting participants, safeguarding their data, and managing environmental impacts.

Parte Afta Parte saw the sessions they were proposing to be an opportunity for the beginning of a longer piece of work. They wanted to initiate “effective models and prototypes of solutions that can be further developed as resources to tackle the challenge of achieving ubiquity in meaningful inclusion”. In this way the activists hoped to generate knowledge in a time where these practices are “still new and evolving, and with possibility of change”. Despite not receiving a response in 2020, the group were still upbeat and optimistic about the new application. Both Our Internet Voices sessions did end up taking

place at IGF 2021, however, in the months that followed their submission the group once again did not receive anything back from the IGF, neither an acceptance nor a rejection. It was the night before the first of the two sessions was due to take place on day zero when Li was looking at the schedule and saw that Our Internet Voices and her name were listed. She shares her surprise “I see my name, I see Kay’s, I see a couple of others. I’m like, no way. So I guess it was a last minute decision”. Determined to make good on the opportunity Li raised the alarm amongst the group. In the early hours of the next morning I received a message from Kay

Kay: “Hello Henna. Soo apparently we have a day 0 event today.. just figured”

Henna: “No one knew???”

Kay: “No one knew”

Many members of Parte Afta Parte were heading to the IGF in Poland as volunteers or through fellowships, so they decided to go ahead with the sessions. Li felt that it ended up being useful to hold a session on day zero as it meant that other attendees got to know them.

That was a very important session, it began the conversations off on a good foot, and gave people the opportunity to identify us and the work we're doing so they followed through with other sessions that we were part of. So that was really like a marathon that morning, trying to get everybody to be in one place, running around. But it was successful. Be thankful for youthful exuberance, be thankful for the energy, because everybody was rallying some support from somewhere and pulling up things and calling people (Li, 2022).

She considers what had taken place to mean they were unaware of their sessions being on the programme, although none of the group looked into how this had unfolded with IGF organisers.

I think it was a last minute decision to have the session accepted but the communication wasn't sent out, but we appreciate that we still had to show up and made it work (Li, 2022).

Kay finds that holding the sessions was only possible because the group involved had prior relationships and were able to coordinate quickly. He also feels like since their names were already on the programme they needed to work something out, in order to avoid impact on the reputations each of them was individually working hard to develop in the IGF community.

Since we already had some sort of a communication relationship and an understanding for the young people available to be involved it was easy for us to run it rather than other sessions where you don't know anybody and you just have to start there, and then there's no bondage [sic] or some sort of chemistry that can happen, so it's not very authentic (Kay, 2022).

Art was already attending in-person so he was able to chair, Li was attending with the Youth Observatory—Internet Society's youth programme—and was able to take her place on the panel. They were joined by other members of the Youth Observatory in the panel discussions, Bo, from Nigeria, Rik from Uganda and Leia and Jay from Kenya. Below I outline key points discussed during the day zero Our Internet Voices session. I was not attending the IGF in-person but joined the livestream on YouTube and the second Our Internet Voices session which took place later in the IGF was significantly disrupted by 'zoom-bombing'⁹⁸, unsolicited and disruptive attacks that made it too hard to follow online.

As planned, discussions centred around the move to online events during the pandemic, and the implications of this move in terms of marginalised and “underrepresented” groups being able to take part. All of the speakers took great care to emphasise the importance of the discussion they were taking part in, having all been youth participants at internet

⁹⁸ This was not the only instance of zoom-bombing at the 2021 IGF, and such attacks also took place online during 2020's IGF.

governance consultations for two to three years. Further, they all expressed appreciation that representation of young people generally, and young people from the African continent in particular, had improved during this period. Bo claimed that young people are the largest demographic using the internet, “yet we are underrepresented in internet policymaking, and have been for some time”, he continued “this is why I call on the youth in the room to represent their perspectives”.

Kay joined the session during his layover in Germany whilst travelling to the conference from Tanzania, highlighting the flexibility that remote participation enables. Whilst the IGF has offered remote participation for some years, well ahead of the other consultations in this study, there had needed to be an uptake amongst audiences more widely to realise its potential. In the IGF context, the pandemic meant that remote participation moves from a peripheral position into a more mainstream form of participation, whilst attendees developed stronger skills around video-conferencing software and tools.

Li noted that there need to be conversations about the varied needs of audiences, their linguistic ability, bandwidth available, data costs and costs of software before decisions are made about what software is used for online events, moving the conversation away from “simply picking the first tool” that comes to hand, which may not be the best one for the job. Kay agreed, flagging that simply having access to tools is insufficient, arguing that people need to know how to use them effectively—and whilst wealthier societies have been able to adjust to pandemic conditions very quickly, because they had the capabilities needed—others have not been able to move as quickly because they “do not have the capacity to the use the tools to achieve their goals”.

Kay and Li expressed hope for a break from the past through the pandemic. By using online tools they are optimistic that future online events, specifically internet governance consultations, will be attended by more people like themselves. However, Leia added, options to take part must be adjusted for diverse cultural and technical environments. Rik expanded these also need to be examined for safety for different groups highlighting instances of zoom-bombing as being particularly dangerous.

In an interview soon after 2021's IGF, Art shared that the IGF community seemed highly engaged with Our Internet Voices, and that this had led to longer term engagements for him.

There was a lot of interest in the topic event from the ICANN communities because after the meeting, we stayed in the room on the sidelines continuing to engage, especially sharing experiences from the Global South. There was a lot of interest, especially from the ICANN representative from Switzerland, I think they seem to have an upper say in a way the Europeans operate in the ICANN. So there was a lot of interest from Switzerland after the meeting and the same continued I've responded to I think two or three emails still asking me about the same issues way after I've left Katowice. Two of them have been on the internet shutdowns that happened during the elections and then one on how people in rural Uganda actually attended school using online services (Art, 2022).

It is important to note that, whilst supportive of youth activism, Art does not identify as young or as youth himself, which contributes to the ongoing engagement he was able to develop.

5.3.3 Participating at IGF 2021

As mentioned earlier, members of Parte Afta Parte are only able to participate in the global IGF in-person if they can find a way to resource the travel and other associated costs. Members of the group readily share opportunities for funding amongst themselves and tend to apply to many at once with a view to securing something, in this way 'hedging their bets'. This flexibility can mean they end up doing a lot, as shown in Art's reflections on what ended up being an extremely busy IGF for him in Katowice.

Initially, I had planned to take part in three sessions, two of those sessions I was supposed to be an on-site moderator. And then one of the sessions I was supposed to be a speaker, preferably on-site. But by the time we're planning all this, we're not certain if, first of all, the IGF for this last year was going to be physical. So it was

more or less hypothetical. It was a wish list really, then it turns out that I got support from the UN to go and participate physically (Art, 2022).

For Li too the conference was incredibly busy and she found herself speaking at a range of events on topics ranging from the environment to literacy and human rights, alongside fulfilling her responsibilities as a volunteer host, which had enabled the IGF funding to attend in person. This followed from her experience of volunteering to support the IGF online in 2020, where she had supported 100 sessions in different capacities. She described working with a number of groups to submit a range of session proposals with the hope that at least one or two would be accepted.

Because I was part of the Internet Society's Youth Special Internet Group we had a couple of sessions that were group submitted. And everybody also had opportunity to form their groups and create sessions, but just probably cross post and let the young people also in the community know about what it is that we're doing, so that they could come on board, and also attend the sessions (Li, 2022).

Li explains that, when submitting proposals as youth organisers in 2021, they were keen to “build solidarity” with the Eastern European youth who were also in attendance in Poland, and this factored into their design of sessions.

What we did was to essentially find young people from different countries, especially because you want it to be diverse in the thoughts that we're bringing to our conversation. So what we did was to invite people from Asia, and to try as much as possible to have representation in our thoughts, and in the submissions just bring to bear the fact that even though there are very different issues in different parts of the countries, they could be similar in a way. There is opportunity to pick best practices to run with, for countries that are probably looking to also better some issues when it comes to internet (Li, 2022).

Thinking tactically comes first for Li. With a view to getting to the consultations, ideas for applications that she had been involved with tended to begin with considering what would

appeal to IGF organisers who are selecting from applications, with a consciousness of the year's theme and different assessment criteria.

So there were the preparatory stages where we just had a collaborative tool, we usually use Google documents, to gather our thoughts to have just like a brain dump of what you wanted to do, or to have firsthand feel of what it is you want to do to have the original intent written down before we shaped the idea to follow the conferences style of submitting proposals (Li, 2022).

Kay describes the work of attending the IGF in 2021 beginning about four months prior, when he began contributing to various workshop proposals, rallying friends and peers, and arranging to attend as a funded volunteer through the IGF scheme. This scheme sees the IGF pay costs of attendance for volunteers that help support the event to run. For Kay, the work involved being assigned to sessions for which he had to arrange spaces and other volunteers. After the event had taken place, he was responsible for reporting the “key outputs”, which had to be done within two hours of the session end. Kay explains that he is part of the IGF ‘resource’ list, which means he gets called up to volunteer for the annual gathering.

There's a resource list on the IGF site where anybody who's interested in linking or being part of the network can find people or anybody who wants to take activities in the IGF can link to them. So you list your country, your expertise, as well as what you have done before, what you're interested in doing at the IGF. So anybody can find you there. But it's not easy to find this thing, I don't think their website is quite easy for people to trace that information, but it's there and anybody can as long as you just have an account, so it's easy to be part of it (Kay, 2022).

Low in-person attendance at 2021's hybrid conference due to travel uncertainties related to COVID-19 seemed to open up new speaking opportunities which might not have been available before, particularly for those that were on-site. This allowed Art to participate much more than he would have otherwise but required significant flexibility on his part.

So of the three sessions that I had planned to attend, to be very active in as a speaker or moderator, I happen to attend, I think, nine sessions, I was speaker in four, and then a moderator in five. I don't know how that happened. A number of people who were initially scheduled to travel did not make it. And then you remember Li, at some point, she's like, you're going to help me do this, you're going to help me do that, so she was more of an active participant in the whole thing (Art, 2022).

Art contrasts the experience of being in Katowice with Berlin's meeting in 2019, finding that there was more space for individuals to speak due to longer scheduled sessions and lower in-person attendance.

Sessions were longer than those in Berlin, and had fewer people in them. So you had more time to actually deliver on what you want, what you had hoped to speak about. What happened was half the time the conversation will be happening on-site, then the other half, the conversation will then attract the online audiences (Art, 2022).

Further, according to Art, after official sessions came to an end it was easier for those on-site to meet each other and talk in-person, as their attention was much less divided than it would have been at a fully in-person event. For Art, the online IGF in 2020 was “not memorable” due to “zoom fatigue”, he emphasises that “experiences go beyond the meetings” and stresses the importance of developing relationships as well as developing new interests within internet governance, aspects of the experience that he does not see as possible through online participation. This stands in contrast to Li who notes the unifying effect of an event held completely online relative to a hybrid in-person and online format:

The thing about the hybrid, you will find out that the on-site activities are prioritised more than the online activities are. But when it is virtual, everybody's online and essentially enjoying every bit and benefiting from every bit of the conference, the village, for the organisations, the networking breaks, the breakout rooms, the Q and A sessions and all that (Li, 2022).

This is amplified by online participants tending to take advantage of the ability to watch session videos after they have already taken place, meaning they are not in the room in real-time to participate. Li notes that online participation is not suitable for everyone:

The other issue is that not everybody can be able to afford up to four hours of internet, or have their good Internet to connect in a day to join. So they'd rather present on-site to be able to benefit of whatever is going on. Because when you're on-site, everything's taken care of, and you're able to fully participate (Li, 2022).

Kay too feels that the hybrid offering needs further refinement, with the online and in-person participants in his experience ending up siloed from one another. As a session organiser he felt that this meant a decision had to be made about which audience would be the focus.

We had to choose one option, if you had to do it online, you had to focus really on the audience online and if you had to do it on-site, you had to focus on-site, we didn't have a way where you could moderate like, okay, now we will take like five people online, and then we listen to people on-site. So that model hasn't been quite figured out yet. So some people felt underrepresented, like, okay, I was waiting to speak online, I didn't get a chance. So I was in the room, and I didn't get the chance, I would rather have just done it on-site (Kay, 2022).

Even those attending in-person ended up participating in sessions using their devices, in cases when on-site participants were not really getting attention.

Most people on-site are actually doing it online because there was a higher priority for people are replying. So if you want to ask the question, you better go online and ask the question. While you're in the room that was a problem and a concern that was raised. So we still have to figure out how to actually run it. I think that's an area where that can be improved (Kay, 2022).

Discussions about access are missing “those who are unconnected”, according to Kay, who feels these groups are never represented at the IGF, whilst those who attend conversely tend to be people who are connected very well.

It's still a very small fraction of the people, you know, they say that 4 billion people are connected, they're the same ones who are coming to the IGFs. You know they're not unconnected, we should find some people who are unconnected from rural regions. People who have never found internet at all to come there and experience it and say their voices. So we can learn from that perspective, because it is important. When we're talking about meaningful connectivity we need to bring them in to tell them okay, this is what we have done technically, policy wise, but what do you actually need, so that you can use it? Because people don't quite understand it. So if I don't understand it, and I don't know how to use it, it's nothing for me, then how can I use it? So when you bring them in, in the multistakeholder approach, it's easy for you to kind of create a dialogue that can create impact, it opens your mind to their challenges (Kay, 2022).

He is particularly concerned by the lack of security and instances of zoom-bombing, which he adds are higher risk for some.

They need to secure the platform. Do we have any policy whereby I don't want my voice to be spread out there, but I just want it to be represented in this space? It's important that we have that because some people are actually in danger, and they just can't speak like that. And you go to set a cost of self-censorship, because you know, now I can't represent myself well, because I'm at a platform that might be hacked then it dilutes you from the real message of what you want to do. And in the end, that's not quite nice, because you haven't achieved the truth of the matter. It's better when you're in the room, because you have free space, they say that it's a free space for communication and it's true that I have experienced that in reality, it is (Kay, 2022).

Kay suggests a more defined approach to access that involves stronger ties between local and global levels of the IGF, “building coalitions with those who are not connected”. He criticises approaches to expanding internet access that do not involve discussion with communities about what they want to achieve for themselves before all else.

You can't just go to a rural region with people who can't eat, who have a language barrier and just give them the connection and say “this is the internet enjoy it!” It doesn't make sense, there is a way where you need to understand that from their perspective, where they need to represent themselves where you need to help cultivate the capacities based on what they want and then they'll see what they need, and then they'll figure out the gaps that you left (Kay, 2022).

Notably, whilst he does not oppose external support for these regions, he also indicates that after some initial facilitation they should have the opportunity to work out the rest according to their requirements.

Kay feels that, whilst there were plenty of youth spaces, there is a lack of spaces where youth can interact with everyone else. He looks to build an “intergenerational alliance” because otherwise it feels to him like the work that youth are doing in their all-youth spaces does not get circulated further.

We had really young arranged workshops, there were just young people there, and we had the platform, and we were on the table talking. But I still think the engagement with older people we didn't. We are lagging still on that intergenerational alliance, because we did have young workshops but after that, you know, sharing the outputs, still so much bureaucracy so we can get the message out there. So that's what we still working on, because it ends just sending the report and that's about it, you don't get feedback (Kay, 2022).

This situation feels frustrating as Kay wants to go further than discussion, he wants to influence policymaking. Kay considers an institutional route to youth views getting more attention through the IGF Secretariat.

Now we had the seat at the table, there were more young workshops, but still, you know, kind of finding people who are at the macro at the policy level, who can actually convert these messages into activities or strategic plans or policy, that's still an issue. We haven't quite found a site synergy and how we can find a way to further the discussions we had. So we still have to bridge that gap because it's just young people now discussing having your inputs, sharing the reports but then watch. Rather than the workshops, which are arranged by people who are actually connected to the MAG or people in the Secretariat that can follow these discussions and create the impact they need. But it's very hard to get that channel and it's something I still need to work on. Or at least maybe you only have a young person at the Secretariat who can oversee all that we want to do (Kay, 2022).

Looking back over four years of youth activism within IGF systems at different scales, Kay finds that the situation of African youth representation has improved. In 2018 he recalls that youth were not recognised as stakeholders at all, and this resulted in very few young people in attendance.

When you went there was a very low percentage of young people actually in the room so even getting your voices heard is difficult. You're just there for the metrics you know, we just had these young people, they said this, and that was that about it. And the second time I got a workshop but there were very few workshops led by young people and then 2020 still happened but that's where they changed. They said we need to recognise youth as stakeholders and this year there were more young people, more young sessions led by young people in terms of the sessions, how you run it, how you report it, that was more interesting (Kay, 2022).

However, it is not just more youth in attendance at the IGF that Kay perceives, it is youth expressing themselves on their own terms.

So I've seen quite a rise in the number of participation of young people from all over the world as well as people actually setting their own agenda and having a voice that

is disruptive, you have the freedom of expressing yourself in terms of ideas, and what you want to do with it. So now comes the challenge of how we can convert these (Kay, 2022).

Kay advocates for opportunities that allow youth to contribute to internet governance in what he calls “youthful” ways, rather than looking to force young people into processes and ways of working which conform to organisational norms that subdue difference.

5.4 Digital Grassroots: at RightsCon and beyond

The third case focuses on youth-run collective Digital Grassroots, beginning by outlining the origins of the initiative before looking at two Digital Grassroots events held at RightsCon in 2020 and 2021. It highlights the activists’ distinctive conceptualisations of internet governance issues, which in their RightsCon sessions break down prevailing binaries between first, internet access and internet governance, and second, internet access and online gender-based violence. We then return to the organisation’s journey after these events have taken place, following the activists as they move from ‘on-stage’ to ‘off-stage’, showing the contrast between being at a high visibility event and the challenges of activism.

Digital Grassroots was founded by Esther Mwema and Uffa Modey in 2017 after they had both been part of the Internet Society’s Youth Ambassador Program, a 10-month engagement that provides training on “internet governance, leadership skills, mentoring and the opportunity to attend a significant internet, event such as the Global IGF, RightsCon or a Regional IGF” (“Youth Ambassador Program”, n.d.). As part of their experience the two went to the global IGF, which that year was in Geneva, Switzerland. Here, according to Esther they found “mostly older Western people speaking for our region” which led them to see the need to bring more African and Global South youth into internet governance spaces. Uffa describes the IGF in Geneva as “overwhelming”, continuing that she had

never been so aware of the digital inclusion gap between sub-Saharan Africa and Global North. I realised that these conversations are so important and young people

from my region were not there - European and North American young people were there. And it is so important. They are shaping the future and our entire continent was missing (Uffa, 2020).

After their experience at the Geneva IGF, Esther and Uffa devised a curriculum for their own internet governance course, titled the “Digital Grassroots Ambassadors Programme”. This was a programme geared towards youth from across the Majority World, designed to be delivered online in ways that are accessible for those with limited internet access, including those who connect only through their mobile phones, as well as persons with slower internet speeds and less data availability. To recruit participants, the two opened a simple application process, which was also suitable for mobile participants, and received over nine hundred applications, which they assessed themselves to select a cohort of one hundred. Since they started their work Digital Grassroots have taken five cohorts through their Ambassadors Program, with provision in English and French, all without any funding support and by giving their time for free. They have also created and delivered five other original training courses for young internet advocates in partnership with other organisations.

As part of their advocacy, Digital Grassroots highlights continuities between exclusion of certain groups from internet governance and the limitations the same groups experience in benefitting from the goods of the internet.

The digital divide is really about a concentration of power. A new sphere of existence where the rich get richer, women and young people are treated like second class citizens, neurodivergent and persons with special needs are silenced and violently excluded from systems that are shaping the world we live in. They are disconnected, it's like they don't even exist. The internet lacks borders but rural, urban, gender, education and geographical differences are creating new and cumulative inequalities online. The internet produces both good and harms, except that this power is wielded by an elite few (“On this Side of the Web”, 2021).

It is this view which underpins their work to change the makeup of internet governance, by bringing in Majority World youth.

According to Uffa and Esther, the Digital Grassroots Ambassadors Program has acted as a launchpad to support young people from the Majority World to be better placed to apply and be accepted into the Internet Society Ambassadors Program, which they say is very competitive with exceptionally limited places on offer. They also aim to build “South-South” connections amongst young people, to find commonalities in their challenges and experiences. Digital Grassroots seek to resist tokenism in internet governance by maintaining a “grassroots connection” that “prioritises the collective over the individual” (Esther, 2020).

I want a bottom-up approach—but not in an extractive way. I don’t want to replicate that. There is a lot of recognition for individuals in this space. If I become a celebrity then I am doing my work? Or is it that there are not enough people like me. We try to bring in our community leaders in a way that is holistic. Bringing people into the space in an equitable way (Esther, 2022).

They are conscious that this must not be extractive; both Esther and Uffa actively resist what they describe as “Western practices” that they do not agree with. They root themselves in their cultural contexts, values and self-identification as African women and youth. They recognise that difficulties in accessing funding relate to these positions, however, they have also experienced “tokenism” which makes them wary, recalling that larger organisations have looked to benefit from an association with Digital Grassroots, but have offered no material support to help them keep it going.

Many organisations talk about youth inclusion in a very tokenistic way. They want you to talk on panels, to show that they include you. They want to promote their work on your community. They admire [our community] and want to leverage but they do not always support it (Uffa, 2021).

Recognising the way that her peers, like the members of Parte Afta Parte, have to go about attending internet governance consultations, Esther notes that even working on these

issues for some years, and having developed significant expertise, young people's participation is still contingent.

Young people are called to be IGF's volunteers—so they have to apply. Still volunteers even being experts for many years. There's not much power in being volunteers (Esther, 2022).

This also reflects the experiences of Sam and Pat, who were so exhausted by volunteering with MozFest they ended up not being able to attend sessions and participate.

Digital Grassroots has conducted projects with Mozilla, Internet Society and UN Women, whilst the individuals involved have done much more. Some terms of reference they use have their origins amongst these institutions and organisations, particularly “internet health” (Mozilla), or even the name of their training programme which echoes the name of the Internet Society programme (Digital Ambassadors). Whilst it should not be assumed that the activists use any terms uncritically—as will be shown in the next section, Digital Grassroots engage deeply with conceptual work—it is notable to trace the journey of terms and concepts.

5.4.1 Internet universality and governance

The session titled “On internet universality and governance, sharing perspectives from underrepresented communities” was a part of the RightsCon online programme in 2020. This took place as a “Community Lab”, a format which RightsCon suggests for testing out ideas and getting feedback on projects amongst a closed audience. The event was at capacity with thirty-five participants taking part on Zoom, whilst a number of RightsCon online sessions tend to be recorded, this one was not.

Esther, who is president of Digital Grassroots, introduced the session asking “What do we mean when we talk about internet governance and universality? Why is there a disconnect in our understanding of internet governance?” Esther frames representation of diverse subalternised groups in internet governance as intrinsic to internet universality, the vision of

the whole world being connected to counter what she sees as currently dominant “top-down” policymaking processes she calls for “bottom-up, grassroots” approaches.

Participants attending this session were for the most part also engaged in the work of trying to have communities who are underrepresented heard in internet governance spaces, in particular young people. They noted that current systems in place for ‘inclusion’ are selective, competitive, contingent and individualistic referring to fellowships, scholarships, leadership programmes and other short-term, high-visibility initiatives. They described these as bringing in one person for a short time, with the individuals continuing from one scheme to another, placing them in positions of precarity for an extended period. Being few, and with high requirements for entry, these opportunities are still fairly exclusive and therefore largely benefit highly-educated, urban Majority World youth such as those in attendance at the session, who flagged this concern. Alison, a youth woman from Uganda stated “yes I can do it, I have built awareness from university and education, but what about people who don’t have the same opportunity from education?” (Alison, 2020).

Digital Grassroots is well aware of this problem, providing a ‘bridging’ experience through their youth programmes that have focused on the challenge of getting youth located throughout the Majority World engaged and supporting them onto other programmes such as Internet Society fellowships. At the RightsCon session, drawing on research conducted with youth cohorts who have been through the programme, Esther emphasised that spaces need to be created that “allow those who are on the margins to contribute meaningfully, with access to information and autonomy in decision-making”. Session attendees reflected on their own positions as they negotiated for themselves as “marginalised groups” and also for further marginalised groups who were not in the room with many conflicted about their positions.

University student Iham raised the question of whether inclusion should be sought in existing multistakeholder processes or whether Majority World youth activists should be

supporting the creation of new norms or spaces that are more reflective of what we need for a global internet, as opposed to the norms we currently have, which were

really developed through American and European structures and norms (Ilham, RightsCon, 2020).

Discussions reflected the variety of contexts and experiences amongst attendees even if they shared certain aims and a youth position, with some pointing towards UNESCO's ROAM-X indicators⁹⁹ (Souter and van der Spuy, 2019) as an institutional backdrop for this conversation. Speakers Madhu Siveraman and youth activist Ahmed Median posed the framework as a method to multistakeholder internet governance at the national level which builds-in participation of marginalised groups including youth and rural populations. Others disagreed with a UN-led approach advocating for independent, "high-impact ideas" that make use of free resources. However, this view was also met with challenge. David, an audience member, raised "the trade-off between supporting local community standards when those local communities aggressively marginalise certain populations", asking "which community norms should be most protected and which should be challenged?" Others raised similar concerns that, even if independent spaces are created, this can raise different problems of power and accountability.

5.4.2 Access and online gender-based violence

Taking place in June of 2021 as part of RightsCon online, the session titled "The unexplored dichotomy of internet access and online hate" was billed as a 'lightning talk'. The nine-minute video includes segments featuring Esther Mwema and lawyer Catherine Muya, pre-recorded and made available throughout and after scheduled dates of the gathering.

Catherine began the video by telling the story of Brenda Ivy Cherotich, a Kenyan woman widely thought to be the country's first COVID-19 patient. After sharing her experience of the illness on her social media accounts Cherotich suffered abuse and harassment on social media (Orembo and Cichanga, 2020, p. 11). Following this introduction, Esther described how the pandemic has proven that the internet is a "public utility necessary for daily life", adding that this has led to renewed efforts globally to "bring connectivity to those still

⁹⁹ A UN-developed framework to assess internet development which I outline in detail in Chapter 2.

without access". However, she raised the issue that many people who are newly connected and "making use of digital platforms" are becoming targets for "hate speech, harassment and violent extremism" with a large proportion of this directed towards women and girls like Cherotich. For Esther, the concern was that many of these newly online populations are made vulnerable by their unfamiliarity with these spaces, and further, after experiencing violence may be forced to halt their participation online, or to choose to be offline to protect themselves.

The two speakers drew on their work in southern and eastern Africa where they have been involved in projects that support women and youth from "marginalised communities" online, sharing a series of strategies that they have found useful to "protect and empower" these groups. These are ways to manage the current situation even as both Catherine and Esther look to change the structures which limit women in this way. Catherine suggested that when using social networking tools and seeing someone behave violently or offensively, it is important to "be an active bystander". This involves reporting the post, liking comments that indicate this is wrong, deflecting from the abuse, writing a respectful comment indicating that you think this is wrong or tagging supportive others.

Catherine's research found that after experiencing instances of online violence women tend to feel confused about what action they should take. She offers ideas for what victims can do, including reporting on the social networking site or application itself using the tools provided, or pursuing legal action. Catherine highlights that online abuse could have significant impacts for mental health and suggests that victims pursue emotional and psychological support. Whilst she urged that designers of online tools must take action to safeguard women and queer persons, Catherine also stressed that it is essential that everyone "practice cyber hygiene" with regards to the personal data shared online to prevent hacking and attacks.

Esther stated that "we need to ensure that the internet is a safe space" into which "we can bring new communities online". This highlights that for her there is a responsibility involved in connecting new groups to ensure they are not being invited into what becomes a trap due to a lack of safety provision. She continued that there needs to be a "bottom-up approach for an open, feminist internet by design", and described a project that Digital

Grassroots have developed that involved consultation with young people from twenty-one countries, mainly across the Majority World. The project is called the “Youth Resolutions on Internet Governance” (Digital Grassroots, 2018), and culminated in a document, which is laid out like a comic strip featuring illustrations with speech bubbles that describe internet governance challenges in different contexts. The process behind the document seeks to provide “contextually-located insights” and “gathers indigenous wisdom without exploitation” according to Esther. A look at the document is striking as the layout immediately puts the differently situated perspectives into conversation through its layout. Esther argued that “instead of Big Tech’s move fast, break things we need a community-centred approach for slower, safer design emphasising different ways of relation to the status quo”. Rather than suggesting modifications to existing design Esther is calling not just for a change to designs but for a *change to the design process itself* to enable more just options.

As practitioners that work in multi-scalar ways, downstream as part of and directly with communities that experience the sharp end of gender-based violence, and as advocates upstream in policy discussions, Catherine and Esther communicate in both directions. This session at RightsCon shows them doing so, sharing support to help women negotiate the current situation, whilst also conceptualising a radical change. At the same time, they shed light on moves that surreptitiously place latter-connected groups into the past by not acknowledging the disadvantages of being latter-connected, a view that is rarely discussed.

5.4.3 Challenges of youth activism

Esther recalls that, with several years of being involved at RightsCon, Digital Grassroots has “never had an unsuccessful session presenting our personal stories and community”. Despite this, the organisation received almost no external funding between 2017 and 2022, with the founders having to give their time and resources to keep the work going.

The work we do at DIGRA [Digital Grassroots] has been free and on our own labour. If we stop there is a lot of work we are going to lose as others are not doing what we are doing. The way we connect people is valuable—there isn't that pathway (Esther, 2021).

Esther shares that they chose not to use their presence at RightsCon as a way of finding funding, “we did not think about leveraging the people there in the space, that’s a very Western way of thinking, that’s not a view that I like”. For Esther the difficulties of establishing Digital Grassroots in a sustainable way, in keeping with the founding team’s political goals and cultural values is a signal that whilst there might be more representation in certain internet governance spaces of youth from the African continent and the Majority World than when they first started, there is still a “lack of tangible change” because

It takes privilege to be in this space, you need time and your own resources and ability to communicate in English. For Global Majority there is only space for individual stars (Esther, 2021).

She refers to feeling like there is limited room for “Global Majority” persons, fuelling tokenism that allows only for “individual stars”. Esther illustrates this by referring to the 2022 IGF in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, (this was yet to take place at the time of the interview) which she feels does not make additional room or develop specific measures for African youth to be present and heard.

IGF is in Addis, in Africa yet African youth not prioritised. To get us there. We have been given a stall but it's in the carpark. And we have no funding to go. IGF has been in Europe so I am happy to see it in Africa. But how it will show up is yet to be seen. The civil war in Ethiopia is quite serious. What does it mean to just turn a blind eye? What does it mean for the continent? (Esther, 2022).

Again she finds it difficult to take part with Digital Grassroots’ politics intact, reflecting concerns that were widespread about the global IGF being hosted in Ethiopia. The internet

has been cut-off by the government in the country's northern Tigray region for more than two years (Zelalem, 2022).

Whilst Esther takes issue with a lack of funding generally, she notes that it is even less likely they will get support close to home.

Lack of funding from Western funders is a problem. But nothing from African governments from local funders or support. Funding doesn't seem as urgent, as important in these African countries where there are other priorities (Esther, 2020).

Esther posits that that they have not been funded because as youth they are not trusted to use funds responsibly. Digital Grassroots spent several years stuck in administrative paradox where they could not register the organisation as an entity, as the directors live in different places, and for that reason they could not get a bank account, making it very hard for them to get any funding.

In 2022 Digital Grassroots was finally able to register as an entity in the UK. It was very hard to get a bank account which we eventually got through a through a financial start up. Nationality was the main reason, Uffa lives in the UK so she thought she could, but the banks were very negative and made it very complicated so it was nearly impossible. We got it in the end very luckily, we created an account online. It is hard for young organisations to get funding from bigger funders, they have strict requirements like they want to see you have a legal team! They maintain power in the system, by not allowing for small organisations. Getting the account means we can finally receive some funding. But now we have to navigate paying tax and exemptions, there is not enough funding to get someone to do it full-time (Esther, 2022).

Trying to manage an unfunded organisation has taken its toll on the two, who are managing the pressures of volunteering their time to Digital Grassroots with paid work and their non-working lives.

It has been stressful to try to build a youth organisation that is trusted and has global impact and care for the grassroots, it's not just about us and our portfolio careers. It was very hard because we were not funded and we are living our own lives. Getting support helps us to go on another day. It is not healthy for me or other young people which gave me a lot of anxiety to bring other young people into the space—it's not sustainable. All this has personal implications like how much time you spend with friends and family. If you have too much responsibility and are not paid it feels very pressurised (Esther, 2022).

In this regard both Esther and Uffa were particularly pleased to be a part of this research when I first asked them as they had not felt they had received acknowledgement outside of the youth community.

5.5 Summary

All of the youth activists who have collaborated on this chapter take their work very seriously, going to great lengths to participate at these internet governance consultations. Not to take these politics seriously is to ignore an important part of the politics of internet access.

Each of the three cases intervenes at different times within the organisational cycle of the three internet governance consultations showing the different types of negotiations for access that activists are engaged with. They show that organisers of consultations offer restricted access to youth activists alongside claims to openness. This has seen research collaborators feeling confused and disappointed as they try to navigate contradictions, which for them have serious implications. They look to bring their communities into spaces of internet governance but run the risk of them having to deal with the same issues they face, as in the case of Sam and Pat at MozFest. This reflects the problem raised by Digital Grassroots at RightsCon where they consider the implications of bringing women across the

Majority World online into spaces which have been designed in ways that make them unsafe in gendered and racialised ways.

Collaborators relate in varied ways with inclusion measures to have more youth attend, and more representation from the Majority World at internet governance consultations. Activists all seek to be present and, in this regard, take up whatever offers are available for funding and support. This can mean having to adjust their stated aims according to prescriptions around what makes a good proposal, or through offering to volunteer their labour. This gains them some measure of access, but it does not see organisers of these consultations ceding power since they get to dictate the broad agendas and prescribe what makes an appropriate session. The rhetoric that consultation organisers all deploy hides these moves to power in their operations, making it seem like they are benevolent, responsive leaders.

Organisers behind each of the consultations are thus able to benefit from the labour and knowledge of the collaborators, as well as from their claims of having included these groups. Sam and Pat as well as the Digital Grassroots team look to resist being tokenised in this way, however, given the powerful position of Mozilla and the various institutions that Digital Grassroots interact with, and the need to make a living whilst being an activist, this is a hard balance to strike. It can mean that activists feel they have to make sacrifices like volunteering or working more than is comfortable for them just to get a foot in the door. Given that all collaborators have been working on internet governance activism for up to four years they have developed significant expertise. By inviting their input as volunteers the well-resourced organisations that run consultations are engaging in extractive practices, benefiting in particular from ideas and knowledge. When volunteering for the IGF and MozFest, the collaborators report struggling for time to participate above and beyond their volunteer duties, whilst Ria and Kay share the frustrations of being invited to the IGF but finding attendees who are not youth do not want to hear them out.

In the face of these imbalanced power dynamics, activist collaborators make use of tactics and opportunism to work towards their goals. Parte Afta Parte hedge their bets and propose many sessions at once to the IGF, with a view to trying to get at least one accepted, whilst

also keeping agendas in mind when formulating their ideas to increase their appeal. Although they are willing to use varying terms of reference to get on the agenda, what the activists do with that space and with their community is rooted in their own visions for the internet should look like. Both members of Digital Grassroots and Parte Afta Parte mention making use of different available fellowships, echoing Tjahja and Fonseca's (2023, p. 6) research about youth participation at the IGF which finds that youth participants apply for numerous programmes and fellowships, often with the same people circulating between them and repeating very similar programmes so that they can continue to be present. In her capacity as a volunteer organiser with MozFest in 2021, Sam describes making the choice with the team responsible for the 'Decolonisation Space' not to accept session proposals from persons in the Global North or those who do not identify as Black, Indigenous or People of Colour.

Digital Grassroots in particular find it insufficient to 'integrate' their work into these consultations by compromising to a "Western way of thinking" (Esther, 2021). The aim for Esther and Uffa is to share their views and their practices, as youth, as women, as young African women. Whilst space may have opened up for representation in what they see as tokenising moves, there is material and discursive resistance in Digital Grassroots' stance. They are selective about the tactics that they put into practice to negotiate access for themselves and for others in their community, even when this results in additional challenges such as struggling to get funding. The activists work together in their groups in flexible ways, motivated by their own goals in terms of friendship, community-building and gaining visibility. They are not worried about their agendas being shaped by predominant institutions, where their frustrations lie is in the confusing messaging of inclusion, which simultaneously invites and limits access. They enter the consultations with a sense of entitlement and ownership over the internet and its benefits, not as "unsure and trembling visitors to other societies' achievements" (Mavhunga, 2017, p. 18). Back-stage and off-stage, Parte Afta Parte relate in ways that are informal and friendly, modulating this when hosting their sessions at the IGF, but as Kay says drawing on the strength of their relations to enable their work. This resistance, which is steadfast and committed, yet not always visible reflects a decolonial habitus (Walsh, 2018, p. 43), a way of doing things that rejects the organisational cultures of the research sites.

Digital Grassroots engage with practices of delinking in their conceptual work which is seen in their sessions at RightsCon. Here they break down gendered, colonial conventions and binaries in internet policy. Centring the knowledge and lived experiences of their community of Majority World youth, the group's work is demonstrative of border-thinking, as they look for shared experiences, share per support and work towards common goals. All of the groups engage in practices of border-thinking as they centre lived experience in their activist practices by looking to invite members of their communities to into internet governance spaces, be that Sam and Pat acting as Ambassadors, Parte Afta Parte putting together a panel of women to talk about their experiences at the IGF or Digital Grassroots learning from their youth training cohorts. Within this they also take their own lived experiences seriously too, theorising from these standpoints about the broader issues of access at play. In building solidarities and sharing these experiences amongst their communities the group work towards relinking, in developing again connections where gendered coloniality has cultivated isolation.

6. SOUTH ASIAN FEMINIST ACTIVISTS

6.1 Introduction

This chapter traces multi-scalar feminist activism, starting locally with observation conducted in settlements, villages and in the city during fieldwork in south India, moving to interviews with activists about their work at national and global scales. Whilst scales are contained in each section, the idea is not to suggest they are discrete but to illustrate how they are co-constitutive by following the activist collaborators as they move between them. The work illustrates complicated negotiations of access that women and queer persons engage with at every level, from using the appeal of ICT¹⁰⁰ education as a ‘trojan horse’ to convey sex education, to the difficulties of getting funding to attend in-person conferences where the goal is to secure resources.

Working with collaborators located across the South Asia¹⁰¹ region provides opportunity to consider similarities and differences and creates space for contextual discussion. This is useful given in particular the colonial legacies of the British Empire in India and Pakistan, and the colonial interventions in Nepal which whilst not formally colonised still endured significant influences (Yadav, 2019, pp. 1–2). The region is claimed to have the widest “gender digital divide” (Mangal, 2020) with research finding significant differences in smartphone ownership and usage between women and men (Shanahan, 2019); research on the same for other gender groups is limited. NGOs based in the region have carried out research that looks into what kinds of differences people are experiencing, asking from where these differences emerge and naming a range of barriers to consider when thinking about gendered internet access. Issues that have been identified include: the cost of devices, data packages and broadband lines; limited control over shared devices for women (Rehman et al., 2021, p. 33); restricted physical mobility of these groups limited to the home, or being in need of a male escort when outside the home (ibid., pp. 31–33); social

¹⁰⁰ This chapter sees frequent reference to ICTs (information and communication technologies). This is the preferred term used by TechEverybody to describe their area of work, comprised of internet tools and services alongside digital devices that both are and are not networked.

¹⁰¹ In this thesis South Asia refers to the area where activist collaborators work, there are varying interpretations of what this regional designation means, and where the borders lie, these debates are outside of the bounds of this project.

stigma around women and girls' use of the internet (ibid., p. 22); surveillance of online activities by family (Kayastha and Pokharel, 2020, p. 6); online gender-based violence; lack of legal protections from online harms (Gurumurthy et al., 2019, pp. 32–37); self-policing and self-censorship (ibid., p. 12) including 'Digital Purdha'¹⁰² (Schoemaker 2016 in Rehman et al., 2021); limited opportunities for creation over and above consumption (Perera and Ibrahim, 2021, p. 10); and a lack of content in local languages (Perera and Ibrahim, 2021, p. 89). Despite these challenges the literature shows women and queer persons negotiating internet access to varying degrees, particularly for the purposes of: self-expression and exploration of identity (Kayastha and Pokharel, 2020, p. 6; Perera and Ibrahim, 2021, pp. 10–11) fun and enjoyment (Rehman et al., 2021, p. 43); and remote working and soliciting sex work (Perera and Ibrahim, 2021, p. 63).

This chapter features work with the following organisations, the names of which have all been changed for anonymity: TechEverybody, an India-based organisation that has been active nationally and globally since the early 2000s on issues of internet governance, development and gender; InternetWitness, a Pakistan-based NGO that was founded in the mid-2010s and works on internet law and gender; and GenderOnline, a Nepal-based organisation created in the late 2010s and primarily concerned with queer communities and the internet. Individual activists who collaborated on this chapter include: Shama, an Indigenous Nepali trans woman blogger and activist working on LGBTQI and Indigenous rights in the Nepali national context; and Pakistani feminist organiser and researcher Irum. The first section follows TechEverybody's work in southern India, drawing on observation carried out with their projects during fieldwork in 2019. The sections that follow bring in other activists as we move into national and global scales.

6.2 Local community projects

Arriving in India in late summer of 2019 I came at the tail end of severe flooding which had a devastating impact on many of the rural villages in Karnataka which had TechEverybody

¹⁰² Allowing women to maintain privacy in online spaces in ways that tend reflect their offline choices.

projects in operation at the time, making the locations inaccessible by car. Here I was supported by the local team leader Rupina who was able to accommodate me in English, making her the conduit for my communication with everyone else we encountered who spoke Kannada and often several other south Indian and Indigenous languages. I accompanied the team, which included Rupina and five colleagues, two women and three men, on their routine visits to a number of settlements and villages within about three hours' drive from the South II office.

For the purposes of identification, I refer to the Indigenous communities that we visited as living in 'settlements', these are less formalised gatherings of different types of dwellings at the edges of a dense, forested area, the Nagarahole National Park (Appendix 6.a, point 1). This impermanent term acknowledges that many of the people engaged in TechEverybody's projects who are currently living here intend to return to the forests in the future, a struggle against the government's violent expulsion from their ancestral homelands which I engage with further below. By contrast Hindu communities are described as living in 'villages' which are more formalised, seen as permanent, caste-organised and Kannada-speaking (Appendix 6.a, point 2).

6.2.1 Direct support

Women internet leaders

"Women Internet Leader" (WIL) is a position within a programme of work designed by TechEverybody. The position is occupied by a woman who has been selected from a given village or settlement for training in using ICTs, specifically a desktop PC and web browser. Training is particularly focused on enabling these women to access information and claim resources through government portals for themselves and for members of their community. Following her training, a Woman Internet Leader takes on employment with the NGO TechEverybody. In this role she is the point of contact in the village who people see when they require an online service; generally, this involves accessing government funds and services.

In the cultural context of the Hindu villages where the WIL project is in operation, gendered caste structures are related to different experiences and life opportunities for women, with higher-caste women disallowed from paid employment and reliant on income from their husbands. As relayed to me by Rupina, and as I witnessed during visits, lower-caste men in these villages do not tend to work, but spend the days socialising together, whilst their wives and mothers work in rice paddies, walking three or four hours to and from work and managing domestic labour. Given patriarchal power dynamics, the women in the villages do not have control over the incomes they or their husbands generate, and many of the men in the village spend the family's money on alcohol, mopeds and smartphones, even whilst they struggle to make use of the latter.

In Village A we met a WIL named Prakruthi. Taking the position comes at a personal cost for her as she is met with suspicion from some community members for taking on a job with an organisation that is external to the community's practices and traditions. These concerns are also levelled at her husband and parents who are criticised for allowing her to take on the job. There are concerns that the WIL might model this alternative life path to young girls in the community, and inspire them to choose different routes to those which are traditionally expected. This is a part of the programme's design and a hope for TechEverybody who wish for the WIL to model women's agency to young girls.

The WIL is empowered by the utility of her skills which are not common in the villages. Men and women alike require the help of the WIL to access online services, but the position being occupied by a woman makes it easier for women to go to her for help—had the position been taken by a man there would be more difficulty for a woman to go see him alone, without a man to escort her. In Village A, the WIL and a desktop PC with internet connectivity is housed in a 'milk building' (Appendix 6.b) where women bring the milk from their cows in the evenings to be processed allowing them to access the WIL and her support without additional travel or a change from their routine. This reduces barriers related to not having time, or related to family surveillance, as the women would be required to go to the milk building anyway in the course of their daily work. It also builds familiarity amongst the women with the WIL going about her duties in such a visible space.

From the perspective of Rupina, as TechEverybody's local coordinator who has worked on designing and running the programme for some years, the WIL can indeed shift some power dynamics within the highly patriarchal social relations of the villages, yet she acknowledges how hard it can be for the women to be engaged in this struggle over a protracted period.

In another location, Village B, the WIL Prakruthi took us to meet a family who she had recently helped to access government entitlements towards the care of a young child with a disability. The process to complete the required forms and administration online had taken a year, and the WIL explained that once she had submitted the application the struggle had been that different members of staff evaluating it had wanted bribes to push the process forward. She was extremely proud to share that she completed the process without paying any bribes, however this had been incredibly taxing for her personally as she was met with aggression for not complying, and all the extra work required was also taxing on her finite time and resources. The grandmother of the child, who was responsible for his care was elderly and the entitlements were a lifeline for her considering she was too frail to work. The gratitude of the grandmother in particular was very visible, as was the general affection with which the visiting TechEverybody workers were held, bringing as they did small gifts and helpful items for the local people which they distributed on arrival. The mood was celebratory for the grandmother, the child and their neighbours who greeted us outside their homes. There was no other way for this family to have figured out the process of applying for their entitlements online, and further, to have had the application be looked at if they were unable to pay the bribes.

Women's '*sangha*' meetings

TechEverybody is involved with facilitating and supporting '*sangha*'¹⁰³ meetings in the rural Karnataka villages where their projects take place. These are local, caste-divided gatherings where women share their issues and concerns with each other, and collectivise to take actions and share financial support through a system of loans. TechEverybody facilitates the delivery of information through these meetings with the goal of supporting women and girls

¹⁰³ Meaning collective in a number of languages deriving from Sanskrit,.

in how they manage gendered difficulties. With a view to allowing the women some time and privacy, they host a concurrent men's *sangha* meeting. Here too they address topics of gender justice; TechEverybody staff tend to split along gender lines to facilitate the two meetings. The NGO coordinates the women's meetings to highlight opportunities for education, contraception and alternatives to early marriage, Rupina emphasises how important she thinks it is that young girls resist marriage until they are a bit older.

Sangha meetings cannot be scheduled in advance, TechEverybody staff have to visit the village on a suggested day and then wait to see if women are able to gather. On a visit to Village C, we waited for the women to meet, however, as there was rain forecast later the women did not have time to attend as they needed to complete their agricultural work while the weather was fair. As we waited to see what would happen, I saw the women carrying out domestic labour cleaning, gathering laundry and looking after children before leaving to walk to fields and farms; at the same time the local men gathered to talk and spend leisure time together.

After some time some women did have to gather though. TechEverybody had selected this particular day as they knew that it was the day that a local loan collector would also visit the village. On these occasions the women would gather together to sit with the loan collector and make their payments one by one. Rupina explained that it was often husbands that would take a micro-credit loan, to buy a moped or smartphone, and then when it came to the repayments, they would leave it to their wives. When I observed the micro-credit collection meetings, I only saw one husband attend, standing outside of the seated circle of women about half a metre away. Given that the women know one another intimately with families generationally living in the same villages, they act as guarantors for one another's loans and if they cannot make a payment the social consequences feel immense. Rupina described a recent death by suicide during a sangha "she said she was going to get money and then she jumped into the canal and her body was found later".

After the stress of the loan collector's visit, the women were in a rush to return to their work schedules, and Tech Everybody staff were only able to get them together for a short time. One of the main reasons that the team were keen to have the meetings on this

particular day was to share some government service information with attendees. After finding a place to sit down Rupina and her colleagues brought out a laptop to play a government information video for the women to watch. This particular video covered how to take action if a woman's gold is pawned without her permission; after playing the video the TechEverybody staff facilitated a discussion answering questions which also touched on flood relief support and how they could access this from the government. Whilst data coverage is somewhat available (if patchy), most people locally do not have access to devices or data contracts. Further, according to Rupina, the people living in Village C do not have sufficient awareness or literacy to seek out information from the government online.

There is a disjuncture here; online portals are now pretty much the only way that entitlements like flood relief, or information about changes in policy or law are communicated. Even with some connectivity, local people in the village still do not have access to essential information and resource without the NGO acting as a bridge. Staff are not only screening the video, but also parsing the information and answering questions, they are moving the message from one mode of communication (the screen and video) to an interaction with which the communities are more familiar.

Digital storytelling

I accompanied TechEverybody staff to Village D which we were visiting to record a video with one of the mothers whom the NGO had spent some time supporting. This woman had taken the difficult decision to allow her three daughters to go to school outside of the community, and in doing so had faced fierce criticism from the community and violent abuse from her husband. The woman was dressed up for the video and the shoot was set up outside, in a part of the village which is visible to any passers-by. It was filmed by TechEverybody staff who asked the mother to talk about her experiences and explained how and why she had come to her decision.

As the filming was highly visible, other members of the community gathered to watch, creating noise disturbance which prolonged the recording process. At times this felt like a difficult atmosphere, the mother was after all sharing controversial views in plain sight,

however NGO staff did their best to ease tensions with light-hearted interactions. The people who gathered around started to talk about some of the reasons why they do not send their children to school, one significant issue which came up was the cost of transport, since there are no schools in the immediate vicinity.

The mother expressed that despite the negative consequences she stood by her choices and her three children still went to school despite the hardships. She mentioned some of the work opportunities that were opening up for the older girl as a consequence and emphasised the importance of education to enable her children more self-sufficiency.

The team's strategy behind making the video was to screen it in other villages to mothers who were facing similar decisions, to act as a model of what it can be like to go against the grain, with a view to supporting girls' education. Filming in such an open way also proffered some status to the mother, who was the focus of their attentions, whilst allowing facilitated conversations take place around the topic. The film is published on the organisation's website, but Rupina emphasises that these resources are not there to be viewed independently—the communities do not have this kind of access. Rather they are held as an archive to be viewed in settings that are facilitated by the NGO to support discussion¹⁰⁴.

Displaced Indigenous communities

TechEverybody has a number of projects located in settlements (see Appendix 6.c) on the outskirts of a large forested area, Nagarahole National Park, in rural Karnataka which had traditionally been home to Indigenous communities. The Wildlife Protection Act (1972) began the process of removing Indigenous tribal groups from the forest, efforts that intensified when the area was declared a tiger reserve in the late 1990s. This was met with resistance from the communities who have engaged in a decades long struggle against the displacement (Environmental Justice Atlas, 2019). In February 2019, months before the fieldwork took place, the Supreme Court of India ruled that Indigenous peoples across the country who resided in forested areas were to be evicted, with an order estimated to have

¹⁰⁴ This reference has been redacted as part of anonymisation of the NGO.

displaced around 7.5 million people (International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, 2019)¹⁰⁵.

Arriving into this community as an outsider during this time required a great deal of sensitivity, understandably the families living in these settlements can feel distrustful of some people from the towns and cities. As part of the resistance to the persecution they are facing, there is a strong desire to protect local ways of life from external influence and the Indian state, as much as they can be. There is an ongoing process of emotionally reckoning with what has happened which includes grief and anger, according to Rupina, who tells me that this makes it hard to muster up motivation, particularly amongst the families living in Settlement A.

In these communities TechEverybody's work involves supporting efforts at education for children, and encouraging and enabling access to government entitlements for adults and families. Rupina says that whilst the NGO staff find their efforts are oftentimes met with disinterest and apathy, they continue to visit, and have built up a great deal of trust through regular presence and with the help of their local supporters. Here again the work is spearheaded by women who are responsible for the day-to-day running of projects. In Settlement A we met the local WIL, Swapnika who was born into the community and is engaged with overseeing a collection of settlements, supporting them with their needs, travelling in between them through the dense terrain on a moped.

The settlements vary in how engaged they are with TechEverybody's efforts, and the provisions of the WIL Swapnika. Whilst in Settlement B there was more interest in education with some children attending school regularly, in Settlement A we drove in to see children walking around outside during what would have been school time, much to the dismay of

¹⁰⁵ This eviction is part of a long process set in place by the Forest Rights Act (2006), which gave communities living in forests for more than three generations the rights to live and work on the land, provided they completed administrative claims to local government to exercise their right. These claims were not completed amongst the vast majority of these communities since the idea of them *not having* right to live and work on the land seemed a completely alien concept, whilst other claims were rejected by local authorities with suspicions that this was to be able to sell the land to industries (Dhillon, 2019). The push to enact the law and evict communities who had not proved their connection to the land came following pressure on government from wildlife conservation groups who claimed that Indigenous peoples were jeopardising efforts to protect the forests and ecology, and moving into areas that were not their historical dwellings (ibid.).

the TechEverybody team who tried to encourage them to get to school. According to Rupina, the Indian government's goal is integration of the tribes into Hindu society against their will, however even this goal has no provisions, with no local school available for the children in Settlement C.

The most pressing issue at the time of my visit was flood relief, including supplies such as medications and blankets. Whilst there were flood related entitlements available from the government to claim these required an application process that required photos to be taken and sent through online systems within 24 hours—a task which was extremely difficult given limited access to devices, power, data coverage, and literacy. In this area there was very little to no data coverage, with power outages common from falling trees and infrastructure not robust.

Rupina explains that the Indigenous peoples were not particularly interested in the idea of getting internet access, and even where devices were given to them or shown to them people who often respond that they did not have a need since “everyone I know is here”. Having experienced years of persecution and structural discrimination encroaching on their cultures, values and way of living, access to internet tools draws some degree of concern and suspicion. Many members of the community across the settlements live with severe alcohol addiction and mental health difficulties relating to the experiences they have lived through. Older members of the community in particular are disinterested in schooling or even accessing state entitlements as they feel that they should aim to return to their forest homes. Rather than adjusting to living in the settlements at the outskirts of the forest, most people in the communities dream about returning to their autonomous lifeways, to start to adjust would involve an acceptance of their displacement.

As I have mentioned, when they were expelled the communities were allocated settlements located just on the outskirts of the forest. However, the Indian government had, in the eviction, taken away the traditional subsistence way of living the groups followed. Whereas before they would have spent their days gathering wild foods to live from, now they were reliant on receiving government rations, and were sometimes employed by the government to go into the forest to harvest goods. This once again makes use of their specialised skills of

foraging and harvesting, as well as making items like brooms, whilst forcing the communities to sell them to the government for a very low rate.

Women and girls are able to move more freely in the Indigenous settlements and are able to divorce and marry according to their will. However there are a number of serious issues including high rates of child sex, marriage and child pregnancy, lack of contraception leading to high birth rates overall, and high rates of sexually-transmitted infections. In Settlement C it was notable that only boys had gone to the school, which was located a distance away, with very young girls engaged with taking care of their small children. Although in Hindu villages training women enables them to use their skills with ICTs as a form of social bargaining this is not the case here as power relations are structured differently, and because technology and access to it is considered less desirable.

On arrival in Settlement A, we were taken to see a young man who had suffered deep cuts and injuries all over his face and body after being attacked by a bear. Rupina shared that after their eviction from the forests, settlements for these Indigenous peoples had been arranged by local government at the borders of forested areas to take advantage of their traditional skills in fending off wild animals, acting as a human barrier to stop tigers and bears from heading towards villages and cities. One of the NGO team members administered some care to the injured young man, whilst other colleagues moved around the village giving out the various resources that they had brought along. Watching this unfold I was aware that the NGO—whose focus was on ICTs—were expending most of their efforts on tasks that were wholly not-digital. When I mused as much to Rupina, her response was straightforward in a way that had me questioning how I was processing the situation as she shrugged her shoulders and said “this is what they need”.

This need to respond to communities’ needs at a given time, regardless of the activists’ remit also comes up for GenderOnline. Dexa explains that the Nepal-based NGO was asked to assist in disseminating support during the early COVID-19 pandemic.

We were approached by funders because there was so much need. We were asked for direct support, like, for food and other supplies. So in between we did a bit of that

work because the funders that we had, at that point, they asked for it, we wanted to allocate some of our money to whoever needs it and we were reluctant in the beginning, because we're like, hey, we don't exactly do that work. We don't know how to do it. But later on, we had to do it. So we just helped two organisations who work with sex workers and one who mostly works with LGBTI, mostly trans people. So just channel the funding from one point to another because we are the trusted group for the funder (Dexa, 2022).

The complexities of life in communities that are targeted for expanding internet access are not centred upstream but, as this shows, they still happen and they still have to be confronted locally.

Visits to these communities illustrate how insufficient agendas that centre access to the internet as a technical cure-all can be. There are such pressing environmental, cultural, political and existential threats to contend with like the climate crisis and ethnic persecution that the internet universality agenda feels parochial and an imposition. The Indian government's use of online portals to disseminate information and resources can clearly be seen to have gendered implications as well as having a particularly insidious edge for the communities living in the Indigenous settlements.

6.2.2 Systems of education

Teacher training

Moving to the work of the South I TechEverybody office, which is located in a city, projects revolve around the education system. The teacher training project involves educating student teachers on how they can better use software and internet tools in their pedagogical practice. TechEverybody is critical of approaches that involve instructing student teachers in how to “use a few pieces of proprietary software” (Uday, head of education programmes, TechEverybody), which become the centrepiece of their lessons. Rather, the organisation looks to furnish individuals with critical perspectives around ICTs, as well as creative skills to integrate software tools of different kinds into their work with

their classes. TechEverybody encourages the student teachers to formulate pedagogical intentions first, develop strategies for teaching, and only then bring in tools that can serve to support their goals.

I was able to observe second year students taking end of term exams contributing towards their Bachelor of Education qualification. The exams took place on a Saturday afternoon with most of the college empty and three classrooms occupied by the student teachers who were split by their subject specialism. The cohorts that I observed were majority young women, with a few men, aged around 18 to 22-years old. For their assessment they presented for 5 minutes each to their subject cohort of student teachers, showing a lesson plan they had developed on a topic of their choice from the curriculum they would be teaching. Only the science teachers were presenting in English, so I spent most of the time with this cohort and since I was a new face the NGO staff also invited me to share feedback with the presenters on their work. The exams were to assess students' understanding of TechEverybody's training regarding how software and online tools could be used in the classroom. Each presenter was invited to stand at the front of the room; in the science cohort there were about 20 people in the spaces made up of peers, student teachers and the training staff from TechEverybody who had delivered the course.

The student teachers used a whole range of tools creatively for learning purposes. It was notable how many different types of opensource and free tools and software packages the students had used, giving each presentation a very different look and feel, although they all used the opensource OpenOffice Impress slides software. During their presentations the students also described their design process which involved spending time finding opensource and free 'Open Educational Resources' to achieve what they wanted to, as well as finding media content to illustrate their lessons from online creative commons sources. 'Open Educational Resources' is a policy agenda which is supported by UNESCO, who define it as referring to

learning, teaching and research materials in any format and medium that reside in the public domain or are under copyright that have been released under an open

license, that permit no-cost access, re-use, re-purpose, adaptation and redistribution by others (UNESCO, n.d.).

Below, three of the presentations which I observed are outlined to give an idea of what kinds of approaches the student teachers took.

In Presentation 1 the student teacher had created activities using online tools. These activities were ‘fill in the blank’, which she put on worksheets she handed round, and anagram games that were made to be played as a group looking at the slides as they were projected at the front of the room. The student teacher had also made a video clip using a montage of images she had gathered online which had some music playing over it and her voiceover explaining the images. The majority felt that overall there were too many different elements in this lesson plan and said it needed simplification.

In Presentation 2 the student had created a video to showcase the words of a poem. This was then integrated with a group activity that involved using images she had gathered from the internet. This presentation received strong criticism from her peers for not making the point of the activity clear, this was an occasion where different tools had been used but the pedagogical intention was missing—according to the cohort—highlighting that this is a serious point of focus.

In Presentation 3 the student teacher had sourced a ready-made worksheet from a database of Open Educational Resources. They paired this with audio which they had sourced online and edited together using free software Audacity. Whilst listening to the audio the audience worked together to fill out the worksheet which projected at the front of the class. This received positive feedback from the class as it combined something which was ready-made (efficient use of resource and time) with something which was unique to the teacher.

The TechEverybody examiner asked each student “How have ICTs helped your teaching?” and students generally covered the same range of replies: the gathering of video, image and audio resources and specific educational resources; saving time; the ability to use illustrative

tools to ensure student understanding more easily and more efficiently. It was notable how much of a range of opensource tools the student teachers would use to achieve precise design goals, this felt very different to being guided by the limitations of any one software package. This stuck out as one of the ways in which TechEverybody's criticality was baked-into the training which they had given, and would be something that would get passed onto the classes the student teachers would go on to work with.

Girls in urban schools programme

TechEverybody further develops the skills these young teachers acquire by working with them after they have completed their training and commenced teaching in schools. In August 2019 the NGO had recently begun piloting a project getting young girls using ICTs at local schools in the city. The team responsible for this work took the time to tell me about this project at the South I office and, given that most of the team primarily speak Kannada and a number of other south Indian languages which I do not speak, we communicated in English with the team lead, Vitaka, translating for me and her colleagues.

The team had been testing out their methodology with sporadic sessions in a few select schools; they were now negotiating with local schools to have them allocate more regular time during term to TechEverybody's programme. Their ambition was to create a three-year programme for adolescent girls in eighth to tenth standard by the Indian educational system who are around 13 to 16 years-old. This required difficult discussions with schools where senior staff members held negative views about girls and their use of ICTs. For the team, it was easier to try and find time during the school day than it would have been to take more time outside of this as parents would be unlikely to agree, given that sending girls to school is already a point of contention when they could be providing more value to the family by staying at home, providing domestic labour and looking after their siblings.

The team described setting up the programme as being a difficult process that requires long term negotiation, as schools and parents hold some suspicion regarding the educational services provided by the NGO. Broadly speaking, TechEverybody offers to teach young girls ICT tools and skills, like how to find reliable information online, and how to produce videos

and audio projects using a smartphone. Whilst ICT tools are the medium of education, and framed as the primary content, additional content provides information regarding sexual health and works to “open up [the girls’] options” with regards to life decisions such as early marriage, according to Vitaka.

Team members responsible for delivering the teaching in schools share that their target communities tend to view access to the internet for girls and women negatively, as a bad influence. They describe a feeling that these technologies are considered to be “corrupting”, with implicit assumptions regarding girls accessing sexual connections and content, and information which would make them seek to evade control of their family members.

There is a balance to be maintained for the NGO team, as they also express concerns about girls’ use of internet tools, specifically social media. Whilst social stigma rests on the girls themselves, charging them with engaging in unacceptable behaviours, the NGO staff are more worried about online environments being unsafe in gendered ways. Vitaka explains that young girls are using social media as their primary interaction with the internet and that the NGO staff are “seeing school girls presenting themselves as adult women, as well as adult women presenting themselves as school girls”. This can lead to “risky behaviour” with young girls presenting themselves as older online, making them more vulnerable to exploitation, grooming and violence.

The team goes on to explain that social networks based on video and image, specifically TikTok, YouTube and Instagram are more appealing as they do not have the language barriers that text-based tools have primarily Kannada-speaking communities. However, Vitaka is critical of an approach that only “denies access”, as is the case in many schools, justified by a purported “corruptive influence” and instead wishes to equip children in their decision-making.

“We’re demystifying tech, all [young girls] hear is don’t don’t don’t”, shares Vitaka. The programme is of particular importance for marginalised, poor and low-caste girls whose parents keep them at home from school to work. The activities that are set as part of the programme often involve family participation, for example, recording their parents for an

audio clip. This is important as parents usually do not attend parents' meetings at the school, and are therefore are not engaged with their children's education, this means that they can often not understand the value of sending their girls to school.

Tasks set for participants in the programme involve storytelling using video, photograph taking, use of voice commands, downloading and using apps offline, and basics of programming for children. The use of social networks is not a part of the programme as this would deter schools from including the sessions in their classrooms.

The goals of the work according to the team are: to reduce the risk of early marriage and to keep girls in education for as long as possible; to facilitate girls to articulate adolescent issues; to help girls in developing their life aspirations; and to enable the children to see ICTs as tools that they can make use of. Vitaka shares that the Indian school system "makes [school children] into parrots" and "railroads them" down a specific path, "flattening" their opinions—"to have opinions is considered negative". In this light the programme seeks to "give back autonomy and explore where [the girls] want to go next, with self confidence in their articulation". Supporting them in developing these skills, Vitaka hopes that they will be able to tell the stories they want to tell, and that girls will be able to communicate with each other. Rather than learning being seen as a "burden", and the "internet as something to fear" she hopes to change perceptions that ICTs can be used to make learning easier.

The programme is in constant negotiation with a number of challenges which the team described as follows. Firstly, they have limited time in schools ranging from 40 to 80 minutes per week, which is difficult to manage because they hold participatory sessions. Secondly, young girls have limited access to devices; whilst families do not tend to have desktops, they do tend to have shared phones, however these are more likely to be used by boys and men in the household. This is because, thirdly, Vitaka describes the culture as "very inhibitive" for girls when it comes to using ICTs, both at school and at home. There is more value ascribed to desktops because these are thought to confer social opportunities and are considered more in terms of providing access to home jobs for girls, however families are often dissuaded from acquiring them for fear that boys will use desktop computers to consume porn. Fourthly, the cost of devices and data plans are very high for low-income families with

the cheapest smartphone handset costing around 1000 rupees and data plans costing about 50 rupees monthly. Fifthly, to get a phone SIM contract requires an Aadhar number, a home address and a photo and many marginalised families do not have an Aadhar because of the bureaucratic requirements.

6.3 Organising nationally

6.3.1 Gendered social norms

Moving up a level from the local to the national, and bringing in other contexts outside of India illustrates that gendered inhibitions in social attitudes apply limits in different ways across contexts. Irum, an independent activist, describes her experience of conducting research looking at the Pakistani “gender digital divide” with an NGO where she was formerly working (2022). She feels that the NGO’s managerial staff limited the directions of the research in numerous ways that constrained the feminist orientations that the NGO claimed for the work, and which Irum had hoped to embody, she explains that “the project was severely restricted by societal and institutional limitations”. When looking at the topic of gendered access to the internet she had been keen to include the lived experiences of women and queer persons, however this was not permitted. Senior colleagues were concerned how the inclusion of queer groups would be received, whilst Irum’s desired focus on lived experiences was also considered to be unsuitable.

In the Nepali context, activist Dexa explains the difficulty of talking about gender and the technical together.

We have been trying to talk to people from a technical background as well as people from the other side like journalists, activists or women's rights advocates, letting them see the linkage between gender and internet, because it's always usually seen as something very technical, something people without internet or without IT background can't understand (Dexa, 2018).

Access to funding also plays a role in the decisions that NGOs have to make in how they frame their work in gendered environments. Dexa feels that the NGO which she founded, GenderWitness, has struggled from its inception to communicate what they do.

I have personally struggled with how to frame the work that we do in front of others. Because we're all women and queer people, right? And wherever we go like we are visible, we speak like that, we mention women and marginalised communities. So people will think we work with LGBTI community, like they don't put digital rights anywhere in the work that we do. So some people think we are LGBTI rights group, some people think we are like art school because we put out like art medium to talk in our social media, I don't know what. It's quite confusing to people of how they see us (Dexa, 2018).

Not wanting to give ground and move away from their focus, which includes gender and sexual expression online, the organisation has also wanted to benefit from the greater variety of funding becoming available to organisations that are seen to focus on so-called 'digital rights'.

Irum describes how, in the Pakistani context, women's activism is socially acceptable and given government approval and permission only when considered "palatable by middle-classes" and appealing to international notions of "liberal feminism" (2022). Her example of this is the well-known 'Aurat March' (translated as Women's March) which has taken place in several cities across the country annually after its inaugural instance in 2018 on International Women's Day. The marches have been accompanied by arresting artwork, the most recognisable being a poster designed by Lahore-based Shehzil Mailk in 2019—a practice of art-marking that has continued at the march ever since, circulating on social networking sites and in the national and international press (Javaid, 2021). Irum mentions this to contrast with the struggles of women in the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), who experienced a four-year internet blackout (Díaz Hernández and Antonio, 2022, p. 3). "They don't have the same appeal to middle class aesthetics as the posters" she continues, "I feel like optics matter more than grassroots work". Here she alludes to the

class dynamics at play, as well as explaining the ethnic discrimination which impacts the tribes living in the former FATA region; “women [there] are not seen to have agency”.

For Irum, initiatives like the Aurat March give the impression that women from different regions and social groups are enjoying similar levels of access to the internet, resulting in a kind of silencing (2022). Even after the supposed end of the blackout, very little internet access is available to anyone in the former FATA of Pakistan, that were merged with neighbouring province, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2018, bringing about an end to their semi-autonomous status. These areas have seen huge securitisation since 2004 due to the global ‘war on terror’. Sporadic internet was introduced in 2005, but was not accessible to the majority until 2014, however even this dwindled from 2016 following violence at the border with Afghanistan (Kamran, 2017). Irum sees ongoing disconnection and poor connection as a political move to securitise specific provinces by the government and Army in collusion (2022). Contracts for connection in Azad Jammu and Kashmir, former FATA, and Gilgit Baltistan have been awarded to the Special Communication Organisation (SCO), which is overseen by the Pakistani Army—all of these locations suffer from poor access and shutdowns (Baloch and Musyani, 2020).

Researcher Hija Kamran’s (in Rehman et al., 2021). subsequent work points towards difficulties becoming more acute during the COVID-19 pandemic as, for example, women students had to leave universities and colleges in other parts of the country and return to poorly connected regions during lockdowns. Scarcity of connectivity, however, is just a part of the problem; girls returning home had little time as they were expected to pick up domestic responsibilities and give up limited internet bandwidth to allow boys to continue their education. Additionally, women’s mobility is restricted in the former FATA areas, meaning they must move around accompanied by a man, adding a barrier to their ability to go outside in search of mobile signal—an option that is more available to men.

National internet governance discussions in the Nepali context tend to see high-caste men dictate the broad agenda, according to Dexa. Even though the feminist and queer critique they share is society-wide representatives from GenderOnline are only ever invited to speak on limited topics.

We are seeing few more digital rights groups, all Brahmin men, typical Brahmin men in suits, like mostly lawyers, suddenly they are visible and they are being invited in spaces by government and other NGOs and we see that in photos and we're like, hey, we've been here, we don't get invited, how come these dudes are being invited? So that's becoming more and more visible, and we feel like we have been put into this box of like "gendered online violence people". So even if there is an event where we get invited, we get invited to those kinds of topics, rarely in larger digital rights conversation (Dexa, 2022).

Dexa has noticed that as 'digital rights' have emerged as a topic which is seen as more important, new organisations have emerged—led by high-caste men—and it is these groups that get invited to share their views on new policy.

6.3.2 Making misogyny visible

The idea that women and gender minorities need to be protected from the internet has been an ongoing way in which they have been prevented from being able to access online tools independently and without surveillance. Irum is highly wary of this narrative, which she describes as "infantilising" and shares that, from her research, women who experience online violence are able to create ways in which they can protect themselves and keep themselves safe. Misogynist attitudes that prohibit women from using online services are able to work alongside impunity for online for gender-based violence becomes clear, with the latter providing justification for the former. From Irum's perspective this requires consistent feminist activism on all fronts, but she finds that the organisations she works with are unwilling (she adds that they would argue themselves unable) to commit in visible and explicit ways—particularly in regards to government policy. Anita Gurumurthy (RightsCon, 2021) from the Indian NGO IT for Change similarly resists the notion that "safety and protection discourse" concerning women online is helpful. She notes that, in India, "a recent return to gender conservatism" has emerged alongside digitalisation, with a view that the internet causes divorces rates to rise, as it "turns women into sluts".

In the Nepali context there is more interest in work looking at online gender-based violence. Considering that GenderOnline is a feminist organisation, they find that whilst they look to also highlight queer communities and women's agency, this is of less interest to the press and other national actors.

We were quoted in couple of newspapers and stuff. But people usually really liked the online violence bit of the research and not other things. We really wanted to focus on how people are also content creators, not just content receivers. So we also wanted to bring that kind of narrative, but mostly the violence bit gets more consumed, and people like that kind of thing (Dexa, 2022).

Indigenous, transgender activist Shama highlights that social networking tools and applications are indispensable for queer communities in Nepal to connect amongst themselves, however, she notes that that differences in education and digital literacy may mean people proceed with less information about where their data or images may be available.

The major aspect of having internet access is: how familiar are you with digital and how familiar you are with using electronic devices? There are also people who even don't know English, but they are still using that just uploading their pictures very blind, very bluntly (Shama, 2018).

Moves to 'protect' queer communities online tools deny the crucial role they play for building identity, finding information and meeting other queer people, especially for people living in isolated situations.

Nepal held its first national Internet Governance Forum (IGF) in 2017, and it was the next year that GenderOnline formally came into being. Dexa describes how one of the organisation's primary goals is to interrogate the ICT policies which were being developed from a feminist and queer perspective.

The government has been trying to push some of the policy documents like IT bill, they have come up recently with, and individual privacy bill. So they are coming up with certain kinds of deals and policies. We actually want to see whether or not online violence has been spelled out in these documents, and also look into things such as how state [passing these policies] loops them into women's bodies when they're trying to control us (Dexa, 2018).

As planned, GenderOnline published a significant critique of the draft IT Bill (2019) when it was made available, contributing to a whole range of voices that opposed the law both in the country and abroad. Critics argue that the IT Bill allows the Nepali government powers to place restrictions online content, and punish offenders with imprisonment and fines (Amnesty International, 2020).

The Nepal IGF is also a space where GenderOnline work to build connections with other groups who share their views, although it is not easy given its “macho” atmosphere.

We want to actually intervene in [policymaking] or look into how can we advocate along with other groups that have been advocating around mostly the community and also the IGF as well, the Internet Governance Forum. So this year, it's happening next month. So we are also like, part of the Organising Committee trying to do stuff like figure out stuff like how do we navigate in this like macho space (Dexa, 2018).

GenderOnline has worked to provide critical analysis on policy. According to Dexa, in that regard the national IGF plays an important role in providing space where this can be circulated.

6.3.3 Queer community

Nepali blogger and activist Shama describes the importance of access to the internet for queer groups in the Nepali context to connect with one another, recalling how she grew up visiting internet cafes, which she took as an opportunity to find queer community, especially through her blog.

As a young person I see that online platforms are very, very essential, because a lot of offline connections are based on that because we still don't have the social structure that is friendly, that can create an offline space. Without, you know, without help from online platform, so I think for me looking as a person who was very much raised with internet shops for me, I feel that it's an important platform (Shama, 2018).

From the indispensability also comes risk. As Shama explains, for her, online gender-based violence online is not completely novel, nor a continuation of exactly the same discrimination that occurs offline, but new configurations of old harms. For instance, she describes that “LGBTI” persons are more able to speak about issues relating to their lives and identities and to connect with one another, which has been a positive development. However, as internet access broadens it has also made it easier for individuals and groups that are hostile to queer communities to connect with each other and find queer persons online to attack their groups, content and profiles. This reflects her own experience as an Indigenous trans woman engaged with online activism.

It's more easily accessible for people to harass someone, to humiliate someone, or to discriminate someone. Because you have the access, you have a platform. People who are vocal on LGBTI issues are subjected to false reporting, subjected to humiliation, subjected to stigmatisation, public bashing that takes place online such as taking a screenshot of your profile and posting in some very transphobic people's group and talking and harassing (Shama, 2022).

In this regard online anonymity holds a complicated position for Shama, providing the opportunity for “LGBTI” persons to “express themselves anonymously”, however, this anonymity also creates risk as people become vulnerable to being misled and violently harmed when these vulnerabilities are weaponised, taking advantage of societal discrimination.

Because a lot of LGBTI people are compelled to stay in closet and they're seeking exploring their sexuality on these platforms, I think it would be more easier for them

if there was increased social acceptance so they will not have to rely on an anonymous I.D. where you don't know who you're talking with. It's all about luck game, you never know. You meet a person very randomly whom you have never met, you send pictures, it's all very risky though. For example, two anonymous I.D.s are talking and as they get closer they exchange pictures. Pictures which might lead to exploitation of that person and blackmailing. And there are consequences in such society, which is very much a LGBTI phobic society (Shama, 2022).

Internet access is simultaneously a lifeline and a weapon of surveillance and policing gender and sexuality, Shama describes the situation as a tightrope between social isolation on the one hand and the risk of abuse and violence on the other.

6.3.4 Between government and corporations

Activists describe difficult positions where governments have put in place few measures or have deliberately limited internet access for certain groups and areas, whilst corporations are offering other sorts of restricted internet access. Navigating this becomes more complex where there is collusion between the two. Soha, a researcher and activist working with Pakistani NGO InternetWitness, considers how online abuse of women is often met with inaction from the companies that run social networks and by the government. By contrast the Pakistani government has regularly blocked YouTube, Facebook and TikTok in recent years, until specific content has been removed, usually in relation what is purported “immoral and indecent” content (Shahzad, 2020).

Soha observes that Facebook/Meta’s Free Basics application, the same service that was banned in India, is allowed in Pakistan along with other zero-rated services, challenging net neutrality and “really transforming the meaning of access itself, and what it means to have access”.

There are a lot of times [zero-rating] is to ensure more access. But what ends up happening is that it's a very sort of restricted form of access to data, which is quite interesting how that plays out (Soha, 2019).

Companies' choices about what gets included in the zero-rated package has significant implications, privileging certain tools and services, like in the case of Free Basics which privileges Facebook/Meta services.

Some barriers and restrictions are made visible, like those related to anti-Islamic content, or in claims of 'national security' whilst others, like those behind Free Basics are less evident. From Soha's feminist perspective access should be considered as a whole of social and technical factors, however she notes that this is not the case in Pakistani national policy discussions, a sentiment which is shared by Irum.

The priority within access is access to devices and certain connections that enable those devices to be properly routed to the internet. But I would say that access is also more complicated, you can have infrastructural access at times, but because of your identity you will be treated differently online, even if you can sort of theoretically get access, for example, if the infrastructure is available in your area, you're not able to because of financial barriers, or even when you are online, your access is limited you unconsciously limit your own sort of activities online because of online harassment (Soha, 2019).

Engaging in this activism openly can have serious implications. Founder of NGO Digital Rights Foundation Nighat Dad shares that she was accused of being "an agent of social media companies" by a Pakistani politician in a bid to undermine a campaign she was leading against changes to legislation which she argues impinge on the rights of citizens online (Zamurd-Butt, 2017). Whilst she continues that measures designed to evade surveillance do not always work in every context:

We get feedback from people using, say a VPN or Signal in Balochistan, and then they'll get a phone call from a security agency saying 'hey we can't see your internet traffic what are you using?' (Dad in Zamurd-Butt, 2017).

In the Nepali context, Shama describes a limited concern about tracking by governments online, attributing this to there not having been significant instances of repressive behaviour from the government.

For a long time, I had completely no idea that people can track our messages. Facebook can provide government—already the government had access [to] our messages, and I have completely no idea about encryption and stuff like that. So I think a lot, a big portion of Nepali people who have access to internet and also do not have idea about all these risks regarding digital security. Particularly because we don't have a very suppressive experience as being tracked, you know in countries such as Bangladesh they hacked the bloggers. We don't have that that's a very, very regressive situation for us. And we were not at that level, I guess. So that's why we are not even thinking of that, we also have discussions sometimes in the LGBTI movement—the reason that people just don't care because people are checking in, in the real time and people are updating very, you know, sensitive information, and people just don't care because nothing has happened yet (Shama, 2022).

Shama is glad that the government has not taken action against queer persons in the country given the lack of privacy and lack of awareness many Nepali people have with regards to their online communications.

6.4 Global policy consultations

6.4.1 Getting there

Soha describes how for her organisation, InternetWitness, attending events like the global IGF is a huge investment of time and resource. In 2018 she attended the global IGF for the first time, and did so as part of a delegation funded by US-based non-profit Freedom House with whom her organisation works regularly.

Considering that it was such an expensive sort of experience, that it was so inaccessible there is a really big issue of access to the IGF forums themselves, and there has been work I understand over the years that the national and regional IGFs can be more inclusive. But I didn't see integration of IGFs at the regional level at this level. They did seem like they were a group of people that were well-connected with each other and it didn't feel like there were new voices coming through (Soha, 2019).

Having been through the difficulties of getting to the IGF which in 2018 took place in Paris, France, Soha found it hard to access people and discussions once there, finding that national and regional IGFs that she had been connected to were poorly integrated and as such did not act as stepping stone to engaging in this broader arena.

As well as funding the costs of attending internet governance consultations, the other challenge confronting activists from certain Majority World contexts involves getting visas to travel. Soha describes the process as a “nightmare” which involves investing money in booking the flight without knowing if the visa will be granted, and then awaiting the outcome until days before. This takes a personal toll as the wait to find out and inability make plans is stressful.

Priya, who manages research for TechEverybody, describes how in 2018 their organisation did not have any proposals accepted for the global IGF programme. She was able to contribute to panels organised by others, however, this was by invitation.

So we had a lot of proposals that we put together way back in the year and for many reasons, I think also, because the programming was quite reduced, and we only had three days instead of four. I think the number of workshops was reduced greatly. So none of our proposals that we had done with others made it through. The panels that I attended were ones that we were already invited to, and I was invited to represent the organisation (Priya, 2019).

Priya feels that her organisation is able to sustain this kind of outcome, and still attend the global IGF because it has been around since 2000, is well-known and well-regarded and thus able to arrange to contribute to panels run by their organisation allies.

6.4.2 In search of funding

Mehwish, founder and director of InternetWitness describes how she receives a lot of invitations to speaking events globally, and often feels pressed to go, even when exhausted, to try and solicit funding for her organisation. In our interview (2019) she expresses frustration with being called to speak about her work in Pakistan in front of “Western audiences” because whilst they show interest and concern, they are reluctant to provide any material support which is what her NGO needs to keep going.

At the 2018 global IGF, InternetWitness was seeking funding specifically from organisations working on gender—an area in which they were struggling to get funding—with Soha representing. Grantmaking organisations were not very present, however Soha hoped that the event had enabled connections which may lead to funding for future projects.

It's good for networking, it sort of does connect you to the larger community, I was able to keep a few meetings, like after I came back, so I guess in that sense, it was quite productive. It's a good way to get your work out there, to let everybody know what you're working on and to connect to sort of like-minded people. So in that sense, it was good. Since my aim was to connect to donors and sort of potential funders. So in that sense, it was successful. Not exactly funders they didn't seem to be there, but we were able to meet people that we could potentially collaborate with. Not funders but maybe some of these partners in the future can help us branch out and expand our work (Soha, 2019).

Attending with the Freedom House delegation facilitated some access to meetings, as they had been organised for Soha prior to her arrival. The rest of the time she had to seek out those she wanted to connect with by engaging with the programme of events.

As part of the Freedom House delegation, we had two or three meetings set up with a few social media companies. So we had like, really in depth meetings. So apart from that, I had like, sort of planned according to the schedule, so panellists that I

was particularly interested in meeting or themes that I wanted to attend (Soha, 2019).

GenderOnline has grown significantly since it was started in 2018, however getting funding has been a challenging journey. Dexa describes that initially they needed to gain visibility which they attempted to do at events on Twitter, where they had first contact from a funder who approached them after seeing their tweets. Over time they have been able to be more selective as an organisation.

We have been approached by funders that were not politically aligning with our values, where we haven't taken the funding. Or we try to take funding only for human resources support. We try not to do that. Initially, we had to do that with a couple of funders, but at a certain point, we just stopped doing it (Dexa, 2022).

GenderOnline is supported by three main funders, which according to Dexa “are all feminist”¹⁰⁶; having this alignment, she adds, has allowed them to grow. Dexa problematises that these funders are all US-based, and whilst she would prefer Asian funders, she has found there not to be any resources available for the kind of work her organisation does, meaning she has to look further afield.

6.4.3 Global South solidarities

Soha shares that one of InternetWitness’ major aims in being at ‘global’ conferences involves contributing a ‘Global South’ perspective.

We want to be obviously, sort of part of the international sessions around some of these issues. It was part of our work to make sure that the perspective of the Global South was out there (Soha, 2019).

¹⁰⁶ The names of funders were not shared.

Similarly for Dexa the visibility of other Majority World civil society organisations is important to make sense of what is happening in the Nepali context. The connections between geographically different locations are important with regards to internet rights and policy, for her, in ways that they may not necessarily be in other areas of national policy.

What are the other activists doing in other regions? Versus what's happening here and how it's connected? Like, we just can't separate [internet rights and policy] like other issues and I'm realising it more and more now (Dexa, 2022).

Priya develops on this to explain how her organisation works from what she calls a “Global South paradigm”, and in this work aims to challenge liberal notions of development facilitated by neutral, rational technological tools.

We do have a lot of what you would consider national work. But I think all of our work generally comes from a Global South paradigm, the idea of really looking at developing countries, whether it's communities within developing countries, whether it's developing countries themselves as a bloc, or as clusters, and how North-South dynamics are in different kinds of negotiations, especially when it comes to the internet. The internet has always kind of been understood as a Global North issue, right, because there's this weird understanding that the only thing that Global South organisations can talk about and contribute is experiences of censorship by governments or repression, or internet shutdowns and those kinds of problems, which are very much real. And I don't want to say that they don't exist. I have no interest in undermining that. But I think there is also a lot of scope for Global South and when I say Global South—organisations like us, we're located in developing nations—to actively challenge those highly liberal discourses of, you know, developing nations and societies and public spheres always being those of repression and actually think about economic development. Thinking about what technology does and how technology is not necessarily a neutral, sort of agent of change and all of those things come with particular understandings (Priya, 2019).

In this regard Soha describes there being insufficient Majority World civil society representation on panels in her experiences of attending the IGF, attributing this at least in part to where the events have been held.

The focus on human rights was quite on the back burner, which is something that I wish that it wasn't, there wasn't a lot of civil society represented, especially civil society from the Global South which you could see, and that did end up informing the discussions that were coming in some of the panels. So yeah, I think it was probably about where the conference was held, and sort of all those dynamics came out (Soha, 2018).

Even though Majority World solidarity is considered important for interviewees, a capacity and resource gap is felt by Deka for smaller civil society organisations to engage in regional forums. Considering their funding comes mainly from US funding organisations GenderOnline are disincentivised to make connections regionally, and spend their limited funds on regional trips which are unlikely to yield resources to sustain the work.

Whilst active at consultations herself, Anita Gurumurthy from IT for Change warns that seeking out representation in these spaces should be approached strategically and with caution.

We need to ask in our translocal solidarities are we getting lost in a web of articulations? Or are we getting drowned in post voice trappings of platform expressions. Rainbow capitalism is a risk. Western sexual rights campaigns are not going to trickle down into the postcolonial (Anita Gurumurthy, RightsCon, 2021).

Here she signals how easily tokenism can hamstring social movements, re-stating that a more tactical approach is required in the smoke and mirrors of “platform expressions” and “rainbow capitalism”.

6.4.4 Programming processes

All of the collaborating NGOs have founders and directors that have particularly high profiles, and that tend to appear in more at global policy consultations and gatherings. For GenderOnline the invitations tend to come to Dexa, however she has noticed that when she suggests that a colleague go instead the invitations are often revoked.

In my experience the organiser would really want to help the organisation or someone in higher position and I find that very problematic. It's not just in regional spaces also in national [spaces] because we try to share those kind of spaces among the team. And some spaces, whenever I recommend someone else from the team, there won't be any follow up communication like if I am unavailable then you know, the doors are shut. So it's also weird in that sense. They definitely want someone with good English communication skills and someone who is already aware of the scenario, rather than making it a space for newcomers to learn, I guess, I don't know (Dexa, 2022).

Priya is concerned that the so-called 'multistakeholder model' of programming—which is explicated to be part of both RightsCon—and the IGF privileges already powerful corporations.

So if you look at the sessions they have a really clear understanding about what multistakeholder is in that, you have to have a government person, you have to have a private body, etc. I think it's fair that you don't want to be crowded with too many of one kind, but I also think that those should be judgments that should be made based on the composition of the panel, and not really this sort of checklist way of thinking, oh do you actually have Facebook or Google sitting in with you, if you want to talk about that for a second? That's a very strange way to judge, because it's not as if private companies have any dearth of spaces for them to be talking about or like setting agendas, the fact that there is an insistence that civil society keep acceding to them, is something that I have a big problem with, because it's not necessarily that I'm opposed to make more space. But having that be an imposition is something that

I think is an issue, and I know for a fact, that's the reason a lot of proposals at IGF didn't make it because, you know, there was a lot of ideas about what an IGF multistakeholder session should look like (Priya, 2019).

Priya highlights a norm that the multistakeholder model enforces whereby all sectors must always be represented, taking issue in particular with corporations having access to spaces where they can further their already significant influence. The research has also shown times when corporations choose not to be present in a multistakeholder discussion, and how the lack of representation can be used to delegitimise the conversation. Priya's concerns are all the more notable considering the flows of funding that some corporations put into consultations, and the degree of alignment this indicates, which has been discussed in Chapter 4.

6.4.5 Global spaces for national issues

GenderOnline's priority is working in the local Nepali context, however, facing the challenges of gatekeeping and patriarchal exclusion in national spaces, the organisation has found itself having to engage more in global policy consultations. Significantly, these global spaces are considered as a possible avenue to interact with the Nepali government, although Dexa explains members have not yet been present.

We want to work at the local level with the people here, which means we will do campaigns or workshops and trainings, all the research would be grounded here. But when it comes to advocacy, we don't exactly do policy advocacy here in Nepal. Mostly, because there's a lot of gatekeeping that happens, we don't get invited, even if we want to go it just doesn't work. So the only space we can see where we can intervene is the global spaces, there's limited spaces that we can and we are invited to 'intervene' with the actors like tech companies, and if our government happens to be there, probably with them, which hasn't been the case, actually (Dexa, 2022).

This situation is far from ideal for Dexa, who feels that having to operate in these opportunistic ways detracts from the organisation being able to pursue its goals, however,

given the internet's global scope she sees activism on multiple scales as necessary. In this regard Dexa sees activism related to the internet as distinct from other NGO work she has engaged with in her career previously.

I don't even like that advocacy, because it's so haphazardly done. It's not organised, it's not planned as to how we do it. But at the same time, the work that we do in terms of access and talking against censorship, that definitely touches upon all the tech giants and global corporations. So in a way, we are talking to them, but not directly. Most of the work is limited to national [issues] but at the same time, we try to connect what's happening globally. How do we call ourselves a national or a local level organisation? There's no clear distinction on that because usually in my past work, national level work would just be advocacy within the national level, versus just the global [international] organisations. I find a bit of blur there, actually (Dexa, 2022).

Safety concerns can also force activists to work outside of their national context, as Salwa Sameer Rana from Pakistan shared at RightsCon in 2019, "Pakistani lawyers are being monitored and lack personal safety". This is illustrated by Nighat Dad who remembers the high-profile killing of her friend Sabeen Mahmud in 2015 (in Zamurd-Butt, 2017). Mahmud was an active human rights campaigner and had on the day of her murder hosted an event at her cafe in Karachi about the Pakistani government's repressive policies in the province of Balochistan. The targeted killing saw her car shot at by armed motorcyclists at a traffic light (Parshley, 2015).

6.4.6 Speaking at borders

In spite of the dangers outlined above, the move to online gatherings lowered the stakes for some groups to be involved at policy consultations, particularly smaller NGOs and collectives, potentially opening up the consultations to a wider range of views. The Pakistani NGO Media Matters for Democracy hosted a session at RightsCon online in 2021 titled "Dismantling the neoliberalism of the gender digital divide". Here the chair, researcher and activist Zoya Rehman criticised the development narrative when it comes to women's

internet access. This session is notable for including a range of positions that are critical of the market-based set-up for the internet at RightsCon, a space which upholds this very set-up. Speakers who are able to gain access are able, to some extent, to pursue their own agendas like creating solidarities and seeking funding. Speaking to Priya, Dexa and Soha, the activists all shared that they do not expect significant criticism of corporate actors at RightsCon, “it’s not *that* space” said Priya at RightsCon in 2019. Whilst Access Now and RightsCon have very much made themselves central to discussions on internet blackouts that scrutinise government behaviour, their work scrutinising corporate actors is more limited. Reviewing the campaign page for Access Now, posts between 2020 and April 2022 shows 28 posts, of which 20 refer to campaigns scrutinising governments, and 5 scrutinising corporate actors (3 were other) (“Campaign Archive”, n.d.).

During the session Rehman explained that by “giving women gadgets and then looking for success stories” we don’t contextualise the problem or bring up structural inequalities. She identified a “neoliberal trope of empowering women” and a “saviour narrative” in the development paradigm. Rehman continued that in Pakistan, women are making use of TikTok and Bigo, a livestreaming service, these types of usage are ignored by the development sector. In her research she found that women safeguard themselves whilst continuing their use, for example, on TikTok Rehman found a research participant who would get online friends on TikTok involved when she received a Duet (joint video) request from a man to defuse the situation. She added that the negotiations women manage online are similar to the ones they would make when entering physical public spaces in the Pakistani context. Rehman asked the session attendees: “Are they victims or agents of knowledge we need to learn from? Learning in terms of our own notion of respectability, frivolity, pleasure”.

Queer feminist activist Sachini Perera from Sri Lanka shared reflections from carrying out research about sexual behaviour online in the Sri Lankan context, criticising the prevailing economic development argument for women’s access.

Most discussions about the digital gender gap are based on the development paradigm that recognises and acknowledges and argues for a business case for

closing it. Women are being offered inclusion into the ready-made global economy which is unjust, women are untapped digital object... A feminist and queer approach to access would expand the framing from productivity to frivolity moving away from totalising approaches (Perera, 2021).

Pakistani feminist activist Tooba Syed noted that Bigo receives little attention in national policy, she asserted this is because it is a “working class app” unlike Instagram or Twitter which are “aesthetically pleasing to middle classes”. Bigo was banned by the Pakistani government because according to Syed “women were using it for fun”, they were also using it as a source of revenue, particularly as sex workers. Syed found that companies are refusing to acknowledge women’s use of their online services to make a living, adding that the government in Pakistan and elsewhere looks at these women from a “colonial, middle class, respectability perspective”.

The speakers were conscious not to reinforce colonial and white feminist notions of Brown women and queer persons victims, and were quick to highlight research showing that these groups do find their own ways to manage harms that occur online.

6.5 Summary

The research shows that internet access amongst the communities discussed here is high-stakes, politicised and differentiated; a great deal of what feminist activists are contending with is managing this complexity as it comes up against dominant visions of a fun and free internet whose value as a social good is inherent. In work that spans scales, activists have to deal with moving from the situated complexities of local projects into internet governance consultations, which have been demonstrated in Chapter 4 to be concerned with universalities. Incumbent powerholders, organisers of the consultations, selectively distribute attention and resource in spaces of internet governance and thus it falls to the research collaborators to mediate and present complexity in ways that can be understood and which appeal to funders who have their own agendas. In this way their negotiations must look both upstream and downstream simultaneously.

Activists make use of multi-scalarity where they experience shortfalls in national and regional contexts. Dexta and GenderOnline's feminist work on internet policy is side-lined in the Nepali context, so the group look to global internet governance consultations as spaces where they can try to be seen by members of government and connect with funders. Similarly, Mehwish, founder and director of InternetWitness, works in global setting to highlight national issues whilst trying to maintain her personal safety, sharing how she does not feel safe from state repression at home. Further, both Dexta and Mehwish look to global consultations as to where they might be able to get funding support, to make up for the dearth of national and regional support. This can put the activists in scenarios which are not always comfortable as Mehwish describes, because they have to be flexible and opportunistic to achieve their aims.

Even whilst dealing with tokenising from host organisations the activists share glimpses of opportunity, for regional and Majority World feminist solidarity. This is demonstrated in the session "Dismantling the neoliberalism of the gender digital divide" held at RightsCon 2021 which is regionally focused and sees feminist speakers able to be highly critical. This is perhaps enabled by the session not needing to include representation from all sectors on the panel, as would be the case at the IGF, as Priya highlights, multistakeholderism that insists on corporations always being present in internet governance accrues more power to already powerful actors.

Feminist internet activism within communities cannot be divorced from broader social justice and care; observations highlight how insufficient technosolutionist agenda can be. This is demonstrated by TechEverybody's operations where flood relief and medical care and supplies are just as much a part of the remit. For GenderWitness this involves disseminating food and resources to people in need during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Even where the role is simply disseminating information which is available online, as is the case for TechEverybody when they screen government information videos in villages, NGO staff are still required to mediate, answer questions and discuss the messages with local people on terms that resonate with them.

Projects focused on women and girls are required to take account of patriarchal attitudes and social structures, as such the projects must be designed with everyone in mind, like TechEverybody's *sangha* meetings which see men and women being engaged in separate gatherings at the same time. Disrupting power differentials, as the TechEverybody programmes do by empowering women and girls with access, can be supportive but it still falls to the women and girls to deal with social implications of challenging the status quo. This is seen in the retribution experienced by a mother who sends her girl children to school, then going a step further to be part of TechEverybody's 'digital storytelling' project to talk about her choices. It is also seen during the COVID-19 pandemic when women across Pakistan had to return to their family homes from university or school elsewhere during lockdowns, and had to resume domestic duties alongside remote study.

Indigenous community members living in settlements close to Nagarhole National Park indicate that they are not particularly interested in being connected to the internet. However, these groups are not met with a choice since this is the only way for them to claim entitlements which they are owed by the government after being forcibly displaced from their homes. This indicates that non-use of the internet is not an option, even where, as in the case of these communities, they wish to resist encroachment on their way of life which has already been severely compromised.

A tension emerges for the activists between concern for the wellbeing of women, queer communities and latter-connected groups as they join an internet which is not designed for their safety, and the dangers of denying these groups' agency and capacity to develop strategies to pursue their aims. For queer persons the risks that they take to connect online are measured against the risks of isolation and loneliness without community as highlighted by Shama. Western corporations are opportunistic in this context, posturing as saviours to brown queer communities providing liberation through technology¹⁰⁷.

¹⁰⁷ This can be contextualised historically in gendered racist and orientalist visions of South Asia, used to justify colonial intervention. Shehram Mokhtar notes that the 2016 Vice News documentary series "Blackout," of which the first episode was "*Being LGBT in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan*" was produced in collaboration with Google/Alphabet's think tank and incubator Jigsaw. The series looked at how digital technologies could be used as "weapons in the fight against oppression" in Pakistan, Venezuela, Thailand, Belarus and Eritrea (Gold 2016 in Mokhtar, 2020). Mokhtar (2020) argues that from production to launch these documentaries fit with

PART III

The final part brings together the findings from the 3 Chapters in Part II. In Chapter 7 I open-up gendered colonial workings as they appear in varying modes of access, before outlining shared and diverging resistance tactics amongst activists that go far beyond technosolutionism. Chapter 8 concludes the thesis by reflecting on what has changed for me over the research process. I call for research that centres pluriversal visions for global interconnectivity.

Google/Alphabet's market-making agenda to present technology and modernity as liberation, juxtaposed with analogue tribalism and oppression.

7. DISCUSSION – BEYOND TECHNOSOLUTIONISM

The lens of gendered coloniality provides invaluable insight which calls out the developmentalist, expansionary internet access rhetoric that pervades overlapping internet research and governance circles. The ‘information society’, predicated on a self-referencing, UN-legitimated, market-based, US-shaped and Global North-led agenda has been presented as a foregone conclusion. Discursive space for upstream ‘multistakeholder’ discussions about how the internet might be restructured towards global social justice are subjected to limitations which are difficult to overstate. This research has shown that organisers of internet governance consultations uphold the status quo whilst simultaneously professing innocence and claiming to support social justice struggles, with deleterious implications for activist movements of all stripes. I begin this discussion by opening up the toolbox of techniques and concepts that have surfaced in the research, propping-up skewed notions of (limited) access as an essential and as a gift, before turning to the many tactics of resistance practised by research collaborators to negotiate and reconfigure access on their own terms.

7.1 Setting the agenda

7.1.1 *The set-up*

Internet governance consultations are where issues are framed and agendas are set (Franklin, 2009, pp. 139–140), yet the administrative workings behind these events have been under-researched. Chapter 4 has shown how programming processes operate as forms of gatekeeping which allow organisers to shape the agenda, in accordance with their explicitly stated aims to do so, and set the terms of access. In these sites and across the scales at which this research intervenes, the gendered normative backdrops of the information society and developmentalism via ‘technological diffusion’ frame what is valued in the empirical, be that research or lived experiences (Fischer and Gottweis in Gurusurthy and Chami, 2016, p. 2). This in turn enables the selective distribution of material resources which further feeds normative visions of this particular internet universality.

As I have outlined, from the 1955 Bandung conference to the demands of the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO), the findings of the MacBride Commission (1980) to the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) (2003-2005), there have been continual, heterogeneous and interrelated struggles against a free-market based global communications order (Oppermann, 2018, p. 32). Meanwhile, the decolonisation project left Third World women in a bind between Third World men, who inherited successor institutions of governance (Lugones, 2007, p. 188), 'civilisational' feminists (Vergès, 2021, p. 19) and violent, liberalising and privatising structural adjustment measures across the Majority World (Gurumurthy, 2017, p. 2). Critical feminists, led by Indigenous women sought to resist the disparities that WSIS would uphold and maintain, but their calls went unanswered (*ibid.*, p. 5).

None of the internet governance consultations which I have observed substantively reopen these debates, even if it is often acknowledged the present set-up of the internet is far from serving everyone, particularly those at the sharp end of oppression. As such, shortfalls in the model, like a lack of private sector or government will to develop appropriate infrastructures in rural areas to enable connectivity, are marked as exceptional situations, rather than, as I would argue, signals to the problems of the whole (Benjamin, 2019, p. 177). The dogma of developmentalism undergirds (either intentionally or unintentionally) most conversations at the IGF, RightsCon and MozFest, illustrated by information and communication for development visions and the continued use of the digital divide metaphor, both of which I have criticised at length. Business problematises the contextual and cultural difference which makes it harder to grow into new markets. Under market fundamentalism, difference and complexity get parsed as technical problems in need of technical solutions ripe for technosolutioneering.

The prevailing discursive framing of internet governance in the field of scholarship is limited to the interests of powerful actors by centring technical standards and architecture, or related agreements and institutional machinery (Ali, 2018, p. 112). Broadening this view to follow actors and issues as they move between the research sites, and between scales of work re-integrates internet governance back into socio-political relations. This involves breaking down disciplinary and theoretical binaries between political-economy and culture-

focused approaches and refusal of undercurrents of internet exceptionalism. The internet is an idea of global interconnectivity—but this utterance of ‘global’ came from first-movers speaking from a specific eurocentred, white, capitalist, masculinist standpoint. A decolonial perspective emphasises that other ideas of global interconnection exist in every culture, with varied conceptions of relation to the earth, and the collective; in doing so it challenges internet exceptionalism. Theorists have pointed out that the digital divide, and ICT for development approaches place Majority World peoples into an othered space, temporally in the past and spatially in the dark, bringing nothing to the table but lacking (Warschauer, 2002). A limited view of internet governance restricts invisibilises resistance struggles and thereby what some so-called ‘less connected’ or ‘unconnected’ groups are seeking to express.

7.1.2 Double-standards

Linear models of development place Majority World societies, Indigenous communities into the past in gendered ways, whilst fetishizing rarefied, artificial intelligence and hyperconnectivity as the future. The implications of being the ‘last ones in’, the latter-connected, are rarely discussed, even though the spoils of being first-movers in internet governance (Aouragh and Chakravartty, 2016, p. 563; Sardar, 1995) and in gaining internet access, are abundantly clear. TechEverybody’s team take note of the power that being earlier-connected can afford, and focus their attentions to sharing skills relating to the use of ICTs and the internet on women. They offer training to girls in schools, and to women in settlements and villages, however, in patriarchal contexts this work can be highly-contested. Girls and women who take on the work also take on violent discipline, as was the case for the mother who chose to send her girl children to school in, or social ostracization as was the case for Women Internet Leaders (WILs).

Options for connecting the ‘next billions’ often see double-standards at play, and whilst activists flag this hypocrisy, it is very difficult to hold the most powerful actors to account. Corporate behaviour across the Majority World is criticised; this is well-illustrated by Nyabola (2018, p. 166) in her discussion of Cambridge Analytica’s operations in Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa prior to being active in the United States and United Kingdom. Companies step in to help governments strive for internet universality, as is the case with

Facebook/Meta's Free Basics, however these offerings come with double-standards that push content from the Global North, whilst violating privacy at huge scale (Solon 2017 in Gurumurthy and Chami, 2019, p. 4). As demonstrated by the rise of government-led internet disruptions, a market-led internet set-up is not sufficient to prevent tampering and censorship. It has been notable at the consultations that companies who have complied with threats from governments, and engaged with internet disruption demands, are met mostly with sympathy. Charlie Ngouno, chief executive of development NGO AfroLeadership called for Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to provide a guarantee of service so they are incentivised not to be pressured by governments, and so that they can be litigated if not providing service. However, this tactic was strongly opposed by attendees at RightsCon for pressuring the ISPs ("Censoring without getting caught", RightsCon, 2019).

Commercial representatives in particular cast women across the Majority World as untapped economic potential awaiting empowerment. This is illustrated by a corporate-led panel at IGF 2019 which saw the speakers discussing how connectivity can facilitate entrepreneurship selling, for example, self-made goods online. Simultaneously, queer persons are drawn as awaiting liberation through online tools, even though, as Indigenous activist and blogger Shama highlights, these tools are a tightrope of risk for some and far from a comforting or safe option. To be eternally in the past is to make do with whatever paltry offerings are given, be that Meta/Facebook's Free Basics, or 'meaningful connectivity' according to Alliance for Affordable Internet's minimum standards (Alliance for Affordable Internet, 2020).

Subalternised groups find themselves at the bleeding-edge of technological visioning (Benjamin, 2019; Noble, 2018) whilst simultaneously being imagined into the past. At RightsCon 2020 Pakistani activist Nighat Dad illustrated this point when Netblocks director Alp Toker suggested that internet disruptions are new. Dad countered that in Pakistan "towns, provinces and regions have been offline for years in conflict zones", reflecting that technologies of oppression have long been refined in places where attention is not being paid (Aouragh and Chakravartty, 2016, p. 563; Sardar, 1995). Another example is illustrative, Esther Mwema and Catherina Muya highlight that latter-connected people, who include more women than men, are coming into spaces where they are not safe due to the well-

documented prevalence of violence against women online (Gurumurthy et al., 2019; Iyer, 2021). In their session at RightsCon 2020 the two raised the implications of an internet access agenda that does not take seriously online expressions of interlocking gendered and racialised oppression; yet these considerations remain niche, if present at all.

Multistakeholderism rests on the idea that internet governance consultations, namely the IGF and RightsCon, are 'open' for anyone to attend, however, there are significant limits on access which I have illustrated, both to attendance or to participation once in the room or logged on. These are limits amongst organisations and individuals who do manage to make it into these spaces, there are of course many more who do not. Multistakeholderism through its claims to openness, a term which I will come to shortly, presumes access. The idea that stakeholders from the private sector, public sector and civil society should all be involved in discussions concerning internet governance pervades the IGF, and in its mimicry of the IGF, also RightsCon. Whilst participants from these groups are also present at MozFest, albeit public sector speakers less so, 'multistakeholderism' is not upheld as a virtue in the same way. The multistakeholder model prescribes that representatives from such of these broad groups is involved but says nothing regarding a range of perspectives being in the room. Therefore if there are three speakers, one from each sector who are all pro-market, that poses no problem to the model. Yet having an avowedly multistakeholder process still confers the legitimacy that a consultation with participants of diverse views might have, by assuming this must be the case.

In Chapter 6, Priya from TechEverybody shares that a number of her organisation's proposals for sessions at the IGF were rejected, and her feeling was this was because they proposed to speak about corporations but had not secured representatives from corporations to be a part of the discussion. She takes issue with this as shutting down conversation about important issues, leaving it at the behest of companies whether they think taking part will be in their interest, secure in the knowledge that if they say no the session probably will not go ahead. In this line of thinking, should a session happen to go ahead without having 'multistakeholder' representation, it becomes easier to discount its outcomes for being 'unrepresentative'. In this way the norm of multistakeholderism

stipulates that already-powerful actors are present in discussions where they can further push their interests.

7.1.3 Programming is political

Agenda are set in ways that can disappear as administrative considerations, I argue that programming processes are important and require further scrutiny. The appearance of issues in any one of the consultations increases the likelihood of it appearing again at another. Within organisations some staff are tasked with appearing at numerous sites, often to circulate the same project or message, as seen with Wikimedia Foundation in support of Wikipedia or Alliance for Affordable Internet and their work on meaningful access. Agenda-setting is in this way diffuse, and a 'stepping up' of issues can be traced over years, beginning with one speaker and then at the next event taking up a whole session. In this way the first framing of a new issue, or the first key figure may have an outsized influence. In certain years 'issue guardians' emerge, who reappear continually, setting the agenda on a given topic, and maintaining its identity. This can be seen in the role played by Association for Progressive Communication members on discourses around community networks.

Mozilla, Access Now and the IGF act as gatekeepers who exercise their power through programming processes which selectively distribute access. The IGF's process is claimed to be highly transparent, however, TechEverybody have multiple proposals rejected without reason and Parte Afta Parte experience rejection followed by what appears to be a late acceptance without notification. Wranglers are concerned that application process for facilitating a session at MozFest disadvantage Majority World applicants in particular, due to centralised guidance on how application 'quality' is assessed. In the face of these barriers, Pat and Sam describe establishing their own techniques to manage disparities by giving preference to proposals from Majority World persons. RightsCon's organisational mission is the least defined and thus may be moved the most by inputs that come through its topical open calls to its community and audiences. This can feel tokenistic as RightsCon absorbs 'hot-button' topics whilst also playing a significant role in their early framing.

Whilst the IGF also has a number of calls within its organisation process, the response rate to these has been reported to be low, and this has to be balanced with host country visions,

that need to be worth the substantial monetary investment governments have to put in. IGF programmes also have a degree of continuity built-in through the Best Practice Forums and Dynamic Coalitions, that see the same people and organisations engaged over multiple years. MozFest and RightsCon do not offer these options in any visible kind of way, meaning activists do not feel like they own a space at these events, they have little security to build a movement over time. The IGF requires multistakeholder representation within applications, however, makes little intervention about the way that sessions are executed. By contrast preparatory work is undertaken by both RightsCon and Mozilla Festival to standardise sessions and develop their “quality” or “excellence”.

Each of the research sites emphasises the independence of their funding from their areas of work, however, it does not require assumptions of causality to observe that for resources to be shared there is a broad alignment in the aims of the organisations and their events, with their funders. As such the lack of funders located in the Majority World is stark and noteworthy. Whilst the high proportion of government funding to the IGF is not surprising considering its connection to the UN, nearly half of RightsCon funding also comes from the public sector. This raises the question of why some governmental and intergovernmental organisations are choosing to side-step the IGF. Meanwhile the majority of MozFest’s funding comes from the private sector in the US, indicating that very strong criticism of corporate behaviour would be ill-fitted to this setting.

Research collaborators are subject to programming processes that are selective and changeable. To their frustration, youth activists find themselves in discussions delineated to be for and about youth at consultations. Yet they still seek to stay in the orbit of these events and the organisations that run them, with a view to building their careers over time. This creates a paradox in youth activism, since youth tends to be a transitory identification (Tjahja and Fonseca, 2023, p. 6) meaning activists might choose to identify in another way just as they finally start to embed themselves. Feminist collaborators are a little older overall, and thus have more years of engaging with these processes, yet even they experience rejection of session proposals from the IGF without really understanding why.

By contrast, when activists suit agendas they can find themselves taking part in numerous sessions in any one year, as was the case with director of Pakistani feminist NGO, Mehwish, but this interest then wanes as novel programming is sought the next year. In this sense flexibility is rewarded by gatekeepers, as Parte Afta Parte members found at IGF 2021 when they held their two workshops at the last minute, and then further stepped in for other on-site participants who were not able to attend. Dexa makes use of similar methods of ‘opportunistic’ organising by attending global consultations as her organisation tends to be excluded from discussions nationally. Whilst feeling that she has to work in this way Dexa does not like to use these opportunistic methods which she calls “haphazard” (Dexa, 2022).

Opportunism still requires activists to be present which can be hampered by insufficient support from organisers. As highlighted by interviewees from both regions, the funding to attend conferences in-person can be a large investment, and additionally, visa requirements have been exclusionary in many of the host nations, with organisers providing little support even to invited speakers. Online participation meanwhile creates its own challenges that encompass all of the difficulties of internet access, compounded by dangers of surveillance for those living in repressive contexts, and further impacted by inadequate securing of software tools, as shown by two years of hacking experienced by the IGF. Gendered implications are complex as women who are unable to travel may be able to attend from home with online participation, yet they may also have to maintain domestic duties that limit their capacity to be involved in discussions.

Activist collaborators who seek to earn a living, and gain visibility which enables them to gather funding for their projects find themselves constantly seeking the orbit of well-resourced, US-based organisations like Mozilla and Internet Society who are, in this way, able to shape the agenda whilst also giving the appearance of facilitating ‘representation’ of ‘the underrepresented’. I will return to the idea of representation in due course but for the purposes of this argument suffice to say that in their claims to increase diverse representation these organisations never decentre themselves and such they *rarely cede power*. The workings of coloniality are thus rendered visible not necessarily in the content of what is said, but in the practices that unfold, such as the extractive ways in which MozFest work with Wranglers, discussed in Chapter 5.

Another veteran US-based organisation like Mozilla, Internet Society was set up by Bob Kahn and Vinton Cerf¹⁰⁸ and is a US-based non-profit which positioned itself in 1992 as a ‘guardian of internet standards’. Internet Society has retained a privileged position in this regard having taken a key role at the WSIS and subsequently at the IGF. The hand of Internet Society can be seen in different quarters, as funders of the consultations, as funders of youth attendees at of the consultations, and as creators of the Youth Ambassadors Program which seeks to impart knowledge about ‘internet governance’. It should be stated that these shaping dynamics are not reserved for organisations of any particular political bent, another California-registered non-profit, Association for Progressive Communications (APC), too, turns up time and again in the research sites, and whilst often conducting work which is in line with this thesis’ stated theoretical orientation, the gravitational force exerted by APC has when it comes to these discussions is noteworthy.

7.1.4 Tokenism

Both youth and feminist activist groupings are conscious of tokenism by organisers of the consultations, as well as by funders and other organisations operating in these spaces. This is an issue which Parte Afta Parte wanted to discuss in their She Net proposal for IGF 2020 which was rejected. Digital Grassroots founders Esther and Uffa feel they continually need to resist tokenism by maintaining a connection with the ‘grassroots’. Esther is disinterested in gaining “celebrity” status conferred by incumbent powerholders, which she understands serves to prop-up the elevated positions of these organisations. Yet tokenism can create feelings of scarcity amongst those in the borders, as if there are only a few opportunities to go around and as such re-asserting gendered colonial isolation (Icaza, 2017, p. 33), rather than engendering solidarities.

Uffa highlights that whilst organisations will invite youth speakers they are not interested in supporting Digital Grassroots to independently pursue their agenda through giving funding. This sentiment is echoed by Mehwish from InternetWitness who describes her frustration at

¹⁰⁸ Cerf and Kahn are attributed the work of developing the TCP/IP protocol which made ‘inter-networking’ between different networks possible.

speaking about her work in Pakistan in front of “Western audiences”, yet finding them unwilling to fund her organisation. Meanwhile, members of Parte Afta Parte, Ria and Kay describe their experiences as ‘Global South’ youth who were funded to attend the IGF in Berlin in 2019. Here the two found that when it comes to making actual connections more senior attendees were unwilling to hear them out. Activists at times consciously choose to engage with schemes that they know to be tokenistic, with a view to using opportunistic organising methods, as Tjaha and Fonseca (2023) show, some youth are able to make use of the numerous fellowships available to fund their participation in different internet governance consultations. However, the drawn-out precarity of such work can be difficult to sustain.

7.2 Rhetorical toolbox

7.2.1 Representation and inclusion

Tokenism rests on the purported representation of different groups, a cornerstone in how internet governance consultations are both structured and legitimated. Mignolo (in Gaztambide-Fernández, 2014, pp. 198–199) warns of the danger of representation, “a keyword in the rhetoric of modernity” that assumes there is a world ‘out there’ to represent, decolonially thinking he argues “there is not a world that is represented, but a world that is constantly invented in the enunciation”. This gets to the heart of many of the issues that research collaborators face as ‘representatives’, like Pat and Sam who feel the overwhelming responsibility of negotiating for the contexts which the MozFest team have brought them in to represent. Digital Grassroots and Parte Afta Parte work to manage these moves by making room for others from their communities, sharing the access that they themselves have. Considering that there are only enunciations, which must be located amongst other enunciations in their utterance (Mignolo in Gaztambide-Fernández, 2014, pp. 198–199), the inherent sociality of decolonial activism becomes abundantly clear.

Gendered normative backdrops of the information society paradigm and information and communications for development shape the kinds of representation that is sought after, legitimating actions involving targeted regions and groups. This brings us to the idea of

inclusion, which is predicated on representation but involves also a further claim to social justice. Under the information society paradigm “exclusion from [global information and communication] networks is one of the most damaging forms of exclusion in our economy and in our culture” (Castells, 2011, p. 503). In this light, justice can easily be framed as a counter to exclusion, that is inclusion. Yet, as I have argued, access is inclusion but at low rank, without acknowledgement of the first-mover advantages enjoyed by incumbent powerholders in shaping the geopolitical and sociotechnical set-up of the internet (Ali, 2018, p. 109). Criticising the foregone conclusions of the WISIS, Hamelink (2004, p. 286) asks how far being included is a free choice; it is he argues, not a free choice just as it is not a free choice to be included in the free market economy. This is illustrated by the powerful narrative at both the IGF and at RightsCon that women, particularly those who live in rural areas, within Indigenous communities and more broadly across the Majority World, need to be integrated into the capitalist economy through certain provisions of connectivity. There are no visible measures to consult these women about their aspirations.

Access is framed as liberatory, at the same time it requires meditation through inclusion measures which endeavour to neutralise complexity and difference (Kamil, 2020, pp. 76–77). Yet these are not one-way forces; they are faced with resistance and at the forefront of these struggles are Indigenous communities. The push (into inclusion) and pull (away from it) is illustrated in the context of the communities living in Indigenous settlements outside Nagarhole National Park in south India whom I visited. Here people are pushed into using online portals for accessing government entitlements which they require to live, after having been expelled from their ancestral homelands by the government. Yet their resistance to these gendered colonial impositions, to protect their culture and lifeways, involves a pulling away from the same. Even where they do engage with the internet and government portals this is in measured and careful ways.

Jan Gerlach, speaking on behalf of Wikimedia Foundation makes the, decolonially speaking, outrageous claim that his organisation has a “mission to go to every single part of the world” (“Fostering digital social innovation in the Global South”, IGF, 2018). “All humans can share the sum of human knowledge”, he continues, this ‘mission’ is the “huge task before the 300-strong team based in our San Francisco office”. In response to similar claims

from another member of Wikimedia at RightsCon 2019, a speaker¹⁰⁹ who identifies as Indigenous responded that “not all Indigenous knowledge is for the public domain, it is for the collective”. This is an important assertion that puts the brakes on the kinds of universalising, heroic claims and assumptions that inclusion narratives are built on.

Inclusion moves can be tricky to resist for a number of reasons. As I have mentioned above where addressing tokenism, at times, inclusion can be tactically used to pursue agendas by activists, although this comes at various personal and movement costs. Inclusion moves can also be hard to resist when they are extended by well-intentioned, personable people. As Pat says when talking about Mozilla staff, “the staff are really nice people”. When it came to sharing her experiences of feeling undervalued for her labour she felt like it would be “adding to their burden to bring that up” (Pat, 2021b). This deflection by means of kindness also works at the organisational level. Increasingly over the research period, consultations have promoted themselves as concerned with issues of social justice, these claims often get parsed into inclusion and representation manoeuvres. At MozFest this has looked like adding the Neurodiversity theme to the event, which was shown to backfire when I observed it in its first year in 2019, indicating the degree to which this was a skin-deep initiative. This is similar to the purportedly ‘gender neutral’ toilets at RightsCon 2019 which end up serving to confuse rather than support queer attendees. Fundamentally, across all scales, the issue with inclusion involves bringing groups into spaces without “revision of the very architecture of power, knowledge, being, gender, and perception” (Tlostanova, 2020, p. 166), whilst making it seem like this is benevolence.

7.2.2 Openness

The internet’s purported ‘openness’ is envisioned to be in decline over the research period, in light of government-orchestrated internet disruptions, and national-level policies that increase foreclosure and alter what is possible online with relation to borders. These ‘threats’ to openness are highlighted across internet governance consultations, by organisers and speakers alike. The United Nations Global Digital Compact claims to develop

¹⁰⁹ This speaker’s name is redacted to protect their privacy.

a global normative framework for internet governance based on “an open, free and secure digital future for all” (United Nations, 2021, p. 63). Yet as Hamelink (2004, pp. 282–283) has noted, there is no empirical evidence to suggest that a system like the internet might enable ‘open’ access for the world. ‘Openness’ is an idea which is deeply bound up with the history of the internet, strongly mapping with liberalisation and openness of markets. Whilst it carries the connotations of being positive, openness is hugely ambiguous, making it useful in the legitimisation of varying agendas. To valorise openness is to conveniently forget the varying degrees of (limited) access that are built into the geopolitical and sociotechnical architecture of the internet. This is demonstrated at internet governance consultations which are all declared ‘open’ but as I have detailed through the experiences of research collaborators, mileage can vary greatly. The Global Digital Compact also declares that the process of developing the strategy will occur in an ‘open’ way, when openness itself is held up as a virtue no further effort seems to be required to seriously engage varied options and policy directions.

Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles (Rainie et al., 2019) stand in opposition to Open Data Principles (opendatacharter.net, 2015) to guard against moves to appropriate Indigenous knowledges. This is necessary as openness under relations of gendered coloniality benefits incumbent powerholders the most. Ávila Pinto (IGF, 2020) spoke at the Internet Commons Forum about how ‘open data’ principles, which she had advocated for as a young activist with a view to gaining more equal access to information across the Majority World, have instead served the interests of corporations looking to make products and profit. Private sector actors uphold openness to do business, yet compromise openness where it suits them, like in the case of zero-rating practices that compromise net neutrality. In light of this, Singh argues for a shift from ‘openness’ which is vulnerable in its ambiguity and the ‘commons’ which includes protections for commonly held goods (“Internet Commons Forum”, IGF, 2020).

7.2.3 Platform

‘Platform’ is another concept that contributes here, particularly as it invokes a neutral architecture. Gillespie (2010, p. 352) has theorised that a conceptual use of the term ‘platform’ makes use of all its connotations:

computational, something to build upon and innovate from; political, a place from which to speak and be heard; figurative, in that the opportunity is an abstract promise as much as a practical one; and architectural, in that YouTube is designed as an open-armed, egalitarian facilitation of expression, not an elitist gatekeeper with normative and technical restrictions.

‘Platform’ has served the companies that run social networks so well in its abstract promise of the opportunity to speak and be heard, facilitated by a neutral structure. Whilst governments and activists have challenged the ways in which the software and services function in recent years, the conceptual work around ‘platform’ remains in place. This term circulates across the sites and amongst collaborators, and is notably repurposed as a way to describe these internet governance consultations themselves. Access Now chief executive Brett Soloman calls RightsCon a platform (opening address, RightsCon, 2018), Fabrizio Hochschild Drummond, an advisor to the UN’s secretary-general calls for a “cross sector platform of money and resources” coordinated by the UN to facilitate internet governance (“Global connectivity: where are we heading to after COVID-19?” RightsCon, 2020). This does the very same conceptual work of characterising these as neutral structures to be populated. This alignment in usage becomes particularly clear when consultations move online, and are conducted through video-conferencing software which research collaborators also reference as ‘platforms’ (Sam, 2019; Kay, 2022; Shama, 2022). IT for Change executive director Anita Gurumurthy flags how slippery terms can be when she warns of “getting drowned in post voice trappings of platform expressions”, ‘platform’ itself, I argue, being the root expression from which these stem.

7.3 Resistance tactics

7.3.1 Decolonial habitus

Through the research methodology I have looked to inculcate a decolonial feminist sensibility in my practice, centring care, sociality, delinking, relinking and border-thinking; in my own practice and that of activist collaborators I have seen that heterogenous decolonising politics tend to occur in multi-scalar ways. Expressions of decolonial habitus are varied, uneven and do not always line-up in neat ways; to recall some of these expressions indicates their range.

As theorised by Digital Grassroots, but common amongst all three cases, a clear link is traced between participation in internet governance and the design of adequate provisions of access for African contexts. What emerges in this struggle is cultural discomfort, as shared by Esther Mwema when she talks about the need for “leveraging connections” for fundraising, and flagged again by Namibia-based entrepreneur Paul Rowney (IGF 2019) who finds that “Global North culture permeates all the institutions” inhibiting those with different cultural norms. Aspects of the dominant model of internet expansion deemed to be culturally benign are not. Mavhunga (2017, p. 27) considers the implications of the Atlantic slavery industry that saw trafficking of human forced labour as “plantation technology”, continuing that

Entrepreneur—defined as a person who starts a business and is willing to risk loss in order to make money—is sometimes morally repugnant and ethically fraught in the African context.

In the face of cultural conflicts, a significant part of the decolonial habitus embodied by Esther and Uffa involves seeing these cultural norms for their parochial nature, rather than as common-sense way of doing things, which is how they are framed. The next step that Esther and Uffa take is rejecting these ways of doing thing by rooting in their own cultural norms.

Youth activists who make up Parte Afta Parte are optimistic about the existing set-up of the internet; they enter spaces with a knowledge of their roles as co-creators in the internet, and as such do not harbour concern that the internet is somehow compromised in its essence. For these activists there are goods to be distributed and they take pragmatic perspectives that the benefits of the internet should be enjoyed amongst their communities. The primary goal for Parte Afta Parte is to be present and heard in internet governance spaces, to have more Majority World and African youth representation, and for access to be expanded across the continent. There is a decolonial habitus that assumes entitlement informing their attitude to activism. This can be seen when Kay advocates for organising in a “youthful” way; even within formalised systems and processes this sensibility, inflected as it is in this case with African and Majority World solidarities cannot be limited. To organise in a ‘youthful’ way for Kay is to work in ways that are relational, flexible, opportunistic, insouciant, rooted in lived experience and personal identity (Kay, 2022). These ways of organising do not require hand-wringing over whether activists should be using existing systems or doing something else but involve both and more, cutting across and reframing siloed thinking.

In the case of TechEverybody decolonial habitus is expressed by staff handing out blankets and floor relief supplies, and providing medical care. It involves recognising the gender politics of settlements and villages and working with these dynamics in mind, rather than dropping tech tools into a vacuum. This sees the NGO rejecting upstream technocentric norms, emblematic of the kind of “re-humanizing” (Vergès, 2021, pp. 19–20) of the world which decolonial feminism involves. At the same time TechEverybody steadfastly manages the need to communicate upstream in ways that challenge established norms, but using strategies that are taken seriously.

Where activists manage to get control over sessions at any of the consultations they create spaces of decolonial habitus where they can form solidarities and talk about issues which are important on their own terms. What happens in the session may not always line up directly with what was proposed, however, that does not necessarily matter since fulfilling administrative requirements is not the priority here. This is not to say that such

programming does not serve purposes of tokenism which I have already highlighted, but to complicate that there are resistance agendas at work.

Across African youth and South Asian feminist groupings all activists explicitly locate themselves in the 'Global South', and this is an identity which they express often in their work, co-existing with other identities. This is a powerful indication of the solidarities that these groups seek to engender as they organise in their resistance of gendered colonial relations. Here the work of Digital Grassroots is notable in that the organisation brings together youth from across what they call the Global South to learn about internet governance. This is the first many participants learn about these topics, and it happens in spaces where they are in the Global Majority, contributing a different kind of framing, one conferring a greater sense of entitlement.

7.3.2 Multi-scalar activism

Activists from both youth and feminist groupings are positioned where they are negotiating access for themselves whilst also engaging both upstream, towards policy settings and downstream towards communities of work. As I have mentioned these tactics challenge binary notions that split approaches which look to work with existing systems, and approaches that call for them to come down. As demonstrated by Esther Mwema and Catherine Muya, who offer women advice on how to manage online gender-based violence, and critique the structures of inequity, decolonial activism is more expansive and complex. For the two, struggles must include work for the present and futurity for generations to come.

Collaborators from both groupings express the need to work in a multi-scalar way, this can be within or outside of established routes, often combining both. Some activists use global events as an opportunity to engage with government representatives on national issues, an alternative pathway to a lack of engagement with civil society at the national level as youth activist Innocent Adriko (IGF, 2021) puts it. By contrast, Pakistani feminist organiser Soha finds that both national and regional spaces are more inclusive than global consultations, where she struggles to make connections, and where the costs of attending are so high. Yet

for Dexta, global sites are much more useful than national organising as the Nepali government does not invite her organisation into policy discussions. Both Dexta from GenderOnline and Mehwish from InternetWitness work in global settings to solicit funding for their organisations which is not available either regionally or nationally. Taking a more formalised route, youth activist Li advocates for young people to make use of IGF National and Regional Initiatives (NRIs) and the support they provide. Whilst the impacts of these methods are clear to illustrate, there are also other tactics, the implications of which are not immediately evident. These relate to ways of being, and making connections, outlined above, and simply speaking in these settings where diverse attendees might pick up on ideas and take them away.

Youth and feminist collaborators are seeking to negotiate access for themselves, and also further marginalised groups within their contexts, holding a vantage point which affords them both upstream and downstream visibility. Working in a multi-scalar way involves deciding how best to chart these different waters whilst retaining integrity and commitment to what activists are advocating for. These constant negotiations involve a great deal of uncertainty and are not easy work by any stretch, as Esther and Uffa from Digital Grassroots are open about in their interviews.

7.3.3 Alternatives to access

It is rare to see radically alternative approaches to access that supplant the status quo at any of the consultations, although they do appear amongst a vocal minority. The selection processes across all the consultations are unclear, but more so at MozFest and RightsCon which do not need to document their work in the same way that is required of the IGF. For each of the events calls for proposals to hold sessions encourage applicants to shape their ideas to fit in different ways, for MozFest and RightsCon these may be further developed in the session refinement process that the organisers require. In the case of the IGF and RightsCon, sessions also require multistakeholder representation, which may limit what is up for discussion. As such, politically agnostic language can play an important role, nature metaphors relating to the internet governance such as “ecosystem” are in common use. This imagining reduces responsibility of actors and instead depicts a landscape where certain forces are set and cannot be brought under control.

The “digital divide” metaphor continues to be shorthand for different access inequities, although in the research period “meaningful access” also rose to prominence, with the latter a very suitable response to criticisms of the digital divide in that it moves away from binary on/off visions of access by making the least required adjustment. Taking a multidimensional look at the term access, following Vergès’ (2021, p. 20) contention that gendered coloniality shapes all “social proposals and subjectivities” exposes connotations of a limited, contained, contingent experience in a space that is *not one’s own*. In this context inequity does not feel alien but intrinsic, the idea of access is based around some having more than others, and some having none at all. This relates to Ávila Pinto’s (2018, p. 18) criticism that latter-connected regions and groups are not offered liberation online, but only personal consumption, with little opportunity for creativity, autonomy or collective benefit. As Anita Gurumurthy puts it talking about women’s access, it transforms them into “desirable objects of the digital economy” (“South-South strategy on facing gender inequalities”, IGF, 2021).

For the majority of attendees in research sites, economic integration, and the promised benefits of access to labour and internet-based commerce is a route to betterment for women, rural populations and the Majority World. This is the view espoused by Fatoumata Bâ from Jumia/Janngo who appears in different sites advocating for access that “empowers women with income” (“Digital Inclusion of Marginalised Groups”, IGF, 2019), giving the example of rural women in Nigeria selling self-made products online. From Bâ’s perspective internet access allows women to come play by the rules and seek a fortune, but for Ávila Pinto (“Internet Commons Forum”, IGF, 2020) the internet that was promised would have allowed you to come as you are, bringing your own intentions. A multidimensional view also raises the time of connection to be significant. Global North societies, wealthier groups, urban geographies and men have in greater majority had access to the internet from earlier in its development, and as such greater experience, more education in technical skills, and more involvement in design decisions.

Anita Gurumurthy and Esther Mwema express concern over bringing Majority World women and gender minorities online where they may experience abuse, infringements of

privacy and a host of other new dangers for which they may not be equipped. Women and girls who experience violence online tend to leave those spaces or stop using the internet altogether (Iyer, 2021, p. 103). Women reporting instances of online violence against them are not taken seriously by legal authorities, research in South Africa and India see women report that they are laughed at when seeking to take action (Gurumurthy et al., 2019; Iyer, 2021, p. 105). Both Gurumurthy and Mwema coordinate projects that support women and girls to participate online regardless, however this problematisation of timing is crucial. It echoes at a different scale, Tawil-Souri and Aouragh's (2014, p. 107) "cyber-colonialism", as Majority World women are brought into a realm that "reinforces a world of contact and influence between radically asymmetrical powers" and Ali's view of internet governance as inherently colonial because first-movers were able to design the landscape in ways that they find beneficial.

Whilst they are limited, conceptualisations offered as an alternative to 'access' further illuminate its shortcomings. Nicholas Echaniz from AlterMundi ("Community Networks at Times of Crises and Pandemics", IGF, 2020) criticises "meaningful access" for only offering "concentrated information silos", and instead advocates for "internet co-creation" which encompasses the need to "de-concentrate the internet". The IGF is where discussions about representation in internet governance tend to take place, although both RightsCon and MozFest do, over the course of the research extend invitations to Indigenous activists, neurodivergent identifying persons and queer communities. A distinction can be drawn between these invitations—that look to invite individuals and groups to share their perspectives in certain moves that I have shown to be tokenistic, and what might be called "internet co-creation" of the kind advanced by Echaniz. This is noted by Vergès (2021, p. 36) who draws a distinction between "women's liberation feminism" and "anti-discrimination" approaches that look to integrate women into capitalism.

The global internet universality consensus is underpinned by European modern values of individual liberal subjects with ownership of devices and theoretically available equal access to the internet. An imagined universality is made possible by its placelessness which is a "central feature of dispossession" according to Kamil (2020, pp. 76–77), difference is eliminated as everyone is included under the same frame. Varied requirements are

rendered invisible in a vision of *equality* that assumes all start in the same place, erasing histories and a present of gendered coloniality. In stark contrast to this, it is for the most part accepted and asserted amongst African and Asian activist collaborators that internet access must be context-based, supporting groups and localities in the ways in which they want. This challenges the accepted internet universality consensus and raises the question of what pluriversal alternatives—that take seriously varied visions of world-scale communication—might look like.

Moves towards national borders being drawn on the internet are heavily criticised at each of the research sites, garnering very little support from any quarters charged with ‘internet fragmentation’ in a highly prominent critique which I have highlighted. This process of decline has been seen to emerge from: reactions to foreign surveillance; censorship and national policy agendas that seek further control over information; a lack of alignment in policymaking coming about from inadequate global institutions; and reactions to the unwieldy power of internet-based corporations. For South Asian feminist activists who experience the sharp end of these policies, wrapped up in nationalist rhetoric, they are unappealing. Legal frameworks enforce patriarchal and misogynist social attitudes meaning that feminist collaborators criticise ‘cyber-nationalism’ even where it is framed as ‘anti-colonial’.

For rural and Indigenous groups, the idea of local level decision-making around what internet access looks like through community networks has seen growing interest at all of the research sites, appealing to stakeholders from private, public and third sectors as a ‘complementary’ connectivity option, with a niche few going further and considering community networking as an alternative. There is a danger that community networks may be vulnerable to patriarchal social norms, which as raised by feminist and queer activists, sees women’s internet access restricted by surveillance and cost. Interventions designed by TechEverybody, that see women educated on the use of internet, have demonstrated that in these specific contexts it can be an effective way to counter gendered restrictions. These approaches shed light on what internet pluriversality might look like, centring differentiated needs, abilities and acknowledging inequity as inherent.

8. CONCLUSION – TOWARDS INTERNET PLURIVERSALITY

At the start of the research for this thesis I held a deeply pessimistic view about the internet. Having previously been optimistic about its potential for democratising information and communication, I had come to believe that the small-scale inequities which were apparent to me and those around me were imbricated in the larger structure. This was a perspective rooted in political-economy, centring US corporations and Global North institutions as the creators and enforcers of the only option for global interconnectivity available. Whilst some aspects of this early analysis remain relevant, others have been challenged. From the perspective of gendered coloniality, the internet can certainly be seen as a tool of domination. A geopolitical and sociotechnical set-up that maintains historically-constituted unequal relations. However, having been in the field for five years, I have come to realise the partialness of this perspective, skewed upstream and trained to Northern actors; ironically neglecting the manifold visions of global interconnectivity that are in play and enacted every day. An insistence on pluriversality must be at the heart of any visions for just and liberatory global communications. This involves taking seriously the disparities that have been projected into the historically-constituted, geopolitical and sociotechnical set-up of the internet, whilst giving time and energy to practices of creative resistance in the borders.

The hallmarks of the colonial matrix of power (Quijano, 2000, p. 540) come out clearly in the research. Agendas that target global internet access show the network's inherently expansionist qualities, stretching to shape all spheres of social existence. This is what I call the internet universality—a horizon, a carrot on a stick, a dogma—which simultaneously legitimates and fuels the geopolitical set-up of the internet. Development agendas brought forth through the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), the Millennium Development Goals (UN, 2000) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UN, 2015) interlock with global trade agreements enforced by the World Trade Organisation (WTO) (Hamelink, 2004, p. 285). Internet governance consultations, including MozFest, RightsCon and the global Internet Governance Forum (IGF), take the internet access consensus marked out by these institutions as an assumed starting point for the agendas which they shape.

At all consultations the assumption of a market-led internet underpins discussions and most ideas and options. It is galling that at events that purport to consider the future of vast swathes of humanity, organised by groups that prize so-called innovation, models for ICTs, technologies of any kind, outside of this orthodoxy, get such little time or space. Where present these options are peripheralised as being ‘complementary’, filling in where the market option fails and governments do not wish to go. In this way organisers of each of the consultations elide re-connecting with debates that question the skewed geopolitics of global communications, as have been expressed in successive struggles including the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) (Oppermann, 2018) and feminist resistance at WSIS (Gurumurthy, 2017).

The research has challenged the notion that there is only one option for global interconnectivity, whilst showing that internet universality is currently the preponderant vision being exercised. A vision, chiefly shaped by incumbent powerholders, that is enforced through institutional and policy machinery. This reckoning has illuminated the manifold imaginings of global interconnectivity that persist in the borders, which I will come to shortly, whilst also showing the epistemological foundations on which the internet universality rests. One, a linear developmentalism that places the unconnected and less connected forever into the past (Quijano, 2000, p. 552), behind the wealthiest, hi-tech innovators. This is entrenched in literature and in policymaking concerning the ‘digital divide’ and ICT4D. Two, these ideas justify new civilising missions that light the way along certain technological paths, market-based, shaped by US corporations and Global North first-mover institutions. These cast women and queer persons as groups to be saved by benevolent and neutral technologies. Three, to mark this course of ‘development’ to be correct requires denigration of diverse technological traditions and trajectories, rooted in value-systems that are not profit-led, and cosmologies that value relations to land, spirit and the collective over the individual. Four, the extractive, gendered relations built by consultation organisers with African youth and Asian feminist activists illustrates how, in existing at borders, these groups are at the cutting-edge (Tuhiwai Smith, 2013, p. 203). As such organisers make use of subalternised knowledges where it serves them.

These dynamics are made all the more affronting by the ways in which they are maintained within internet governance consultations, making use of tactical rhetorical devices. Inclusion, which as the other to exclusion seems beneficial, but does not usually involve having a say in what one is being included into. Openness without attention to power disparities simply affords more opportunity to incumbent powerholders, whilst masking this to be the case. Internet access, which is inherently limited, and sees agendas that make little prescription for enabling latter-connected groups to have a say in their internet experiences.

Engaging with border-thinking affirms that gendered colonial relations are always contending with varied modalities of resistance. This is shown in expressions of decolonial habitus which are exercised by research collaborators in how they make use of systems, how they envision internet access for themselves and their communities, and crucially, in the ways they foster solidarities. Resistance is exercised even when in precarious positions, as shown by Sam and Pat in their volunteering positions with MozFest. It can be enacted through doing what needs to be done to get a foot in the door, as illustrated by Parte Afta Parte. It is seen in the multi-scalar negotiations for access that activists are constantly engaged with, orienting themselves upstream and downstream as needed, as shown by TechEverybody.

The upsurge in decolonising scholarship and activism concerned with the internet too is part of this resistance. The rhetorical plays and inclusion manoeuvres which I have highlighted pose risks, but the idea of total co-option is mythical. Decolonial options are boundless and adaptive; crucial in articulating liberatory futurities. They are rooted in the lived experiences of those at borders, consciously delinking from concepts of modernity/coloniality, whilst relinking us to one other. Although access to the internet and to internet governance is proffered as limited and limiting, it only works that way if we play by the rules. The antidote to the internet universality is to show it up in all its parochial pomposity. To cut through this requires more research that connects to subalternised, pluriversal visions for global interconnectivity.

Internet pluriversality is the route to my imagining of liberatory futurity, centring the myriad visions and practices of interconnectivity which are rooted in the needs and cultures of those who are marginalised under conditions of gendered coloniality. It involves space for dialogue between different epistemic and cultural understandings of technology and communication. In this it brings forth opportunities to learn from differences and similarities making it both coalitional and, at times, messy (Icaza, 2017, p. 33). The research has shown manifold imaginings of interconnectivity do co-exist. Yet at the consultations these ideas are deliberately made small using material-discursive strategies such as rendering them ‘complimentary’ to the unshiftable orthodoxy. Alternative options are rarely discussed and even less often taken seriously beyond immediate exponents. I propose to animate this diversity, not suppress it.

Internet pluriversality refuses the tunnel-vision which enables sociotechnological empowerment *for some* at cost to others, unseen somewhere else in the world; in other terms, unfettered control of the internet for some and limited access for others. The work must be undertaken within existing systems, including through internet governance consultations, as well as outside of these arenas, in multi-scalar ways, bolstered by traditional communities, transnational solidarities and knowledge-sharing. Within modern/colonial institutions expressions of decolonial habitus scramble gendered/racialised capitalist logics. This research has shown that in many cases decolonial habitus is practised unselfconsciously, to work in coalitions will enable activists to observe and share these tools.

Redirecting resource, research and normative primacy away from “One World. One Net. One Vision” (IGF, 2019), internet pluriversality rolls-back from expansionary sameness to recognising and acknowledging difference. As such governance systems move from being tools of management to tools of sharing and learning; theorising from margins to benefit the whole. Valuing and trusting local cultures and feminist activism, internet pluriversality involves attention to the ways in which women, Indigenous communities and marginalised groups can design their experiences of interconnectivity, be that non-use, or use in ways that are supportive of subalternised expression, safeguarding against gendered violence and knowledge extraction. As such it calls into our imaginations to transcend colonial myths of

limitation and demand more, creating better systems of interconnectivity that centre care for ourselves, for the collective and for the planet.

APPENDICES

Appendix 3.a: Participant consent form

Research Participation Information Sheet and Consent Form

INFORMATION ABOUT THE RESEARCH

- **This project seeks to** investigate the power dynamics of internet access.

- **The work is being carried out by** Henna Zamurd-Butt, a self-funded doctoral candidate in the Media & Communications department at Goldsmiths college, London with the supervision of Professor Marianne Franklin.

- **How you will be included:**
 - Observation at international events and conferences
 - Interviews (remote and in-person, at your convenience)
 - Observation of your projects

- **The wider project involves:**
 - Organisations and individuals involved in similar work
 - Observation at international summits and conferences including IGF, MozFest and RightsCon

- **The researcher will:**
 - Work with participants in a collaborative way
 - Store findings securely
 - Share outcomes and insights with you if desired

CONSENT FORM

- I have read the information sheet;
- I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and have had them answered to my satisfaction;
- I understand that participation is entirely voluntary and that participants can withdraw from the project at any time without giving a reason;
- I understand that my information will be stored and used for the purposes of the research project, understanding that outcomes may also be used for future research.

Name:

Signature:

Date:

Additional questions - please circle

- Do you consent to audio recording of discussions? (You will be asked again at the time of interview) --- Yes / No
- Do you require your name/organisation's to be removed from the published work? (You will be asked again at the end of the project) --- Yes / No
- If yes to the above please share a preferred pseudonym for yourself/your organisation.

Appendix 3.b: List of formal (pre-arranged) interviews

Collaborator name and affiliation	Dates
Sam (independent)	2021a (with Pat), 2021b, email (with Pat) 2022
Pat (independent)	2021a (with Sam), 2021b, email (with Sam)
Mehwish (InternetWitness)	2019
Soha (InternetWitness)	2019
Irum (independent)	2022
Priya (TechEverybody)	2019
Dexa (GenderOnline)	2018, 2022
Shama (independent)	2018, 2022
Uffa Modey (Digital Grassroots)	2020 (with Esther), 2021, 2022
Esther Mwema (Digital Grassroots)	2020 (with Uffa), 2021, 2022
Li (Parte Afta Parte)	2022
Art (Parte Afta Parte)	2022
Kay (Parte Afta Parte)	2022

Appendix 3.c: Landscape mapping list

Internet Engineering Taskforce (IETF) meetings – Three annual meetings, taking place in-person in different locations, to generate technical documents and testing ideas. Their motto is "we believe in rough consensus and running code" (IETF, n.d.).

Internet Society Peering fora – Regional discussions focussed around interconnection, peering and traffic exchange, coordinated by Internet Society.

Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) meetings - Three annual meetings, taking place in-person, in different locations. "Multistakeholder" meetings for "learning about ICANN, advancing policy work, conducting outreach, exchanging best practices, conducting business deals, and interacting with members of the ICANN community, Board, and organization" (ICANN, n.d.).

Indigenous Connectivity Summit – Initially coordinated by Internet Society, in 2022 coordinated by the Indigenous Connectivity Institute (Canada). Focused on North America, inviting anyone "who cares about finding community-led solutions to improving access to fast, affordable, and reliable Internet connectivity in Indigenous communities" (Internet Society, n.d.).

Internet Freedom Festival – An annual meeting with a global focus targeted at technologists, activists and journalists (Team COMMUNITY, n.d.).

European Dialogue on Internet Governance (EuroDIG) – Part of the IGF National and Regional Initiatives (NRIs) focused on Europe, taking place annually.

Asian Pacific Internet Governance Forum - Part of the IGF National and Regional Initiatives (NRIs) focused on Asia Pacific, taking place annually.

African Internet Governance Forum - Part of the IGF National and Regional Initiatives (NRIs) focused on the African continent, taking place annually.

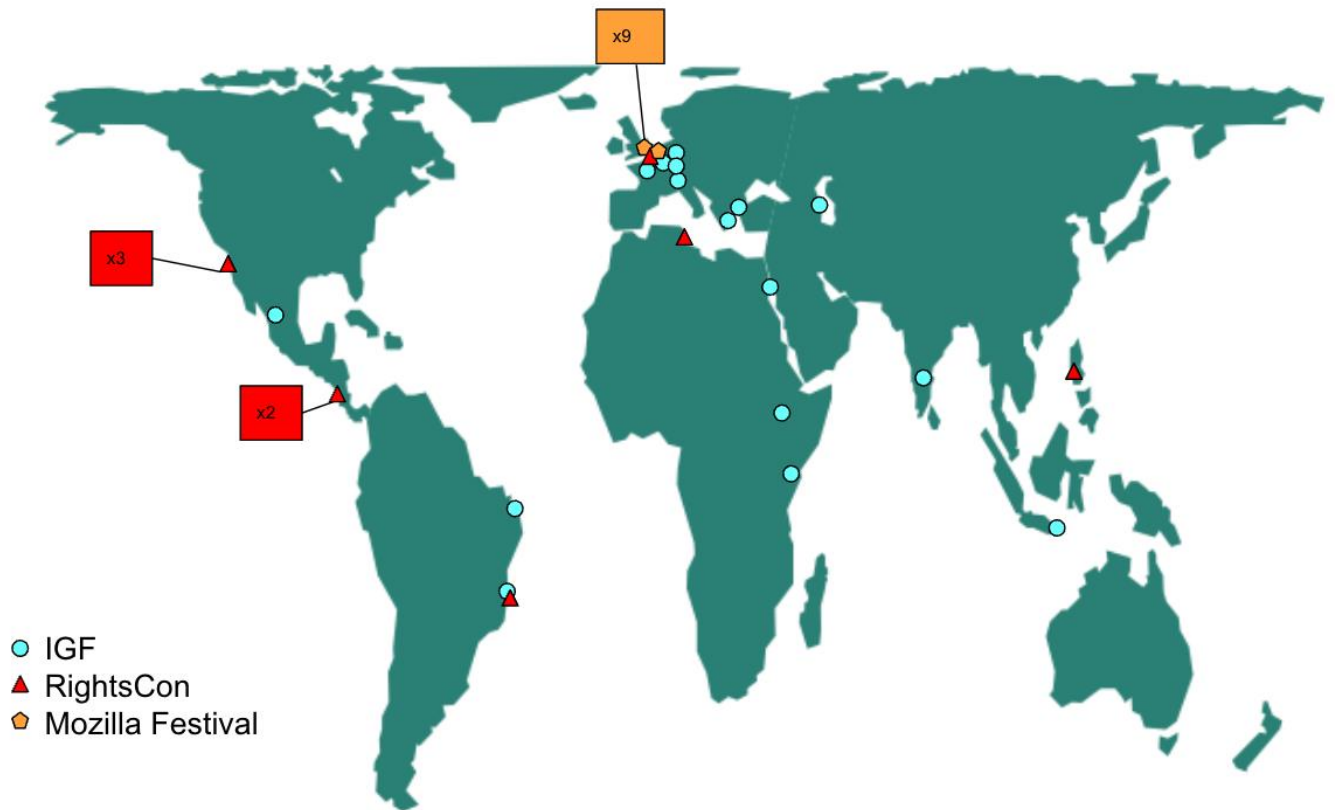
World Society on the Information Society (WSIS) Forums – Hosted annually in Geneva, Switzerland, "the WSIS Forum represents the world's largest annual gathering of the 'ICT for development' community" (United Nations, n.d.).

Freedom Online Conference – Hosted by the Freedom Online Coalition, a group of governments focused on "Internet freedom" and "fundamental human rights – free expression, association, assembly, and privacy" with a global scope (Freedom Online Coalition, n.d.).

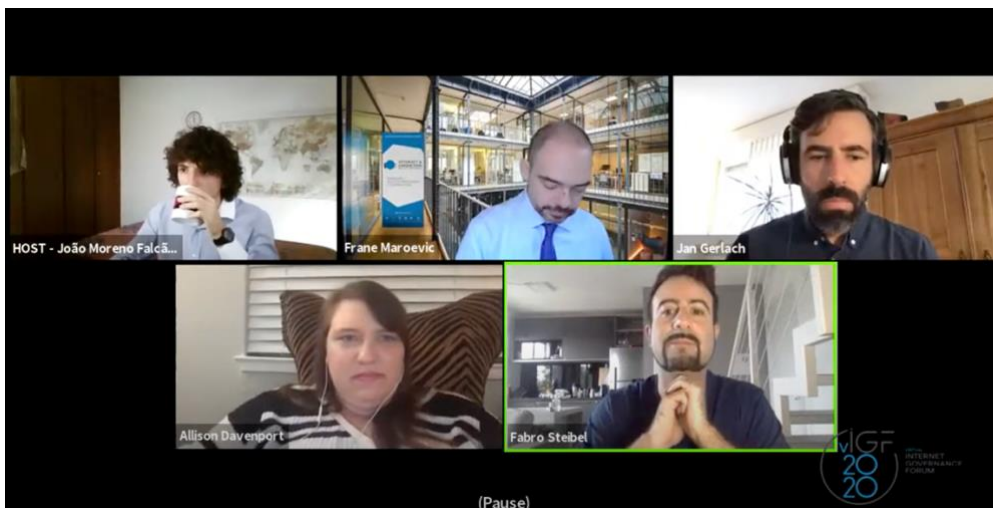
Slush – An annual meeting focused on tech businesses, “the world’s leading start-up event” (Slush, n.d.).

Web Summit – Holding events in Lisbon, Portugal, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Toronto, Canada and Hong Kong gathering “policymakers, heads of state, and the founders and CEOs of technology companies and fast-growing startups” (Web Summit, n.d.).

Appendix 3.d: Map showing locations of all in-person gatherings for IGF, RightsCon & Mozilla Festival since they were founded



Appendix 3.e: RightsCon 2020, IGF 2020 and MozFest 2021 online session interfaces



Appendix 4.a: Mozilla Manifesto 'Principles' (2007)

1. The Internet is an integral part of modern life — a key component in education, communication, collaboration, business, entertainment and society as a whole.
2. The Internet is a global public resource that must remain open and accessible.
3. The Internet should enrich the lives of individual human beings.
4. Individuals' security on the Internet is fundamental and cannot be treated as optional.
5. Individuals must have the ability to shape their own experiences on the Internet.
6. The effectiveness of the Internet as a public resource depends upon interoperability (protocols, data formats, content), innovation and decentralized participation worldwide.
7. Free and open source software promotes the development of the Internet as a public resource.
8. Transparent community-based processes promote participation, accountability, and trust.
9. Commercial involvement in the development of the Internet brings many benefits; a balance between commercial goals and public benefit is critical.
10. Magnifying the public benefit aspects of the Internet is an important goal, worthy of time, attention and commitment.

Appendix 4.b

Mozilla Manifesto Addendum (2018)

1. We are committed to an internet that includes all the peoples of the earth — where a person's demographic characteristics do not determine their online access, opportunities, or quality of experience.
2. We are committed to an internet that promotes civil discourse, human dignity, and individual expression.
3. We are committed to an internet that elevates critical thinking, reasoned argument, shared knowledge, and verifiable facts.
4. We are committed to an internet that catalyzes collaboration among diverse communities working together for the common good.

**Appendix 4.c: Mozilla Festival 2018
Ravensbourne University, London, UK.**



Credit: Erik Westra



Appendix 4.d: Access Now Mission 2010 to 2022

Date of snapshot	Mission text from Access Now website
21.12.2010	<p>Access is a new global movement for digital freedom.</p> <p>Access is a global movement premised on the belief that political participation and the realization of human rights in the 21st century is increasingly dependent on access to the internet and other forms of technology.</p>
22.12.2013	<p>Our Mission</p> <p>Access defends and extends the digital rights of users at risk around the world. By combining innovative policy, user engagement, and direct technical support, we fight for open and secure communications for all.</p>
17.12.2015 to 2022	<p>Access Now defends and extends the digital rights of users at risk around the world.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business and Human Rights • Digital Security • Freedom of Expression • Net Discrimination • Privacy <p>By combining innovative policy, user engagement, and direct technical support, we fight for open and secure communications for all.</p>

**Appendix 4.e: RightsCon 2019
Laico Hotel, Tunis, Tunisia.**



Appendix 4.f: RightsCon applications regional breakdown (Garrido and Harper, 2022; Harper, 2020, 2021)

	2019 ¹¹⁰	2020	2021	2022
Sub-Saharan Africa		8.5%	8.4%	13.6%
Asia Pacific		11.3%	14%	12.4%
Europe		22.6%	28%	26.3%
Latin America & Caribbean		18.3%	16%	13.3%
Middle East & North Africa		4.6%	3.6%	5.3%
North America	46%	32.90%	29%	28.8%

Appendix 4.g: Internet Governance Forum (IGF) Mandate (UN and ITU, 2005, paras. 72–80)

We ask the UN Secretary-General, in an open and inclusive process, to convene, by the second quarter of 2006, a meeting of the new forum for multi-stakeholder policy dialogue—called the Internet Governance Forum (IGF). The mandate of the Forum is to:

- Discuss public policy issues related to key elements of Internet governance in order to foster the sustainability, robustness, security, stability and development of the Internet;
- Facilitate discourse between bodies dealing with different cross-cutting international public policies regarding the Internet and discuss issues that do not fall within the scope of any existing body;
- Interface with appropriate inter-governmental organizations and other institutions on matters under their purview;
- Facilitate the exchange of information and best practices, and in this regard make full use of the expertise of the academic, scientific and technical communities;
- Advise all stakeholders in proposing ways and means to accelerate the availability and affordability of the Internet in the developing world;
- Strengthen and enhance the engagement of stakeholders in existing and/or future Internet governance mechanisms, particularly those from developing countries;
- Identify emerging issues, bring them to the attention of the relevant bodies and the general public, and, where appropriate, make recommendations;
- Contribute to capacity building for Internet governance in developing countries, drawing fully on local sources of knowledge and expertise;

¹¹⁰ Only data for North America is available for 2019.

- Promote and assess, on an ongoing basis, the embodiment of WSIS principles in Internet governance processes;
- Discuss, inter alia, issues relating to critical Internet resources;
- Help to find solutions to the issues arising from the use and misuse of the Internet, of particular concern to everyday users;
- Publish its proceedings

**Appendix 4.h: Internet Governance Forum 2019
Estrel Congress Centre, Berlin, Germany.**



Appendix 4.i: IGF Intersessional activities (I. S. United Nations, 2021a)

Activity	Definition
Dynamic Coalitions (DCs)	Open groups, dedicated to one or more Internet governance issue(s).
Best Practice Forums (BPFs)	IGF platforms for multistakeholder discussion on Internet governance issues, to facilitate dialogue and collect emerging and existing practices to address specific issues.
National, sub-regional, regional and Youth IGFs (NRIs)	Independently organized IGFs at the national and regional levels.
Policy Networks	The policy network concepts aim to develop multistakeholder expert-led frameworks that address in-depth issues, challenges, good practices and ways forward for a broad Internet governance matter.

Appendix 4.j: Global Youth Summit at IGF 2021 - Universal access and meaningful connectivity group action points

1. Representation of groups that are missing in internet governance processes - this needs checks and balances to ensure better representation of Global South and managed representation of Big Tech
2. Representation in IGF decision-making bodies and more transparency
3. IGF should not just be for discussion, but for actual policy making
4. Equal access to digital goods - IGF to provide more tools and data to those that don't have it so that they can participate
5. It should raise awareness of new technologies
6. There should be youth involvement in policy making
7. IGF must improve the quality of online participation
8. User friendly changes to the IGF website, which is currently not easy to use
9. Increases links between the global IGF and National Regional Initiatives (NRIs) and youth NRIs
10. Human rights should be embedded in digital cooperation models

Appendix 6.a: Location of settlements and villages relative to the city of Mysuru



Key

- 1. Indigenous settlements
- 2. Hindu villages

Appendix 6.b: Milk building in Village A, south India, where the Woman Internet Leader provides her services to the community



Appendix 6.c: Indigenous settlements near Kakankote Forest



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