

Contending with the digital horizon – What next for social movements ?

World over, social movements are reckoning with their coming of ‘digital age’, so to speak. Informal traders, street hawkers and vendors in India are coming together to think through what the e-commerce wave means for their livelihood. First Nations in Canada are rallying against the disastrous impact that policies such as the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) are likely to have on the constitutionally and internationally protected rights of indigenous peoples and their lands, waters and resources. To it they are adding data rights and sovereignty. In Congo, the gross abuse of child labor to mine and extract the cobalt needed to fuel smart phones and laptops, is prompting human rights activists to raise necessary questions about the invisible costs of the technologies that run our world. Citizen rights activists are grappling to make sense of the takeover of democracy by the digital edifice of an all seeing, hydra-headed state machinery that can surveil, censor or worse, disenfranchise simply with a few lines of code.

As social justice concerns become decisively entangled with ‘data’ and ‘algorithms,’ the conversation about digital rights can no longer be restricted to the online domain. Digital intelligence, based on socially and economically valuable data, is restructuring key sectors such as health, trade, commerce, agriculture, financial services, retail, hospitality, tourism and more. For social movements engaged in long standing struggles for equity and justice, the faultlines of contestation are being redefined. However, the vocabulary and strategies to pin down the manner in which neo-liberal globalization and dominant digital frameworks come together are not clear. Further, the digital context offers serious issues with regard to their effective political organization.

Just Net Coalition (JNC) was born through a recognition of an urgent imperative to build bridges between the older, “traditional” social movements and the digital rights community. We believe that RightsCon, which brings together a vibrant patchwork of digital rights activists, civil society organisations, journalists, coders, policy makers, lawyers etc. is a good space to rethink and re-strategize an agenda for social movements as they face the formidable digital horizons.

Our satellite event, ‘Contending with the digital horizon – What next for social movements?’ for Day ‘0’ of RightsCon will attempt to broker this dialogue by convening a space for representatives of social movements (focussed on social, economic and cultural rights) to speak from their situated experiences and emerging insights about the so called ‘digital revolution’. These exchanges and interactions we believe can help in exploring how individual and group/collective rights movements can work together for data and digital justice.

Session Description

We propose a 4 hour session from 2:00 – 6:00 PM on Day ‘0’ split into 2 sessions along the following themes:

1. Social movements in the age of the digital: understanding what we’re up against - To kick-start the event, we will have a panel session with speakers who represent/ are associated with movements at the forefront of global justice issues – right to knowledge, right to livelihoods, right to decent work, right to health, right to development, gender along with digital rights scholars and activists speaking to the tectonic shifts underway in social, economic and cultural terrains thanks to digital intelligence. The session will build the context and set the stage by bringing to fore experiences and perspectives from the women’s movements, labor rights groups, indigenous groups and so on.

2. Strategies, responses and challenges: charting the course of action - The session will focus on arriving at a reframed mandate for social movements from the standpoint of various rights. This will be a cross cutting session with an aim to seek strategies and courses of action. A key outcome we hope to achieve through the satellite event is to create an enduring and on-going space of conversation and dialogue between digital rights communities and social and economic rights movements towards the larger aim of data and digital justice for all communities and people and hopefully, have it be a recurring feature at the RightsCon space.

A network of civil society members who will be able to collaborate and learn from one another can be expected to be a concrete output of the proposed event.