



The Impact of Digital Technologies: a UN75 Priority?

By Carter Boyd and Elena Marmo

In recent years, the opportunities and challenges presented by rapid digitalization have become a staple on various agendas across the United Nations. Within the past few months, as the socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19 increase global reliance on digital technology, the relevance of and concerns about digitalization have heightened. Digital technologies have been prominent in a number of UN processes and deliberations such as UN75, human rights reports, the Roadmap for Digital Cooperation and the 2020 High-level Political Forum.

75th Anniversary of the UN

The impact of digitalization has been identified by the office of the Secretary-General's Special Advisor (for the UN 75th Anniversary--UN75) as one of several key issue areas to be discussed in a series of global dialogues held by Member States, civil society organizations (CSOs), and the private sector.

The [UN75 Issue Brief](#) on digital technologies, used to inform global dialogues, states that while rapid digitalization in the past two decades has extended internet connectivity to 50 percent of the world: "those yet to be connected remain cut off from the benefits of this new era and remain further behind.... While this gap narrowed in most regions between 2013 and 2017, it widened in the least developed countries from 30% to 33%."

The gap in access to advances in digital technology, and concern for its role in exacerbating inequalities, is often described as the "digital divide". The brief covers topics from the future of social media to the problems of automation and urges members to establish an international standard of engagement to mitigate the potential shortfalls of the new digital era.

Beyond internet connectivity as a driver of the digital divide, the UN75 Issue Brief reports: "800 million people could lose their jobs to automation by 2030, while polls reveal that the majority of all employees worry that they do not have the necessary training or skills to get a well-paid job".

UN Women Executive Director Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka has [spoken about](#) the gender dimensions of the digital divide: "In low and middle-income countries, 433 million women are unconnected and 165 million fewer women own a mobile phone compared with men...The global internet user gap is 17%, and the digital gender gap exists in all regions of the world".

On 21 September at the UN General Assembly High-level meeting, Heads of State and Government will adopt the [UN75 Political Declaration](#), negotiated by Member States. This declaration makes reference to digital technologies, noting:

"We will improve digital cooperation. Digital technologies have profoundly transformed society. They offer unprecedented opportunities and new challenges. **When improperly or maliciously**

used, they can fuel divisions within and between countries, increase insecurity, undermine human rights, and exacerbate inequality. Shaping a shared vision on digital cooperation and a digital future that show the full potential for beneficial technology usage, and addressing digital trust and security, must continue to be a priority as our world is now more than ever relying on digital tools for connectivity and social-economic prosperity. **Digital technologies have the potential to accelerate the realization of the 2030 Agenda. We must ensure safe and affordable digital access for all”** (emphasis added).

The Political Declaration, though recognizing the potential pitfalls of rapid digitalization, on the whole endorses and embraces this technology.

Human Rights

The concerns mentioned in the Political Declaration are reminiscent of [tensions among Member States](#) on the topic of digitalization throughout the 74th Session of the General Assembly in 2019. In the Third Committee, the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, Phillip Alston, focused his [report on the digital welfare state](#). The Special Rapporteur on the Protection of the Right to Freedom of Expression, David Kaye, addressed [online hate speech](#). They both pointed to the fact that, despite their potential benefits, digital technologies come with considerable risks for entrenching inequalities or undermining rights.

Both of these human rights experts issued strong pleas to Member States to approach digital technologies with caution and to strongly consider multilateral regulation and human rights accountability for the private sector in this field and beyond.

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet voiced similar concerns at a Third Committee side event on [Human Rights in the Digital Age](#) during the 74th Session of the General Assembly: “The digital revolution is a major global human rights issue. Its unquestionable benefits do not cancel out its unmistakable risks”. More information can be found in GPW UN Monitor #14 “[Human Rights in the Digital Age: Challenging Issues on the UN Agenda](#)”.

Roadmap for Digital Cooperation

As much of the world is struggling to adapt to COVID-19, international cooperation on key issues has become even more critical, forcing UN deliberations and meetings to move almost entirely online. To accelerate action on bridging the digital divide the Secretary-General launched the [Roadmap for Digital Cooperation](#). The report calls upon Member States and other stakeholders to: “play a role in advancing a safer, more equitable digital world, one which will lead to a brighter and more prosperous future for all”. The Roadmap, as well as [several Member States](#), urge international cooperation to mitigate the risks and globally standardize the opportunities.

During the [Launch of the Digital Roadmap meeting](#), Special Advisor to the Secretary-General on Frontier Technologies Fabrizio Hochschild noted that “the most pressing issue as pointed out by the COVID-19 pandemic seems to be handling the mute button on virtual platforms.” While perhaps a joke, Hochschild addressed the power dynamics at play in the virtual world and urges an emphasis on digital literacy. While COVID-19 has forced people to rapidly shift their day to day online, some parts of the world still lack the technical capacity and skills to make this shift successfully.

With this swift transition in mind, it is important to note that digital technologies have been developed, deployed and operated at a speed that has outpaced regulation and legislation. At the Digital Roadmap

launch, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights also raised human rights concerns regarding digital technologies:

“It is crucial that the UN lead by example. Serving as a model for Member States, tech companies, and others to do our human rights due diligence in our own use of digital technologies and in our data protection and privacy policies and procedures. As this call to actions points out, within the UN, human rights must be fully considered in all decision making, operations, and institutional commitments.”

2020 High level Political Forum

Digitalization was also a prominent topic during the 2020 High level Political Forum (HLPF). Issues addressed included the impact of digitalization on recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic, the protection of human rights in the digital age, and the improvement of digital infrastructure to support sustainable development progress. An official session on [Science, Technology, and Innovation](#) and several side events, including “Accelerating action through digital technologies” and “Data for a Decade of Action”, highlighted questions about the impacts of digital technology.

The limits of technology became dramatically clear at the 2020 HLPF as several statements, questions, and even Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) were interrupted due to technical difficulties. At the culmination of the Barbados VNR presentation on 16 July, the presenter lost connectivity and could not answer questions from Member States and CSOs about the country’s progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), innovative development financing strategies, and goals for ensuring those already behind were not being pushed further behind. Similarly, Uzbekistan began their VNR presentation with an informational video presented in Turkic which was not supported by the online translation mechanism, prompting the translator to comment that: “This platform does not support Uzbek”.

At an official session on [Science, Technology, and Innovation](#), Elenita C. Daño of ETC Group reiterated concerns regarding the digital divide, in the context of it hindering achievement of the 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals. She noted: “as we join online conversations like this, vulnerable populations are not at the table and unable to participate. To build back better the world must focus on improving digital access, not a digital dream world that excludes those most vulnerable.”

At a side event titled, “Data for a Decade of Action” Francesca Perucci from the UN Statistical Commission cited a practical example of how the digital divide is affecting National Statistical Offices. Due to a shift to virtual data collection reliant on internet connectivity, “96 percent of National Statistical Offices (NSOs) are no longer completing in-person surveys and 9 out of 10 NSOs in low-income countries saw an impact on their ability to meet international reporting requirements.”

Without adequate connectivity, NSOs are unable to collect real-time, disaggregated data to track progress on the SDGs. During a time when COVID-19 is drastically endangering development progress and in some cases causing serious declines, the need for reliable and up-to-date data has never been more important.

2020 HLPF Ministerial Declaration

At the close of the 2020 HLPF, Member States had planned to adopt a Ministerial Declaration on the 2030 Agenda. While consensus was not achieved prior to the end of the HLPF, President of ECOSOC

Mona Juul penned a [draft declaration](#) for consideration. The draft makes reference to digital technologies and expresses a commitment to ensuring equitable access, committing Member States to:

“... promote inclusive digital economy and build resilience across sectors. In this regard, we thank the Secretary-General for launching the Road Map for Digital Cooperation. We commit to enhancing and promoting capacity-building, infrastructure, connectivity and technical assistance initiatives as well as innovation and technologies towards advancing the Goals and targets, with a special focus on developing countries, and commit to strengthening cooperation to close the digital divide within and among countries.”

While the Declaration reflects these reiterated concerns regarding the digital divide, it lacks policy prescriptions and detail on the systemic changes needed to ensure equity.

Both the draft [HLPF Ministerial Declaration](#) and the [UN75 Political Declaration](#) raise concerns and possibilities, yet lack practical guidance on the development, use and regulation of digital technologies. What forms of social protection are in place in the event there are increasing job losses that result? How will technology companies be held to human rights standards? While the global community calls for a COVID-19 vaccine to become a [global public good](#), what precedent may be set to consider the internet as such?

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