



CROSS-CULTURAL HUMAN RIGHTS REVIEW

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Human Rights and Digital Transformations

Although definitions vary across disciplines, digital transformation is broadly understood to describe the process by which manual processes and services are transformed through technological innovation, allowing for a process of digitization. This process has transformed governance, business, and societal interactions and has opened up endless possibilities, opportunities, and obstacles for international society. In part it has initiated the compression of time and space that has given rise to an interconnected network society in which connections can be made in an instant, information can be gathered in real time, and the efficiency of systems is increased exponentially. These transformations however, have been an ambiguous force for both progress and destruction. In particular, how we as a society engage these transformation is of increasing interest as the ambiguities of digital transformation differ across societies and cultural frameworks. This has rendered the task of harnessing digital transformation for the improvement of society diverse and potentially culturally specific. The challenge is thus to harness the opportunities presented for improving society while mitigating unwanted effects across all societies. This is particularly relevant to issues of human rights.

Specifically, the COVID-19 pandemic in conjunction with digital transformations has arguably changed our lives forever. The pandemic has in particular demonstrated the opportunities that digitalisation brings. These include increased access and inclusivity (supporting the right to information, education for example), all which allow for more diverse, immediate, and enriched engagement. Big data has also provided the tools necessary to tackle large-scale challenges related to the pandemic. Beyond the pandemic big data has also been instrumental in protecting vulnerable groups with regards to the right to subsistence and development (i.e. China's poverty alleviation programme utilising big data for precise location and redistribution). In these cases the positives of digital transformation have translated into the further protection of a range of human rights. To what end digital transformation can in fact be used to enhance the protection of human rights across diverse societies is an increasingly relevant question.



Equally however, questions have been raised as to how to nullify or dampen the often-unforeseen negative impacts of digital transformations. These include negatives such as the lack of access also known as the ‘digital divide,’ intrusion on privacy, and the social and human costs of the digital shift (mechanisation/digitalisation of human jobs). All of these issues have highlighted the importance but also challenges of regulation of the digital space. Both the positive and negative effects of digital transformation present a mixed picture. It is in this ambiguity that presents serious challenges to the governance of the digital world as well as data processing. The same goes for the ambiguous effect of digital transformations pertaining to human rights and across societies. Significant consideration for these variables is required if these transformations are to be optimally harnessed.

While scholarship across a wide range of fields have expanded to incorporate the digital realm, what remains overlooked and is of interest to this issue of the CCHRR is **how these above-mentioned developments interact across cultures and with human rights?** Arguably, digital transformations have had different expressions in different societies. Relevant questions are then: What are some of the cross-cultural dimensions of digital transformations? Are there lessons to be learnt? Warnings to heed? Benefits to be shared? How do these change from context to context? Most importantly, how do digital transformations relate to human rights in these various settings? This CCHRR issue welcomes explorations into these questions amongst many others.

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