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MEDIA DEVELOPMENT

# Advancing Freedom of Expression

Using digital innovation to foster Article 19  
in the Global South

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III. Conclusion



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Erik Albrecht

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## III. Conclusion

## Imprint

This publication is part of a series presenting individual chapters from the study  
*Advancing Freedom of Expression - Using digital innovation to foster Article 19 in the Global South*

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Across the Global South many digital technology projects support freedom of expression and access to information. Given the diverse nature of the working contexts, the variety of user groups, and the broad range of technologies being adopted it is extremely difficult to gain a comprehensive and united overview of the situation. Nevertheless, this chapter aims to address research question 5 (RQ5) and to provide insight and analysis on how digital technologies are strengthening Article 19 in the Global South based on the findings from the 16 projects involved in this study.

### Lessons learnt for MDOs: How can the different aspects of Article 19 be strengthened through the use of digital technologies?

While digital technologies have dramatically changed MDOs' work spheres, MDOs also have to let themselves be guided by dynamics triggered by digital technologies. At the same time, they have to learn to ask the right questions and find answers to problems arising from working with digital technologies in order to adapt. This study offers only a small insight as to how fundamental this change process already is and will be in the future. And there are some important lessons to be learnt.

Digital technologies can help foster freedom of expression and access to information in all its aspects. They can help provide access to information, offer new ways of creating a public sphere, of cultivating inclusiveness of society, and of holding those in power to account.

In fact, these four aspects of strengthening Article 19 can offer guidance for MDOs in their engagement with projects using digital technologies to achieve freedom of expression and access to information. The research shows digital technologies' strengths in providing access to information and in creating a public sphere. On the other hand, while showing successes in fostering inclusiveness of disadvantaged groups it is often hard to actually reach out to disadvantaged groups even if this is part of a project's objective. Therefore, new digital gaps may arise.

It is the fourth aspect, the question of holding to account where the initiatives differ most. Their approaches to nurture Article 19 through this function vary from publishing information with the aim of building up public pressure for accountability (a more journalistic approach) to using information gathered in their projects for direct lobbying and advocacy work (an approach more similar to classic NGO work).

### Broad range of new actors

The study identifies how **broad the range of new actors** – and thus of potential partners – in fostering Article 19 has become. These can be grouped into three distinct categories:

**New projects of traditional media outlets** such as La Nación's data journalism project VozData (Argentina) or Extra's (Brazil) WhatsApp group for gathering information from their readers are certainly the ones MDOs have the most experience in working with among the new potential partners. They know often from decades of work how to assess a media outlet with regard to the qualities as a potential partner. They are experienced in judging its professionalism as well as the dedication to the rights inscribed in Article 19.

The challenge in these cases constitutes assessing the viability and feasibility of a project using digital technologies. As this study illustrates this is far from trivial. Many actors in the Global South are at the cutting edge in using digital technologies for fostering Article 19 in their specific contexts. MDOs may not have the same level of expertise. And yet, they can find themselves in roles supporting initiatives with complementary expertise and resources. However, this does not free them from the necessity of building up the required expertise. As the field is very much in flux in the Global North as well, an approach that centers on learning from each other will prove even more important than in other fields of MDO. At the same time, it is vital that MDOs build up expertise tailored to the needs of the media ecologies of the countries they are working in as conditions, needs and restraints differ. Especially when it comes to working with disadvantaged groups, best-practice experiences from other countries in the Global South might prove much more useful than from the Global North.

In the second group, there are **new initiatives using digital technologies for their work that is more or less directly aimed at fostering Article 19**. Rutas del Conflicto, the online searchable database and map of massacres perpetuated during Colombia's civil war, belongs in this category, along with the investigative reporting site Plaza Pública (Guatemala) and Poderopedia (Chile), an online platform combining a database of influential people and organizations with a software tool mapping the connections between these people and organizations. Another initiative is Trac FM (Uganda), a software tool which automatically collates SMS responses to opinion polls, and displays these responses as graphs. There are more examples that belong to this group, commonly sharing the fact that they were often founded for the sake of these specific projects. In these instances, assessing new partners poses new challenges. Many projects in this study could only be implemented with funding from international donors. This might mean that quality, professionalism, and viability can often only be judged on the basis of a grant application. In addition,

it might be more difficult for MDOs to find potential partners among this group.

In the third group, there are **certain initiatives that contribute substantially to strengthening Article 19, using it as an enabling right while pursuing other goals.** HarassMap opens access to information on sexual harassment in Egypt by collecting data through an Ushahidi platform. Their goal is to protect women from violence. Mera Swasthya uses the same platform to map reports of illegal fees charged by maternity hospitals in India. Here the goal is to fight corruption. At the same time there is no doubt that their activities are important contributions to nurturing the right of access to information in their countries. In addition, they support social inclusion as they collate information on issues concerning disadvantaged groups. Thus, organizations belonging to this third group can be valuable partners for MDOs trying to strengthen freedom of expression and access to information. These examples further illustrate the extent to which digital technologies blur the line between the media and the rest of society – and as well between media development and general development work.

#### **A wider public sphere, inclusiveness still a struggle**

This study illustrates to what an extent digital technologies **have widened the public sphere.** In many cases social groups can now raise their voices that were not able to do so before. As the theory chapters of this publication show, this finding is far from new. However, the cases studied here shed an interesting light on inclusiveness in this broadened public sphere. InfoAmazonia (Brazil) gets very little input from the people actually living in the Amazonas region. At the same time, local journalists find it difficult to use the project's materials as they lack the analytical instruments for this. Projects like CG-Net Swara (India) expose the potential of digital technologies: The initiative manages to give disadvantaged groups a voice and platform to raise their concerns. However, it still struggles to reach the most disadvantaged and those with the poorest educational backgrounds in the rural communities, especially women. Thus, **digital technologies can foster inclusiveness and participation, but in some cases they also create divisions along new lines within societies in the Global South or even deepen the existing gaps.**

Right now, many societies are undergoing fundamental change processes due to digital technologies. It will be **increasingly important for MDOs to ensure that these processes actually cultivate an inclusiveness of society with regard to Article 19.** This study shows that there are no easy solutions as to how to achieve this goal. One conclusion that can be drawn from the case studies though is that, with the rise of digital technologies and the shift to an information society, **(digital) media and information literacy becomes essential in order to participate**

**in public debate.** MDOs have to develop approaches on how to support disadvantaged groups in this regard.

#### **Innovation in projects using digital technologies - Growing importance of media and information literacy**

Most projects studied here were examples of innovation pushes that introduced new technologies and new media practices into a country's media environment from the outside. As to the relationship between innovation in media technology and innovation in media practices, in all cases described, the creation of innovative media practices was key because it is these practices (that is how the new projects are used) that lead towards the project objectives and the realization of freedom of expression.

As it often proves more technically challenging to use an app than to switch on a TV set or a radio, **the media practices of the “people formerly known as the audience” are much more crucial to success or failure of a project than in the pre-digital age.** No matter how much innovation in technology the projects of the study produced, it was whether users were able to innovate their media practices in order to use these new services that determined the extent of the projects' success. In the pre-digital age, the question of access to radio, TV or newspaper was often the decisive factor. With regard to digital technologies, the needs and constraints of the target groups have to be analyzed much more thoroughly. Maybe women in rural areas have mobile phone access but they lack the literacy to type SMS. Maybe people have Internet access but their provider limits it to the use of Facebook. **Questions of (digital) media and information literacy, costs of services, and again, access in a broadened sense have to be considered by MDOs in this new light.**

Concurrently, it is vital that a service answers a concrete need of the target audience, as this determines to a larger extent the motivation to actually use it. In such cases, MDOs can assist in gathering information on the needs of target audiences. Activities in this field are still in the initial stages but offer huge opportunities with the rise of big data.

#### **New relationship between content producers and technologists**

Digital technologies **have altered the relationship between content producers and technologists.** In the pre-digital age, technology was a mere tool to produce content or mattered as a means of distribution. Our study reveals that in digital projects often the content is in the technology. Trac FM (Uganda) strengthens freedom of expression mostly through a software tool that collates SMS responses in opinion polls. The very idea of CGNet Swara (India) is that everybody can call a toll-free number to inform about grievances.

This constitutes a change in paradigm MDOs have to react to. Broadly surmising, in the past, it was mainly managers and journalists who shaped the ideas of their products, while technicians were mostly responsible for quality and distribution. Working with digital technologies, **MDOs have to develop the ability to not only speak to NGO founders but also to technologists**, especially those working on software, and **assess their projects and their potential**.

This takes on additional importance as this study shows how delays in software development can determine the failure or success rate of a project. In some cases, the development of software solutions took much longer than expected and could only be achieved with additional grant money. Thus, digital technologies add a new layer of uncertainty to the evolution of a project that has to be taken into account by MDOs. This is even more crucial as many project founders lack the skills to understand questions of technology to an extent that enables them to assess the solutions software specialists are suggesting. In this, MDOs can offer valuable assistance and consultancy by providing this expertise and also by helping to initiate digital projects properly from the management side.

In the same vein, MDOs have to engage much more with tech communities and support them in developing open software. These new tools are invaluable for media projects to use and adapt for their purposes.

In general, this study confirms that projects often change over time. As not all ideas work equally well within a project the focus can change. Hence, continued monitoring and evaluation and, if necessary, learning efforts are needed. Participatory reassessments are vital. At the same time, changes have to be seen as new opportunities for an initiative rather than a source or a sign of potential failure, even if they might require additional funding. For MDOs, this could mean that current project cycles and logical frameworks might not work in this highly volatile field.

At the same time, it seems crucial for success that projects are born out of a recognized need of society rather than focusing on technology for technology's sake. Furthermore, having a technological strategy is essential and needs to include an assessment of available technical skills.

### New approaches to media sustainability needed

**MDOs have to rethink their notion of sustainability.** Indeed, all projects studied here were dependent on donor money. Nevertheless, they created important innovation for their countries' media ecosystems. Even if they are not yet financially sustainable and in some cases might never be, they create important innovation impulses that can be taken up by other actors and developed further. MDOs can help make sure

through consultancy that this innovation actually becomes a lasting part of a media ecosystem. In some cases, this will involve finding ways to attain financial sustainability within the project, in others it might mean helping to create partnerships with additional actors in the field. The study draws attention to how valuable these projects are to fostering Article 19. Simultaneously, financial sustainability remains an unresolved question not only in the Global South. MDOs can help here to bridge the global divide by searching for viable solutions together.

### Lessons learnt for MDOs

Digital technologies have long created many new ways to strengthen freedom of expression and access to information as well as threats of limiting both. They have triggered the appearance of many new actors in the field. They have changed the role of MDOs tremendously – be it as donors or partners. In the light of digitization, MDOs have to reassess their approaches to media development radically. In many regards, they might be lagging behind already. Many answers to new challenges have to be found, and many questions have to be asked yet. This study has offered insights to some questions connected to innovative digital technologies and Article 19.

Digital technologies will not “save everything,” as Morozov (2013) put it. Our case studies illustrate how difficult it remains to bridge various gaps within society. At the same time, there are new challenges concerning sustainability and media and information literacy. With digitization, the role of technologies increased making it necessary for MDOs to develop at least a general understanding of technological processes and application in different contexts. Those are fields MDOs will have to engage much more in the future if they want to utilize the opportunities digital technologies offer for freedom of expression and access to information to its full extent.

### Erik Albrecht

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