



Digital access, democratic rights



[Sarayu Natarajan](#), SEP 09 2020, 10:45 IST | UPDATED: SEP 09 2020, 12:12 IST



Digital solutions can have an impact in bridging this gap as they may offset the opportunity costs. Credit: iStock Photo

A few days ago, Omidyar Network India launched a report that highlighted what could be the new trajectory of digital innovation in the government. The Covid-19 pandemic is an opportune moment to transition into digital service delivery. Yet, as we navigate concerns of where such technology can be deployed, appropriate legal frameworks, governance models and concerns of state surveillance --it is also a moment to think deeply about questions of inclusion and access. The pandemic has made visible what everyone always knew – the enormous gap between the state and the citizen.

Digital solutions can have an impact in bridging this gap as they may offset the opportunity costs. Easily accessible and navigable technologies in this space may be able to enable many citizens to make claims. Technology may also create an accessible trail of data – in particular, governments are stymied in serving citizens. It may, if done very carefully with appropriate design and accountability mechanisms, also enable visualising problems while masking identity.

Thinking about inclusion, therefore, is more than just functional. Yes, it does widen the networks that access a platform – amplifying what is called network effect. Dangerously, these wide networks may enable the creation of monopolies in data and access, or enable the amplification of the work of some bad actors. However, the quest for inclusion needs to be framed from the lens of who the state is supposed to serve. And the answer to that is everyone. This is encoded in the legal and constitutional framework. Everyone has a right to access the state.

This fundamental insight into the nature of a government platform (as ODEs are) is the entry point to building for inclusion. Thinking about inclusion and reach is indeed a duty for platforms of the government. Thinking about inclusion at the outset may offer modest efficiency gains as retrofitting programs may be costly and difficult.

Doing this is hard work and requires us to recognise the lived realities of state access and digital use. Ongoing empirical research at Aapti Institute (as yet unpublished), in the context of government technology, is highlighting breakdowns at the ground in awareness – both of rights with respect to the state and of the availability of digital solutions, and ability to navigate digital solutions and trust the state. This fraying of awareness and ability is fundamental, wide-spread, and amplifies breakdowns in state accountability for the most vulnerable. It has the potential to undermine any potential value from digital ecosystems. At its worst, it encodes and widens access gaps along existing lines of caste, gender and community.

However, these very lived realities of how people navigate these breakdowns to access their rights give us hope and suggest an opportunity. Our research shows the continued role of the civil and political society in bridging the gap between the citizen and the state. NGOs and CSOs play a significant role in going beyond their mandates to ensure access in wider access in a variety of domains. NGOs, that work in disparate areas, help citizen file grievances and make claims through technology. Local political leadership – both informal community-level leaders and elected officials – play a significant role in bridging these access gaps by directly interfacing with government officials.

While these types of intermediation are embedded in political economies of their own – for instance, rational politicians seek re-election over everything else - leaning on the intermediaries carefully can offer leverage for inclusion. Intermediaries can be supported to be actors for trust, and navigating digital solutions. Over time, it may also become clear that some aspects of interfacing with the state are best left to the civil and political society.

Equally, thinking about accessibility and inclusion from the technological perspective such as availability in multiple languages, inclusion for disabled and more needs thought. Thinking about the limits of tech here, and leaning on offline architectures where relevant can support ODEs to achieve impact.

However, just this is not it. It is critical to transcend these functional gains around enhanced use and adoption and embed cultures of inclusion in ODEs. Inclusion by design as an approach offers a pathway. However, care must be taken to move from design principles to enforceable inclusion. Simultaneously, we must think of how to retrofit solutions around inclusion.

The starting point is to acknowledge that engagement with the state is about citizenship – which includes claiming accountability of institutions of the state. Community institutions play a critical and enduring role in this. Technology-enabled access to the state can be one of many rallying points around which groups of citizens come together to assert democratic rights.

(The writer is the Founder of Aapti Institute)

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