TITLE: Whose Knowledge Counts? Rethinking Digital Inclusion and Accountability in the Global South

AUTHOR: Shabnam Singla (she/her)

AFFILIATION: Graduate, Department of Philosophy, Central European University (CEU), Vienna + Research Assistant, Cognitive Science Department, IIT Gandhinagar.

EMAIL: iamshabnamsingla@gmail.com, **PHONE:** +91 9781485775

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT FOR ESSAY:

Introduction

For the last two decades, we have been told that connecting people to digital technology will reduce inequality. The belief has been that if people have access to devices and the internet, they will have equal opportunity. Technology will level the playing field, and no one will be left behind. In India, this has taken shape through programmes like *Digital India* and *BharatNet*, where rural schools log into online classes, farmers receive mandi prices and weather updates on their phones, and pensioners are taught to use WhatsApp. On the surface, this looks like the kind of inclusion we were promised.

But this story is incomplete. The story does not end at access. What happens after people have access to the technology? What happens after people come online is rarely asked. And that is where a different kind of inequality begins. Equal access does not mean automatically equal recognition. The deeper issue is not just about who has the tools to speak, but about who is being heard, and on what terms.

In this paper, I argue that digital inequality is not only infrastructural or economic but also epistemic. It concerns whose knowledge counts as valid, what forms of expression are recognised, and what burdens marginalised users must carry to be visible online (Fricker, 2007). I call this the **epistemic burden** of digital participation, and the tactics communities adopt in response as **strategic legibility**. The question of accountability, then, is not only about connecting the unconnected but about dismantling the existing systems that demand constant translation for recognition.

To develop this argument, I will first examine how platforms reproduce epistemic inequality through algorithms and cultural biases. Using a feminist epistemology lens, I will further explain strategic legibility. Drawing on digital activism and my work as a legal translator for queer asylum seekers, I show how marginalised communities adapt to the Western expectations of what counts as legitimate. These adaptations make them visible but come at a significant cost. Next, I will turn to the question of accountability, arguing that platforms, states, and institutions must bear responsibility for shifting the burden of recognition. Finally, I will propose ways to reclaim digital infrastructures as public goods by embedding epistemic justice, community-led governance, and plurality into design.

From Access to Epistemic Inequality

To begin with, platforms like Facebook, Instagram, or X appear, at first glance, to be equal spaces. Anyone can create an account. Anyone can post. It looks like the digital world gives everyone a voice. But what appears on our screens is not neutral or random. Algorithms decide what rises to the top of a feed, what is sidelined, and what never appears at all. They are designed to maximise engagement, which often means privileging content that is already popular, emotionally charged, or easily digestible (Tufekci, 2015). As Safiya Noble (2018) demonstrates, algorithms reflect the social biases already present in the world. They don't just amplify what is popular, they amplify what is already dominant.

The consequences are huge: Imagine two people posting about violence. One is a young person in the U.S. sharing steady footage of police brutality, captioned in English with familiar hashtags. It goes viral. The other is a Dalit woman in rural India uploading a shaky video of caste violence in her village, narrated in a regional language and naming dominant-caste perpetrators. This second post is more likely to be flagged as *hate speech* or ignored by the algorithm. Both posts tell the truth. But only one fits what the system has been trained to recognise as valuable.

The same dynamic is played out globally. For instance, during #EndSARS protests in Nigeria, posts in Pidgin English or local dialects got little engagement. It was only when the language shifted into more recognisable global human rights terms such as "police violence," "state repression", that they gained visibility (Mutsvairo & Ragnedda, 2019). Similarly, in Sudan's 2019 uprising, one iconic photo of a woman in white robes standing on a car went viral. But many other images, those showing gender-diverse protesters or local resistance symbols, remained invisible because they did not fit the "visual grammar" of what protest is supposed to look like.

Equal access to platforms, therefore, does not mean equal participation. The digital divide runs deeper, into the question of whose voices become legible and credible in digital systems.

Strategic Legibility and Epistemic Burden

What happens over time? People adapt. They learn what kind of content performs well, what hashtags to use, and what emotional chord to strike. Activists begin borrowing the language of NGOs and funders. Communities simplify complex truths into formats that platforms know how to read. This is what I call **strategic legibility**, the tactic of making yourself understandable to a system that was not built for you. Strategic legibility is a survival strategy, but it comes at a cost. Local ways of knowing, regional idioms, and slow and complex stories get sidelined in favour of content that is fast, emotional, or globally legible. Over time, this shapes not only how marginalised groups present themselves, but how the rest of us come to understand them.

I will support this with my analysis from working as a legal translator with QueerBase, an NGO supporting LGBTQ+ asylum seekers in Austria. My role was to help queer and trans refugees from South Asia make their narratives legible to asylum officers. Often, this meant rephrasing stories into frameworks the institution recognised: "coming out," stable categories of gay/lesbian identity, and visible proof. But many of the people I worked with came from non-Western, non-privileged contexts where disclosure is unsafe, where sexuality is fluid, relational, or shaped by caste and religion hierarchies. Their own words, their ways of describing desire, fear, and family were often dismissed as incoherent. The only way to be believed was to translate their lives into *Western* categories. This was not a question of digital skills or language ability, but of an institution that only recognised certain epistemologies.

The asylum system and the digital system mirror one another. In both, people are forced into *epistemic burden*: translating themselves into dominant terms in order to be seen or recognised (Singla, 2024). And in both, this comes at the cost of truth. What circulates is not the full complexity of lived experience, but a simplified version that fits the expectations of those in power.

Accountability and Platform Power: Who bears the responsibility?

So, who bears responsibility for this narrowing? Platforms play a central role. Their algorithms and policies structure visibility, privileging what aligns with dominant cultural scripts. States also play a role, by adopting policies that celebrate connectivity while ignoring deeper inequities. Institutions, from asylum offices to medical boards, reinforce epistemic injustice by demanding conformity.

Building on this, I will talk about how accountability cannot be limited to punishing "bad content" or extending connectivity. It requires a collective recognition of how design choices systematically burden some communities more than others. José Medina (2013) reminds us that epistemic injustice is not solved by more access alone, but by creating conditions where diverse ways of knowing can flourish without needing to be translated into dominant codes. So, we need to move further from surface-level inclusion and ask: who designs these platforms/systems, whose worldview do they embed, and who is held accountable when recognition is conditional?

Reclaiming Digital Infrastructures as Public Goods

Towards the end, I will provide a few ways in which digital infrastructures might be reclaimed as public goods by centring epistemic justice rather than mere access. This requires recognising plurality by building multilingual and multimodal platforms that support regional languages, dialects, and diverse cultural idioms rather than privileging English or Western formats. It will also include strengthening community-driven governance initiatives like ARISE and CNX that place local communities at the centre of decision-making. It will also be essential to rethink platform metrics to move beyond connectivity rates and engagement numbers toward measures that capture diversity of representation and recognition. As Citron and Solove (2022) remind us in the context of privacy, technical protections alone are insufficient, digital equity requires frameworks rooted in justice, dignity, and participation. If presence online continues to demand constant self-translation, then inclusion remains conditional. The promise of digital inclusion will remain incomplete if it ends at access. The deeper divide is epistemic, concerning whose knowledge counts, who must bear the burden of translation, and whose worldview digital infrastructures are built to recognise. When a Dalit woman's testimony of violence disappears under algorithmic filters, or a queer asylum seeker must rewrite their life to fit Western categories, these are not accidental exclusions but systemic patterns produced by design choices. The pressing questions, then, are: who bears the burden of shaping digital spaces, and who holds the power to transform them? The burden *cannot* fall on those already marginalised; accountability must shift upward onto platforms, states, and institutions, with the responsibility to design systems capable of recognising plural ways of knowing.

Conclusion

If presence online requires constant self-translation, then inclusion remains conditional. To truly treat digital infrastructures as public goods, the burden of legibility must be shifted away from the marginalised and onto the systems that claim to include them. Only then can the internet be reclaimed as a public good grounded in justice, rights, and participation.

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