

Case Study – “Digital Democracy Challenge”

Background

Open civic space allows citizens and civil society organizations to share their interests and concerns and act individually and collectively to influence and shape democratic societies. However, as per the annual democracy report, global democracy is on the decline. The level of democracy enjoyed by the average global citizen in 2020 is down from that in 1990. ⁽¹⁾

New information and communication tools have transformed every other sphere of life, including playing a role in promoting democracy. We note examples of innovative use of technology to drive pro-democracy movements in many places worldwide over the last few years. A prominent example is Hong Kong, where activists have leveraged their digital tools to protest authoritarianism. Digital democracy is the use of digital tools to shape a democratic society. It can make disenfranchised voices heard, encourage greater participation, and generate more trust in public institutions and decision making.

However, in many countries, autocratisation is on the rise. As the Varieties of Democracy report ⁽²⁾ states: *“The playbook of “wannabe” dictators: First, seek to restrict and control the media while curbing academia and civil society. Then couple these with disrespect for political opponents to feed polarization while using the machinery of the government to spread disinformation. Only when you have come far enough on these fronts is it time for an attack on democracy’s core: elections and other formal institutions.”*

What is the Digital Democracy Challenge?

The Digital Democracy Challenge seeks innovative, low-cost, and viable digital solutions to uphold civic and democratic public space when the rights to freedom of expression and association are restricted.

We seek solutions to allow citizens, activists, civil society actors, disenfranchised political actors and other stakeholders to contact each other and their supporters. We seek digital solutions to keep the democratic space alive, maintain a space for dialogue and ideas, and provide first-hand accounts of government activities.

We call socially committed citizens worldwide, problem solvers, creative minds, democracy experts, programmers, graphic and web designers to come together in a 72-hour collaborative digital process. The process will finish on a Demo Day where the participants will pitch in front of a jury.

We will select the top three solutions, and the winners will receive prize money of up to \$10k.

The solutions need to address the following key challenges in a theoretical context:

- A mix of urban and rural populations cannot rely on face-to-face or in-person meetings to have their voice heard or civic participation coordinated.

¹ Democracy Report 2021. Autocratization Turns Viral, via <https://www.v-dem.net/en/publications/democracy-reports/>

² <https://www.v-dem.net/en/news/>



- Internet connectivity is restricted – from near-total internet shutdowns for a time or the ‘throttling’ of internet speed.
 - Key social media platforms might be blocked permanently or suspended.
 - Free, independent media is censored.
 - Frequent online misinformation campaigns run by authorities in place
 - Significant digital surveillance laws are in place, which might include penalties on the use of specific internet applications that protect privacy or increased access to private data;
 - Digital footprint of citizens on popular applications and websites are monitored.
- Censorship, together with much more severe, targeted human rights violations, may occur based on monitored activities.

Why participate?

Technology has facilitated inclusive participation far beyond any other means of communication. It has also served to promote democracy and expand citizen participation while also reaching people who have been left out of democratic processes. Hence, it is vitally important that we come together to develop innovative solutions and contribute to furthering Goal 16 of the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This will help people keep the principles and practice of democratic and civic participation alive at the community and civil society levels, especially in places that have recently fallen or have been under restrictive regimes. So please join us in promoting and upholding democracy where most needed.

#DigitalDemocracyChallenge is at the forefront of finding novel solutions to promote digital democracy and uphold democratic and civic space.