

TECHNOLOGY, ACCOUNTABILITY AND DEMOCRACY IN SOUTH ASIA AND BEYOND

Seasoned activism meets technical imagination

Dates: January 17-18, 2014

Location: University of Mumbai

Over the last few years, there has been unprecedented focus on corruption and accountability across South Asia. Accountability movements have resulted in a variety of initiatives including special monitoring bodies, transparency laws, monitoring mechanisms, judicial reforms and refining government processes. These initiatives bring different understandings of problems and approaches, with varied strengths and weaknesses. Despite these differences, they are increasingly converging on the use of technology to augment a growing set of accountability strategies.

The availability of new devices, the power of the Internet, the reach of mobile phones, and citizen activism give us reason to believe that the use of technology has real promise in advancing the accountability agenda. Yet the claim of technology's promise is not without its critics. The use of technology has created new avenues for corruption despite claiming to combat it. Technologies rolled out in the name of advancing citizenship also create avenues for greater surveillance and disenfranchisement. Many initiatives are not controversial, but their effectiveness is yet to be evaluated rigorously. Finally marginalized people, who need tools for accountability more than anyone else, have significantly lower levels of engagement with it. The promises and problems of technology's relationship with accountability require closer examination.

This conference proposes to bring together people who are engaged in these questions as activists, officials, academics and innovators to examine how technology is currently being used for accountability projects and to build meaningful platforms for the future. We specifically seek to bring together people with experience in accountability movements (with or without the use of technology), young innovators and researchers in order to promote rich multidisciplinary conversation and to build new collaborations.

SEASONED ACTIVISM MEETS TECHNICAL IMAGINATION

One of the most persistent criticisms of technology for democracy projects is that they focus heavily on the tools without paying attention to the complexity of their use and the fact that accountability is a political project steeped in power relations. In order to ensure that technical imagination goes hand in hand with a sophisticated understanding of the problems and strategies necessary to make technology a tool for progressive change, we propose to invite seasoned civil society activists and leaders from the government who have had a successful track record in managing positive change to meet individuals who are just beginning to consider technology as a response to the same problems. The conference will thus foster an exchange of ideas between innovators and

experienced activists so that innovators can share their tools and experiences while also deepening their understanding of technology's relevance and challenges for potential uses on the ground. In turn, experienced political, social and economic leaders will gain ideas on how elements of technology can be introduced into their work. With this in mind, the conference format provides for opportunities to learn about technology projects, meet with platform creators, and participate in workshops to gain tools suitable for diverse campaign needs.

TENTATIVE AGENDA

The conference will be based on four broad themes: (1) Technology and the electoral process (2) Combatting "last-mile" corruption in public services (3) Gender, technology and accountability and (4) Building safeguards around India's Aadhar project.

DAY 1: JAN 17, 2014

Day one of the conference will focus on grassroots campaigns on two critical issues: electoral malfeasance at the grassroots and corruption in public services at the last mile.

8 – 9 AM: LIGHT BREAKFAST

9 – 10.50 AM: TECHNOLOGY AND THE ELECTORAL PROCESS

Elections are the cornerstone of any democracy, and their integrity is vital to ensure that people's voices are genuinely reflected in governance. The rapid development and application of information and communication technologies (ICT) has created new opportunities while also bringing new challenges for those working to safeguard electoral integrity, promote transparency and foster political accountability. This panel will take stock of these opportunities and challenges and what implications they have for democracy.

Just as election management bodies have adopted new technologies for voter registration, voting and counting processes, civil society has adapted ICTs in efforts to monitor elections, help voters make informed electoral choices, advocate for transparency, connect voters with candidates, open up candidate and party debates to a broader audience, and follow up on campaign promises after elections. For example, citizen election observation groups have incorporated the use of Short Message Service (SMS) to communicate rapidly with observers and to better monitor and assess the integrity of election processes. ICTs have expanded who can observe elections, connecting individual citizens with trained observers through "crowdsourcing." These groups have also used visualization tools, such as infographics, interactive visuals and digital maps, to communicate their findings, while at the same time they have used social media to share their findings more broadly with the public. Such uses of ICTs have the potential to increase transparency, inclusiveness and accountability, and in turn to deepen democracy. On the other hand, there have been instances of the use of online intimidation and hate speech during electoral processes that are distinctly anti-democratic and go against the spirit of free and fair elections. These interactions are understudied in the South Asian context and need greater examination.

We invite presentations based on academic research and practical experience that will elaborate and critique different ways in which ICTs are used in the electoral process by election commissions, governments, political parties and citizen's organisations. Papers could include (but not be limited to) promising innovations, best practices or critiques of existing technologies. We particularly welcome papers that take into account social differentiation in technology projects for electoral integrity.

10.50 – 11.10 AM: COFFEE & SNACKS

11.10 – 1 PM: FIGHTING CORRUPTION AT THE GRASSROOTS

Corruption at the “last mile” – in the form of adding fake beneficiaries to government programs or demanding bribes for rendering services – is among the most visible and debilitating forms of corruption internationally. This session will bring together leading ideas on fighting corruption at the grassroots and discuss how technology can enable these campaigns. We welcome papers and projects on governance, transparency initiatives and other high or low tech strategies to help the collective struggle against last mile corruption. We especially welcome presentations on the use of technology in accountability strategies by women or other vulnerable populations.

1 – 2.30 PM: LUNCH BREAK

Posters on projects with a strong technology component based on the conference themes will be displayed in the venue at this time. Participants will have the chance to view posters and get acquainted with each other.

2.30 – 5 PM: WORKSHOPS 1-2

WORKSHOP 1: UNCONFERENCE ON TECHNOLOGY & ELECTIONS

This workshop will give us the space to have an action-oriented conversation between citizen's organisations and innovators on current problems in the electoral process and how technology could be used to mitigate them. As in an unconference, any participant will have the opportunity to propose a problem that needs addressing. If there is sufficient interest a subgroup could be formed to discuss the challenge and how ICT could be used in the larger strategy to address them.

WORKSHOP 2: FIGHTING CORRUPTION AT THE GRASSROOTS

Taking forward the discussion from the panel earlier in the day, the workshop will focus on different ways of using technology to fight corruption at the grassroots, including crowdsourcing against corruption. This workshop will emphasize the methods and burgeoning technologies for vulnerable groups' engagement in campaigns against corruption and in favour of more inclusive, reliable, and higher quality service delivery.

5 – 6.30 PM: SPEED GEEKING

Description on following page.

DAY 2: JAN 18, 2014

8 – 9 AM: LIGHT BREAKFAST

9 – 12 PM: BUILDING SAFEGUARDS AROUND INDIA'S AADHAR PROJECT

The Government of India's (GoI) project to provide unique identification for all residents of India based on biometric validation has proceeded at a rapid pace and it already covers over 300 million people. GoI has argued that this technological initiative will go a long way in reducing corruption. The claims of UIDs effectiveness have been vigorously contested and many have pointed to the potential of the project to disenfranchise people and to affect socio-economic, civil and political rights.

The current debate around UID is polarised with one section demanding that the project be scrapped completely and the other arguing that the benefits of the project far outweigh the costs, and so it should continue as it is. This panel is organized on the idea that there is significant room for reorganizing the project in a way that retains its promises while building safeguards against potential problems. The UID Bill is yet to be passed by the parliament and complementary laws including a privacy law are yet to be legislated in India. There is also the space for organisational innovations in the UID enrolment process and the use of the infrastructure in various government programmes.

We welcome papers that discuss potential problems of the project and propose safeguards around them. We also welcome evaluations of the project so far. Presentations in the panel will be followed by collective deliberation over promises, problems and safeguards.

12 – 1 PM: LUNCH

1 – 4 GENDER, TECHNOLOGY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

There are hundreds of projects that use technical tools for promoting accountability today. One discussion that is sorely lacking in this community is: are the tools equally relevant for women and men? Additionally, the spaces in which such tools are created are often highly gendered.

This session is created on the recognition that there are often differences between women and men in the strategies they use for demanding accountability and also on the domains in which they seek change. Acknowledging and harnessing the gendered nature of technology ownership and usage can lead to significant progress in making such tools more equitable and effective. This panel-discussion-cum-workshop will involve presentations and discussion on three fronts: (1) strategies for facilitating more inclusive spaces for technology design; (2) understanding gendered patterns of technology use and methods of engaging greater numbers of female users; (3) highlighting arenas of female-driven change in accountability and exploring technology can encourage such spaces and movements. Along with gender, we hope to create a discussion around other intersecting factors such as caste and class.

CONFERENCE FORMAT

The conference will involve a mix of paper presentations, talks, posters with speed geeking and workshops.

PRESENTATIONS

The conference will host panel discussions on the four broad themes mentioned above. We welcome presentations of both applied projects and academic research on any of these themes. We hope to provide a balance between presentations on successful accountability initiatives and technical innovations in each of these panels. Each presenter will have about 15 minutes and each session will have space for Q&A.

Some academic presentations may be solicited by invitation. Others who are interested in presenting academic papers will be asked to send a 2-page summary of their proposed papers before the submission deadline. *While we do not expect a paper from those who are engaged in practical projects, we will also ask them to submit a summary of the project they propose to discuss, and we encourage these participants to collaborate with us in creating a "crowd sourced" handbook based on the experience of individual projects.* We hope that the handbook will provide us with a rich source of information on our collective experience, and will also create the basis for vibrant interaction during the conference.

POSTERS & SPEED GEEKING

Those with a technology project that has relevance to accountability movements will also be able to apply to participate in *Poster and Speed geeking* sessions. They can submit a project as long as it is relevant for accountability campaigns, even if it has not been used previously in such campaigns. For example, this could be a new voice messaging platform that could be used for citizen engagement or a feminist toolkit for technology creators. Participants will be encouraged to produce one or more posters describing their project, which will be on display throughout the conference for viewing by all participants. Attendees who are interested in learning about how these technologies could be useful to their own projects will have an opportunity to fix 15 minute meetings with the presenters (i.e. speed geeking).

WORKSHOPS

The conference will host two workshops on the panel themes. The workshop would be preceded with a collective writing exercise where the participants and others working in the space can discuss their campaign strategies, how they use technology and other aspects of their work in a Google document. This exercise would begin three months before the conference starts and is intended to generate a collective understanding of accountability strategies and of each other's work.

The process would be led by the theme leader who would start the discussion by posing a set of questions about the project (e.g. what are the core accountability strategies, what proportion of users are women? What kinds of technology are already used in the work? etc.). Starting with the questions, participants would share their experiences on a Google document, where we would

collate experiences on each topic. The informal handbook would serve as the basis for the workshop.

WHO CAN PARTICIPATE

- Innovators who have been building technical tools that could be used by citizens, civil society and the media to make governments, corporations and NGOs more accountable. We also welcome projects that are based on social media, mobile technologies and data journalism, etc. for promoting accountability.
- Leaders from the government who have an experience in the conference themes. These include people who have an experience in election commissions, local administration, procurement process, accountability bodies (e.g. auditors, information commissions, ombudsmen and Lok Pals) and other public bodies that suit the conference theme. The conference is particularly looking for leaders who have made a concerted effort at improving accountability in their sphere of work.
- Civil society organizations that have been working on issues such as clean elections, anti-corruption, improving public services and governance of public resources. We welcome organizations that already use technology as a part of their campaign strategy or those who are interested in understanding how technology could be used in their work.
- Investigative journalists who focus on different aspects corruption and accountability who are interested in using technology for analysis and reporting.
- Academic researchers who have studied accountability projects of interest to the conference. We are particularly interested in studies on the intersection of technology, accountability and democracy.

ORGANISATION

The conference is led by the *Center for South Asia* and the *Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law* (CDDRL) both at Stanford University. It will be organized in partnership with Department of Civics and Politics, University of Mumbai and the Stanford Alumni Association of India.

APPLICATION, FINANCIAL SUPPORT & DEADLINES

There are no fees for attending the conference and breakfast and lunch will be provided in the venue. There are three different deadlines for application:

Nov 14, 2013: For presenters who would like to be considered for financial assistance.

Dec 7, 2013: For all those who wish to present papers or posters, and those who wish to participate in a workshop without financial assistance

Dec 20, 2013: For those who would like to observe the panels and participate in the workshops.

We encourage international participants who require a visa to apply by the Sept deadline so that we have adequate time to complete the visa formalities.

In case you are interested in applying for the conference or if you would like to learn more, please send an email to Vivek S. (vivekdse@stanford.edu) or Rachel Brule (rebrule@gmail.com; reb11@nyu.edu).

To register, please go to http://southasia.stanford.edu/bombay_conference