SURGING DEMAND AND THE GLOBAL INTERNET INFRASTRUCTURE

NETGAIN PARTNERSHIP

WHAT'S AT STAKE FOR THE FUTURE OF TECHNOLOGY?

THE CHALLENGE AHEAD

With everything from the boardroom to the classroom shut down and most individuals hesitant to meet in-person, the pandemic has forced nearly all face-to-face interactions online. Website traffic has surged, which has placed an unprecedented strain on the world's internet infrastructure and raised pressing questions about the infrastructure's ability to meet the need: What are the long-term implications of this surging demand? How will the design of the internet change to accommodate video and other tech platforms that we increasingly rely on? How will governments and companies manage the surge in traffic, and what will it mean for possible blackouts and censorship? How will this dynamic affect the public interest's ability to demand regulation?

The landscape for internet infrastructure and technology is changing rapidly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Telecom providers and technology companies must face the recent surge in traffic, and the pressure is on for leaders to adapt policy reforms and standards to the new demands of a digital society.

Data use and fixed broadband consumption in the United States grew nearly 43% between January and March 2020 due to the impact of COVID-19.

WHY IT MATTERS

Internet infrastructure affects all different areas of digital rights, from surveillance to net neutrality to broadband access. The pandemic has stressed the importance of internet infrastructure and spurred growing concerns over internet blackouts, low capacity, decreased speed, and increased censorship – all of which hit historically marginalized communities the hardest. A weakened internet infrastructure could prevent people from continuing the most basic actions like staying in touch with loved ones, maintaining their jobs, or attending school. Groups advocating for justice have lost the ability to meet informally and organize offline, limiting some of their organizing power in a time when it's needed most. These groups have adapted rapidly to online organizing, but are vulnerable to potential censorship and blackouts at the hands of internet service providers and governments. All of this has exposed the need to create policies that protect and design supportive internet protocols and web security.

TOP INTERVENTIONS

As demand for high-speed, reliable internet continues to grow and expand, advocates and researchers across civil society are fighting to design policies that oversee infrastructure regulation and web security, and protect freedom of expression from government interference. Since the creation of the internet, multi-state and international governance bodies have historically ignored regulations on internet infrastructure – allowing power players to remain hidden from public scrutiny and hold almost total control with little to no oversight or accountability. To protect the sustainability and resiliency of our internet infrastructure, we must ensure that civil society has a seat at the table when regulatory conversations are taking place. These conversations will ultimately help prevent internet blackouts, monitor and flag censorship, and reduce the risks of throttling internet speed by Internet Service Providers or other core infrastructure providers.

HOW TO GET INVOLVED

Across the public interest field, groups are investing time, resources, and expertise to develop innovative solutions that protect and secure the longevity of our internet infrastructure.

The **Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI)** is working to ensure our internet is open and free during global emergencies, like the current COVID-19 pandemic. They developed a measurement tool to assess the accessibility of COVID-19 webpages around the world, and flag possible censorship activity or moments of government interference. **Article 19** is challenging threats to freedom of expression online by monitoring and reporting government overreach and urging other governments to recognize possible abuses of international law. Researchers, like **Niels ten Oever from the University of Amsterdam's Media Department**, are also using qualitative and quantitative methods to evaluate elements of our internet infrastructure (i.e. cables, satellites, codes, agreements, procedures), as well as power players who own and maintain it, and study the internet's impact on distribution of wealth and power. And the **Internet Society** launched the "Measuring the Internet" project to monitor inter-

net infrastructure providers, examine trends, and tell data-driven stories on internet resilience during times of extraordinarily high use around the world.

MORE INFORMATION

The NetGain Partnership is a philanthropic collaboration between the Ford Foundation, Knight Foundation, MacArthur Foundation, Mozilla Foundation, Open Society Foundations, Omidyar Network and Wallace Global Fund that seeks to advance the public interest in the digital age. NetGain works hand-in-hand with the nation's leading philanthropic organizations to address our most pressing challenges at the intersection of technology and digital society. As COVID-19 rages on, NetGain is deeply concerned about the impact of the pandemic on technology and society, especially as the crisis exacerbates economic and social inequities across the world and challenges our democratic institutions. There is a significant need for funders and civil society organizations to access critical information to help them understand the current and future impacts of COVID-19 on society and the unique role that technology and the internet are playing as the crisis continues.

ABOUT NETGAIN

To learn more about NetGain's work or hear their latest briefing series on top technological challenges and harms that have emerged as a result of COVID-19 and actionable responses from civil society to address them, please visit:
https://www.netgainpartnership.org/events/covid19/broadband-access-in-the-us

For funders who are interested in the specific policy proposals outlined in this one-pager or have questions, please visit https://mediademocracyfund.org/

ABOUT MEDIA DEMOCRACY FUND

Media Democracy Fund (MDF) works at the crossroads of digital technology and social justice and is the leading convener between public interest grantees, funders and allies in the broadband fight, as well as the larger digital rights field.