Panel: Human Rights Movements and Digital Activism

Digitalisation has accelerated not only the speed with which news is reported by the mass media, it has also diluted the state’s monopoly over narrative-building. It has given people a significant stake in shaping and pushing governments and international organisations to act according to what they want more often. Human rights violation is an area which authoritarian states may no longer be able to hide due to digital news and platforms at the hands of ordinary citizen’s finger tips.

In June 2019, when 26-year old Mohammad Mattar was shot dead in Khartoum little did the world know about the situation in Sudan where bodies were washing up the Nile. Mattar, an engineer by profession and a social media activist, had his favorite shade of blue on his social media profile picture. A blue that became the symbol of Sudanese resistance shortly after as people across the world started changing their profile pictures owing to the hashtag ‘blue for Sudan’. The wave intrigued conventional media and the masses as they started looking for the origin of the massive number of blue profiles appearing on their social media feeds, and hence, the world was made aware of the atrocities of Sudan’s authoritarian regime against its citizens.

Although the media has been actively reporting on most human rights issues for decades, the collaboration between conventional with informal/digital media has played a vital role in documenting and sharing such issues more rapidly. Whether it is Syrian immigrants stranded on the shores of Greece and Turkey; the Rohingya of Myanmar pleading for refuge; Sudanese fighting for democracy; or Kashmir deprived of its right to self-determination and silenced forcefully, mass media is strengthening humanitarian causes like never before. Movements gaining momentum because of digitalisation are subtly transforming societies’ inherent justice and reward system both nationally and internationally.

In this regard, the panel will be addressing the following key questions:

1. How is digitalisation helping ‘resource poor’ causes?
2. How significant is the notion of change in societal attitude towards humanitarian causes due to their increased visibility?
3. Has digitalisation increased the scope of manipulation and propagation of agendas in the guise of social activism?
4. Are the challenges posed by cyber activism to the status quo leading the us to anarchic systems?

Panel Organiser:

Ms Ayesha Ilyas, Research Associate, Sustainable Development Policy Institute, Islamabad, Pakistan
Email: ayeshailyas@sdpi.org

Dr Shafqat Munir, Research Fellow, Sustainable Development Policy Institute, Islamabad, Pakistan
Email: shafqat@sdpi.org

Ms Hania Shah, Research Associate, Sustainable Development Policy Institute, Islamabad, Pakistan
Email: haniashah@sdpi.org