



HUMAN RIGHTS AND DIGITAL SOCIETY: EMERGING CHALLENGES OF PRIVACY, FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND DIGITAL INCLUSION

¹DEBATRA BHATTACHARJEE, ²TRISHITA DEWAN, ³PARITOSH NAG, ⁴RIMI DAS

¹GUEST LECTURER, ²ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, ³PGT, ⁴GUEST LECTURER

¹GOVT. DEGREE COLLEGE, DHARMANAGAR,

²GOVT. DEGREE COLLEGE, DHARMANAGAR,

³GOVT. DEGREE COLLEGE, DHARMANAGAR,

⁴GOVT. DEGREE COLLEGE, DHARMANAGAR

Abstract

The rapid development of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed contemporary society and created new possibilities for communication, governance, education, economic activity and political participation. At the same time, the growing dependence on digital technologies has generated significant challenges for the protection of human rights. Privacy, freedom of expression and digital inclusion have emerged as three interconnected dimensions of human rights in the digital age. The large-scale collection and processing of personal data, online surveillance, cyber threats, algorithmic decision-making and inadequate data protection mechanisms create new risks to privacy and individual autonomy. Similarly, digital platforms have expanded opportunities for freedom of expression while simultaneously creating challenges associated with misinformation, hate speech, online harassment, censorship and content moderation. Digital exclusion presents another important concern because unequal access to digital infrastructure, devices, affordable connectivity and digital literacy can deepen existing social and economic inequalities. This paper examines the relationship between human rights and digital society, focusing particularly on privacy, freedom of expression and digital inclusion. The study adopts a qualitative and descriptive research methodology based on secondary sources, including scholarly literature, international human rights instruments, institutional reports, legal documents and policy materials. The findings indicate that digital technologies can contribute significantly to the realisation of human rights when they are accessible, inclusive, transparent and accountable. However, without appropriate safeguards, digitalisation can also create new forms of surveillance, discrimination and exclusion. The paper argues that a human-rights-based

approach to digital governance is essential to reconcile technological innovation with human dignity, equality, liberty and justice.

Keywords: Human Rights, Digital Society, Privacy, Freedom of Expression, Digital Inclusion, Digital Divide, Data Protection, Digital Governance, Artificial Intelligence, Cybersecurity.

1. Introduction

The contemporary world is experiencing a profound digital transformation. The Internet, smartphones, social media, artificial intelligence, digital payment systems, cloud computing and online public services have become integral to everyday life. Digital technologies have transformed how people communicate, obtain information, work, study, conduct business and interact with governments. As a result, the digital environment has become an important arena for the exercise of social, economic, civil and political rights.

Human rights are founded on the principles of human dignity, equality, freedom and justice. Although many international human rights instruments were formulated before the emergence of modern digital technologies, their principles remain applicable to the digital environment. The expansion of digital society has therefore not eliminated traditional human rights concerns; rather, it has created new contexts in which those rights must be interpreted and protected.

Digital technologies offer considerable opportunities for strengthening human rights. Access to the Internet can facilitate access to information and education. Social media can provide individuals and civil society organisations with opportunities to communicate and participate in public debates. Digital governance can potentially improve transparency and access to public services. Digital platforms can also provide marginalised communities with alternative spaces for representation and collective action. However, technological development has also created serious human rights concerns. Digital platforms and online services routinely process substantial amounts of personal information.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

The study aims:

- To examine the relationship between human rights and digital society.
- To analyse emerging privacy challenges associated with digital technologies.
- To examine the impact of digital platforms on freedom of expression.
- To analyse digital exclusion as an emerging human rights concern.
- To identify the potential of digital technologies to promote human rights.
- To suggest measures for creating an inclusive and rights-based digital society.

1.2 Research Questions

1. How has digitalisation transformed the contemporary understanding of human rights?
2. What are the major privacy challenges in the digital society?
3. How do digital platforms influence freedom of expression?
4. How does digital exclusion affect equality and access to rights?
5. What measures are necessary to ensure human rights protection in the digital age?

2. Literature Review

The relationship between technology and human rights has become an important area of interdisciplinary research involving political science, law, sociology, communication studies and information technology.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) provides the fundamental normative framework for the protection of human dignity, equality, freedom of opinion and expression, and access to information. Although the Declaration predates the Internet, its principles provide an important basis for analysing rights in the digital environment.

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) provides further protection for rights such as freedom of expression and privacy. These rights are increasingly relevant to digital communication, online participation and the processing of personal information.

Castells (2010), through his concept of the network society, explains how information and communication networks have transformed social and political relationships. Digital networks can redistribute opportunities for communication and participation while simultaneously creating new challenges related to privacy, inequality and the exercise of power.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Approach

The present study adopts a qualitative, descriptive and analytical research approach. The research examines major human rights challenges associated with digital society through an analysis of existing academic and institutional literature.

3.2 Sources of Data

The study is based primarily on secondary sources, including:

- Academic books
- Peer-reviewed journal articles
- International human rights instruments
- Reports of international organisations
- Government publications
- Legal and policy documents

- Reports on digital rights and digital inclusion
- Scholarly studies on privacy, freedom of expression and digital inequality

3.3 Method of Analysis

The materials were examined through thematic analysis. Three major themes constitute the core of the research:

Theme 1: Privacy and data protection

Theme 2: Freedom of expression and digital platforms

Theme 3: Digital inclusion and the digital divide

Artificial intelligence, cybersecurity and digital governance are considered as related and cross-cutting issues.

3.4 Scope of the Study

The study focuses on the broader relationship between human rights and digitalisation, with particular attention to contemporary democratic societies. The Indian context is also considered where relevant to digital governance, data protection and inclusion.

3.5 Limitations

The study relies predominantly on secondary information and therefore does not statistically measure the perceptions of a specific population. Future research could incorporate primary data through questionnaires, interviews and case studies involving citizens, students, policymakers and digital-service users.

Discussion

The study demonstrates that the growth of digital society has created both opportunities and challenges for human rights. Digital technologies have improved communication, access to information and public participation, but they have also created serious concerns regarding privacy and personal data protection.

Freedom of expression has expanded through social media and online platforms. However, misinformation, cyber harassment, hate speech and excessive content restrictions can affect the meaningful exercise of this freedom.

The study also highlights the problem of digital exclusion. Differences in internet connectivity, affordability, access to digital devices and digital literacy prevent some sections of society from benefiting equally from digital development.

Therefore, protecting human rights in the digital age requires a balanced approach based on privacy protection, freedom of expression, digital literacy, equal access and accountable digital governance. Digital progress should be inclusive and human-rights-oriented so that technological development benefits all sections of society.

Conclusion

The digital society has transformed the way people communicate, access information, participate in public life and exercise their human rights. However, the rapid expansion of digital technologies has also created serious challenges relating to privacy, freedom of expression and digital inclusion. Data surveillance, misuse of personal information, online censorship, misinformation and unequal access to digital technologies can weaken the effective enjoyment of human rights.

The study finds that protecting human rights in the digital age requires a balanced approach between technological development, individual freedom and responsible regulation. Governments, technology companies and civil society must work together to strengthen data protection, promote digital literacy, ensure freedom of expression and reduce the digital divide. Digital inclusion should particularly focus on disadvantaged and marginalised communities.

Ultimately, technology should remain a means of empowering individuals rather than restricting their rights. A rights-based, inclusive and accountable digital society is essential for ensuring that technological progress contributes to equality, dignity, freedom and democratic participation for all.

References

1. United Nations. (1948). Universal Declaration of Human Rights. United Nations.
2. United Nations. (1966). International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. United Nations.
3. United Nations. (2016). The Promotion, Protection and Enjoyment of Human Rights on the Internet. Human Rights Council.
4. United Nations. (2019). Road Map for Digital Cooperation. United Nations Secretary-General.
5. UNESCO. (2021). Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence. UNESCO.
6. Council of Europe. (2018). Convention for the Protection of Individuals with Regard to Automatic Processing of Personal Data (Convention 108+). Council of Europe.
7. European Union. (2016). General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). European Union.
8. International Telecommunication Union (ITU). (2023). Measuring Digital Development: Facts and Figures 2023. ITU.
9. World Bank. (2016). World Development Report 2016: Digital Dividends. World Bank.
10. Castells, M. (2010). The Rise of the Network Society. Wiley-Blackwell.
11. Lessig, L. (1999). Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace. Basic Books.
12. Deibert, R. (2013). Black Code: Surveillance, Privacy, and the Dark Side of the Internet. McClelland & Stewart.
13. Zuboff, S. (2019). The Age of Surveillance Capitalism. PublicAffairs.
14. United Nations Development Programme. (2022). Human Development Report 2021/2022. UNDP.
15. Government of India. (2023). Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023. Ministry of Law and Justice, Government of India.