

## Plenary session: central themes and ideas

WINGSForum is the preeminent global conference on philanthropy - offering a rare opportunity for a truly unique collection of philanthropy associations, support organisations, funders and academics from all regions of the world to network, learn from each other and deeply explore how philanthropy can make an ever-greater contribution to social impact and civil society building.

The in-person WINGSForum has had to be postponed, and a series of virtual experiences is filling the gap. As part of this online series, on 18 February 2021 we welcomed several thought leaders to discuss and debate the role of philanthropy in the digital revolution, in mediating society's relationship with this transition, and in helping civil society navigate its threats and opportunities. The event began with a keynote interview of Zeynep Tufekci (academic and writer) by Rhodri Davies (Head of Policy at CAF), which was followed by a panel discussion to go into more detail on this topic.

Panellists included:

- Adrian Arena, Oak Foundation
- Nighat Dad, Digital Rights Foundation
- Zia Khan, Rockefeller Foundation
- Nanjira Sambuli, researcher and analyst
- Moderator: Frederike Kaltheuner, European AI Fund

Key highlights from the event can be found in this document.

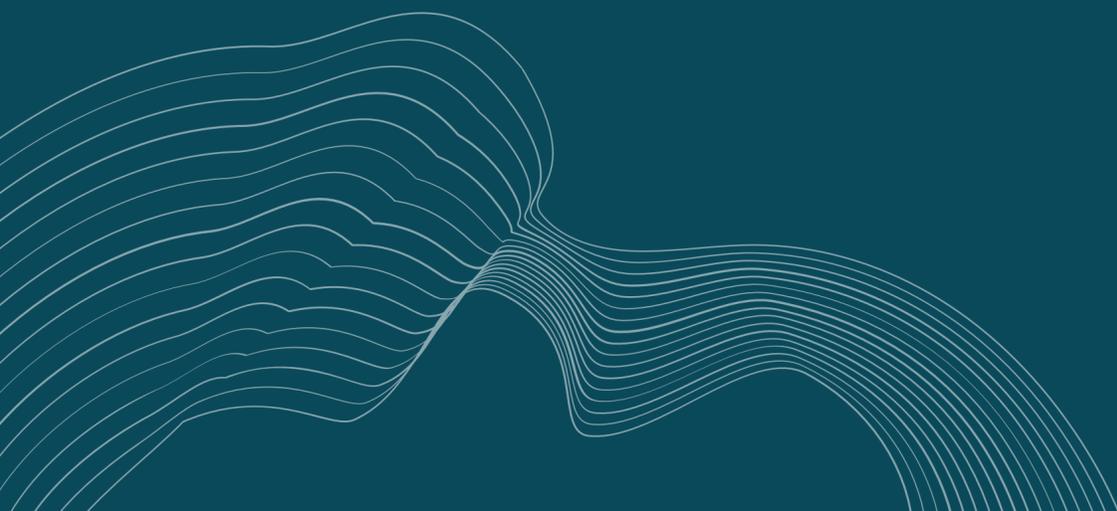
## 1. WHAT ARE SOME OF THE BENEFITS OF TECHNOLOGY FOR CIVIL SOCIETY?

- It is no longer possible to imagine a social movement without a digital component as online platforms are essential to getting attention in the 21st century.
- Technology is now a factor that cuts across everything civil society focuses on.
- Most social movements are not pessimistic about technology as it gives them tools they did not have before.



“It is the age of all the cans that have been kicked down the road”

**Nanjira Sambuli**



## 2. WHAT CAN CIVIL SOCIETY DO TO INFLUENCE TECHNOLOGY?

- Many in philanthropy have found creating a digital strategy beyond simply using technology overwhelming, but we have to look at the issue holistically.
- We need insider approaches and to work with technology companies as a stop gap, but not as the only thing we do.
- There are a few - mostly men - living in wealthy countries making consequential decisions for everyone.
- Activist-only platforms are not an answer as activists need to be shielded, we need to make privacy-conscious platforms more mainstream or regulate the mainstream platforms to make them more secure and protect the activists which use them.
- We need to combine working on the inside, legislation, trying to improve platforms, and recognising and developing alternatives.
- We need patient capital, which is not just financial but also intellectual and moral.
- This is a moment of reckoning - the winners will be those who take a step back and view this as a systemic issue.



“Sometimes the uncritical embrace of technology can do more harm than good”

**Nighat Dad**

## 3. WHAT ARE SOME OF THE ROLES PHILANTHROPY CAN PLAY IN THE DIGITAL REVOLUTION?



“Find people, trust people, empower people. There are no shortcuts to it”

**Zeynep Tufekci**

- **Development:** helping develop some of the technology that is necessary for social change but does not yet exist.
- **Documentation:** explaining to tech companies how their products are used on the ground and impact social movements.
- **Connection:** bridging the gap between those developing technology used for social movements and activists to ensure it is what they actually need.
- **Imagination and information:** creating campaigns which show the public how technology and data/privacy do work, as well as how they could work.

### Influencing governance and regulation

- With new digital technologies, research is happening in companies rather than universities as it historically did. Regulation comes up against the economic power of the companies and the geopolitics around economics.
- It is hard for industries to self-regulate given the scale, complexity, and incentives not to.
- We have to think hard about governance and what might be the approaches for fast moving digital technologies, which are likely to differ from past governance approaches.
- We must consider if a conversation about governance risk focusing the attention back on the Global North, as this is where regulation can happen.



“Innovation has to be the integration of technology and social context”

**Zia Khan**

### 3. WHAT OTHER FACTORS NEED TO BE CONSIDERED?

#### a. Power dynamics at play

- There are challenges between all levels: activists, civil society, and technology companies.
- Technology companies and funders inadvertently empower groups because of existing relationships. We need longer term, deeper relationships.
- Power dynamics between NGOs and funders can limit the potential for building bridges, which could otherwise lead to interesting collaborations.
- We need partnerships and allyships with philanthropy to co-invest in patient capital.
- More work needs to be done on creating safe spaces for grantees to say an approach does not make sense, which might be tricky in a funding conversation.
- There are risks to darlings of the funding world emerging with simple compelling stories that get more attention.
- There is a challenge around the way we celebrate individual tech entrepreneurs and products, while you can also be paralysed by system complexity and impede leaders to emerge: how do we strike the right balance?
- The new philanthropic wealth coming from the tech sector makes it incumbent on others in philanthropy to cover those things they will intentionally skip.

#### b. The importance of context

- Technology does not come from a vacuum, which is why we need a systemic approach.
- Technologies will be shaped by the contexts in which they are introduced, and they have the power to exacerbate, amplify or help solve historical issues in a given area.
- Technology is not an unqualified word but needs to be used differently in each context - we might start with an assumption about how technology might change things, but it will not necessarily pan out that way.
- Dependence on problematic platforms needs to change, but while they exist telling people to boycott them is not an option and we need to understand why due to the specific public sphere ecology of a particular country.
- Technology innovation developed in the context of private markets is very different when inserted into the social change context.

“If we want to get it right: complicate the equation and accommodate the discomfort from all corners of the world”

**Nanjira Sambuli**

### c. Geographies and the Global North / Global South divide

- Diverse perspectives need to be built in, not just be an afterthought.
- This movement is still Global North focused and led - Global South and often women-led organisations are doing this work, and their perspective should no longer be left behind.
- We need to keep in mind that trends in the Global North at the intersection of technology and philanthropy might set an unfavourable precedent for countries in the Global South.
- It can be hard to get out of the Global North vortex when discussing regulation, which pulls us in the direction of the US and EU.
- Humility is better than thinking what works in the Global North will work elsewhere.
- We need to caution against thinking about adopting a US/Europe vs. China perspective in particular.
- We should explore why TikTok has done so well, and what it shows is missing from the technology coming from more progressive places.

### d. Reframing ideas about metrics and impact

- We need to think about taking a broad view of impact and to consider impact in a truly digital age.
- Philanthropic organisations might have to abandon overarching theories of change and instead look opportunistically to engage with a plurality of voices on these issues.
- We need mechanisms to continuously learn and adapt to the impact we are trying to achieve as we learn more about the problem while trying to solve it.
- We need peer support within philanthropy and pooling resources to learn the way forward, create critical mass, and share risks.

### 4. WHY IS NOW THE MOMENT?

- There was a long time when people were looking for market-based solutions which sat at the intersection of social benefit and profit. The crises of the Covid-19 crisis have shone a light on markets as choices rather than being a natural state.
- There is the energy and window for a paradigm shift as we come out of the pandemic.
- There is a window for collaboration opening up around the climate, and there needs to be similar clear articulation on common ground around technology.



“Now is the time to really consider these issues as part and parcel of all of our work. We need to get our head around it”

**Adrian Arena**



**Keynote interview by Rhodri Davies, panel moderated by Frederike Kaltheuner**

The WINGSForum will continue to be a space to hold these kinds of challenging conversations. Find out more about our online and in-person events by visiting the [WINGSForum website](https://wingsforum.org) ([wingsforum.org](https://wingsforum.org))

