APrIGF Macao 2015
Workshop Summary Report

Date: 1 July 2015
Time: 16:00 – 17:30
Workshop Title: Online Threats to Freedom of Expression and Religious Freedom
Reported by & Contact Email: Tehmina Zafar
Gender Balance (approx. number of female vs. male participants):
Moderators:
Panelists:

The session was moderated by Country Director Bytes for All, Mr. Shahzad Ahmad, who opened the session introducing the topic and the Panel comprising of well renowned civil society representatives and human right defenders namely; Pirongrong Ramasoota, Bishakha Datta, Andrew Lowenthal and Nica Dumlao.

A substantive summary and the key issues that were raised:

Bytes for All (B4A) hosted a session mainly looked into Freedom of Expression and freedom of religious expression which also expanded to talking about religious freedom online.

The discussion was mainly focused on Freedom of expression in the context of religious freedom online and all the panelists shared their experiences and research with audience highlighting the situation of their respective countries.

Technology has given opportunities and potential which has opened new path of development and expressing views. In the same context, the kind of challenges and the problems has been arisen. Ranging from, for example, bloggers being hacked in Bangladesh, and attacks on journalists in Pakistan and policy challenges in Malaysia and Indonesia. The discussion started by looking at individual threats against civil society groups and individuals to discussing use of technology in terms of information control and hence the threats to freedom of expression.

Panelists were of the view that the commercial software is being used and governments are targeting different vulnerable minorities and ethnic communities, and how in particular journalists are faced with complex restrictions and problems when it comes to freedom of expression.

Andrew from EngageMedia added that we have been bringing people to this amazing internet tool and telling them that how impactful this tool is for freedom of Expression but it has really become a little bit of a hollow. The models in China and the U.S. surveillance regimes are bowing down to the space as well.

The resistance to surveillance has been amazing whether it is intentional or unintentional but

it has been less due to lack of awareness, if former is the case. People have to be more aware while using online spaces and how to keep Freedom of Expression alive on these spaces. It becomes complicated when it comes to talking about religious issues and religious freedom issues arise when we talk about Freedom of Expression. The state of freedom in different countries in the region with respect to online religious expression must be discussed to find the synergies and possibilities to combat intolerance in the region.

On sharing situation, the panelist from Philippine mentioned that the country has been nothing different from the countries in the region and the use of internet has been increasing. Philippine bill of rights was passed in 2012. Everyone protested against it because it actually listed activities that are actual threats to have anyone land in jail. The constitution actually upholds the equal rights of women. But the problem here is that when it criminalises cybersex, it actually ends up criminalising women.

Ms Pirongrong Ramasoota shared that the situation of Thailand became very complicated after the coup. The political assemblies and gatherings are banned, and people were asked to report. Anytime when someone reported, their gadget or mobile phone or tablet was confiscated. There were many other forms of violations of Freedom of Expression being carried out in the country. Anyone who offends the king can be jailed for 2 years. Those who are outspoken about politics or religion on social media are being harassed by sending men to their residence and warning them about their behaviour on these spaces.

Bishaka Datta explained the Political play in India that the religion and politics go hand in hand. The political party stays on the scene actually as a religious wing and same thinking is replicated on the social media. There is a large Hindu right-wing presence on Twitter, particularly, and also on other social media platforms, which functions as a cyber-army, of sorts. The second kind of thing that's happening is really religion again. If there is objectionable religious content on social media and if the person accused apologises, it is not considered to be enough and people will ask for punishment like sending to prison etc. Social media has empowered everyone whether it is talking about religion or any policy of the government.

On summarising the discussion the moderator added that when we talk about freedom of expression in context of religious freedom, we usually become cautious and silenced or more careful. Governments also come into play and censor such discussion or material. The discussion was further carried out by comments from audience and ended with the question and answer session.

Conclusion & Further Comments: