

Indigenous Peoples: Are We Non-Native to the Internet?

INSIGHT REPORT FROM AIPP'S ENGAGEMENT &
INTERVENTIONS AT GLOBAL AND REGIONAL TECH FORUMS



Art: Tufan Chakma

NINA J. SANGMA
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FRAGMENTED REALITIES

There are various kinds of fragmentation namely, economic and political controlled essentially by the State and Big Tech and related private corporations. CSOs need to study best practices and digital trade agreements, cross border data flow, increase in development of infrastructure in the global south; governments have to have a positive obligation to build policy and practice that addresses the gaps between the global north and global south markets while enhancing equality, rights in creating choices, assessing impact while ensuring technology is harmonized and user centred.



Art: Tufan Chakma

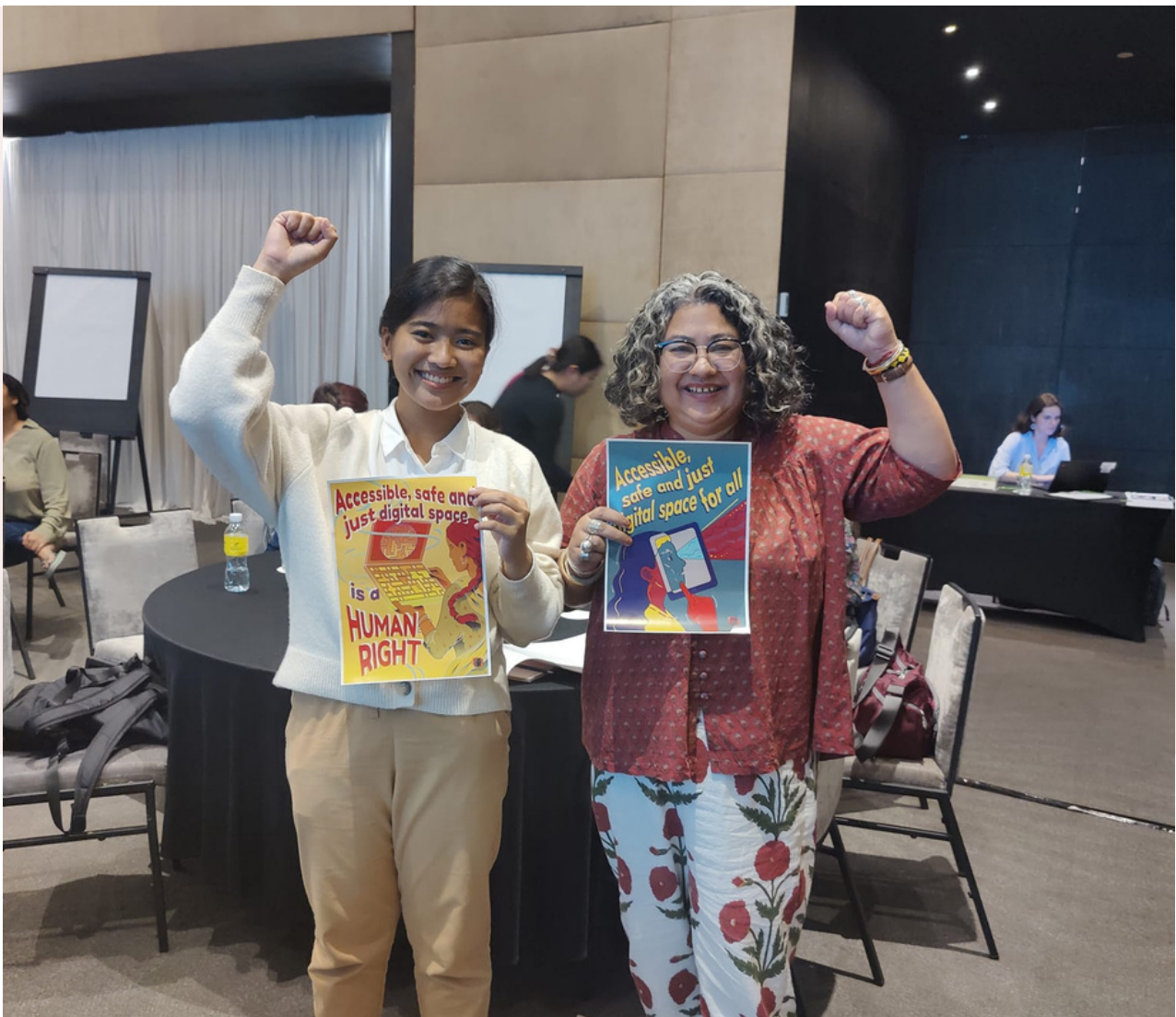
The internet is a network of networks. We need to take a closer look at the nuances between internet governance and digital governance and the role of the State, digital rights community and Big Tech and hold them accountable through global dialogues and international norms and guidelines that are diverse as there is a great need for diverse representation and perspectives that go beyond tokensim and rhetoric.

Data is the new oil of the world.

In March 2023, AIPP's Communication Programme and Miss Eloisa Mesina, Secretary-General, KATRIBU Youth, Philippines presented the key aspects of the DIGITAL DIVIDE that impact Indigenous Peoples at the Asia – Pacific Conference on Internet Freedom in Bangkok, Thailand.

The DIGITAL DIVIDE means limited access to devices, data and discourses which in existing shrinking online civic spaces are endangering us, violating our human rights on multiple levels and further complicating our journey towards self-determination.

The presentation was made to stakeholders and representatives from Big Tech corporation Meta, US State department, the Swedish embassy, lawyers and journalists associations and CSOs to sensitize, inform and hold them accountable while also sourcing potential collaborations with futurists who are mapping weaponization of digital trends and tools by authoritarian regimes.



Whose voices, ideas and values matter in AI?




In May 2023, AIPP's Communications Programme participated as moderators of sessions around the intersections of gender, technology and most importantly kickstarting the conversation of AI's impact on Indigenous Peoples in Asia.

The space led to a coalition of over 50 civil society and human rights organizations from over 30 countries who co-developed the "Civil Society Manifesto for Ethical AI", a groundbreaking initiative aiming to steer AI policies towards safeguarding rights and decolonising AI discourse. We question, and we are not the only ones: whose voices, ideas and values matter in AI?

We are currently at a critical juncture where most countries lack a comprehensive AI policy or regulatory framework. The sudden reliance on AI and other emerging digital technologies has introduced new – and often “invisible” – vulnerabilities, and we have just seen the tip of the iceberg, literally melting from the effects of climate change.

Civil society is here not just as a mere token in multistakeholder spaces, we bring forward what others often dismiss, and we actively participate worldwide in shaping a technological future that embraces inclusivity, accountability, and ethical advancements



“If Silicon Valley was a country it would probably be the richest in the world. So how genuinely committed is Big Tech and AI to funding and fostering human rights over profits? The barebones truth is that if democracy was profitable, human rights lawyers and defenders including techtivists from civil society organizations wouldn't be sitting around multistakeholder engagement tables demanding accountability from Big Tech and AI. How invested are they in real social impact centred on rights despite glaring evidence to the contrary?”

**- Nina Sangma
Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact**

Civil society Manifesto for Ethical AI



In June of the same year, AIPP collaborated with strategic partners Open Development Initiative and International Work Group of Indigenous Affairs at the RightsCon, “...a global conference that convenes experts and advocates to discuss and advance digital rights and privacy.”

Two key side events were co-hosted which were attended by 2000+ attendees both online and offline outlined below:



How can Indigenous women take control of their narratives?

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Community generated data, Indigenous data sovereignty, and defending Indigenous peoples' rights

The world lacks the full picture of the marginalisation and discrimination against Indigenous Peoples due to a lack of disaggregated data. Indigenous Peoples are often left behind when general development trends in a country do not take into consideration their unique socioeconomic and political circumstances. Further they face intersectional threats of racism, discrimination and marginalisation which impact their rights and lives. Production of data on their situation is a key tool in the fight for Indigenous Peoples to secure their rights. This dialogue will present three cases, and open them for discussion on how principles of community generated data, Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Indigenous Rights frameworks can be implemented to meet the need for data.

“We’re facing a lot of issues, for example, concerning gender-related disinformation, misinformation and advancing the extremist narrative. We cannot run away. Rather, we can confront this. So, it’s really important that we see how we’re going to mitigate risks and translate what we’ve learned at this workshop about cybersecurity and AI into the real world.”

DATUSIKIE AMPILAN,
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
MAGUNGAYA MINDANAO INCORPORATED



As the year progressed, AIPP was part of the UN Women and the UN digital security practices for women and persons with diverse gender identities in the region in Bangkok. University Institute in Macau (UNU Macau) led the development of e-Learning modules on cyber hygiene (measures to maintain the security of data systems and their users) for women CSOs and women human rights defenders (WHRDs), and on artificial intelligence in the context of the Women, Peace and Cybersecurity (WPS) agenda as part of efforts to strengthen “...to support women’s leadership in preventing online harms, cybersecurity threats and the malicious use of technology, while strengthening their capacities to use technologies for peace and conflict-prevention efforts. The e-Learning modules are due to be released in early 2024 and will be publicly available for use by interested stakeholders

IS AI GOOD FOR NEWS?

The need to integrate Artificial Intelligence in newsrooms was part of the media festival Splice Beta. Some of the key insights from the convergence space of media practitioners and entrepreneurs was that news focus is constantly in flux with priority areas changing in the context of coverage of polycrisis.

Artificial intelligence is another key space for funding opportunities as was evident from The AI in Journalism Challenge (AIJC), operated by the Open Society Foundations, a global competition that provided participating newsrooms with the training, mentoring, and funding to develop new ways of applying generative AI to journalism. Judged by Gina Chua, executive editor of Semafor; Marina Walker Guevara, executive editor of the Pulitzer Center; and Valer Kot, Senior Media Advisor at the Media Development Investment Fund. The Rappler team from the Philippines and their TL;DR project won the £25,000 award this year at Splice Beta. There is scope to collaborate with The Rappler team since IVAN (Indigenous Voices in Asia Network) member and indigenous journalist Mia Magdalena Fokno is a regular contributor to the publication. OSF along with 9 other philanthropies has launched a new initiative to ensure that artificial intelligence (AI) advances the public interest by promoting responsible use and innovation while mitigating harms.



“AI tools could benefit people all over the world—but who they serve will depend on how they are developed, used, and overseen. The decisions we make now will set the course for decades to come. If we want to achieve our potential as a community and a country, we must meet this moment.”

**LALEH ISPAHANI,
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
OPEN SOCIETY-U.S.**



The writing is on the wall. Funders are keen on funding democratic processes in news production through freedom of expression both online and offline. The key insight funnelling this trend is the fact that people consume news from trusted sources. Trustworthy public interest media is needed desperately. This is a need that indigenous journalists fill as they not only have access to indigenous communities, but also share the same burdens and pain of their communities, and enjoy the trust of their leadership to push decolonized indigenous narratives in their news coverage. High quality credible case studies are in high demand. There are also digital transformation funds we need to scope. That's the good news. The bad news is that there are fewer broader funding calls. Macroeconomic conditions mean that stocks and shareholders are in cost-cutting mode. OSF is an example that affects innovation calls, and open calls. This creates an opportunity for AIPP to collaborate and scale solutions to funders through a one grant many-partners model with indigenous perspectives from the bottom up. This also carves the way for collaborative journalism and collaboration across newsrooms with the added protection they offer to journalists on the ground often most vulnerable to offline and online attacks which are at an all-time high which most indigenous media often do not have as they are not accredited and licenced practitioners. AIPP's power lies in numbers and diversity.

“In today’s digital societies, Internet governance is critical for economic, social, and environmental development. Internet governance is a crucial enabler of sustainable development, ensuring that the Internet is used in a responsible and inclusive manner, and can contribute to promoting access to information, communication, and innovation. The importance of this agenda cannot be understated in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic and the ongoing economic recovery, supply chain shocks, and unfolding geopolitical tensions, especially as economies worldwide are working towards a sustainable economic rebuild.”

-The Internet We Want

Access to all dimensions of the internet is a fundamental right. But we are far from achieving a safe, fair, free, neutral and open internet. At the outset it is important to set the context of the David Vs Goliath fight in stating that the creators of the internet and its products are predominantly Big Tech private corporations whose annual income exceeds the GDPs of some countries, States in themselves; States without armies but with the ability to wield immense good or evil as a double-edged sword that impacts the lived realities of millions connected, poorly connected or unconnected and their human and digital rights.

To expect private entities and creators of the internet to self-regulate would be farcical driven as they are primarily by a profit over people approach in a chaotic, dynamic, automated and mechanized world with shifting geopolitical interests designed to benefit those who benefit from existing structural inequalities. The track record of particularly Big Tech is ableist, exclusionary and enabling status quo which itself is controlled by the majority with deep pockets and political clout in high office and civil society. Sometimes even antithetical to freedom of expression and tampering with election outcomes using biased code & data, algorithms and hate speech to perpetuate technology facilitated violence which is only slated to accelerate given the quick descent into the age of digital simulation with Artificial Intelligence at a pace that is alarming the global digital rights community.

The reality as per the IGF is that “2.6 billion people are still offline mostly in the Global South and vulnerable communities.”

In the rush to close this widening gap created by of lack of access to and representation in data, devices and discourse of the unconnected of which Indigenous Peoples no doubt forms a large group, private companies will view it as a business opportunity. The question then is who is going to hold them accountable and ensure they do so in an ethical, equitable, sensitized manner that puts people before profits?

While attending two high level multi stakeholder meetings with Big Tech representatives from Google, Meta, Microsoft, held under the Chatham House Rule at the IGF, the mood in the room was one of frustration among those of us attending from the civil society side aimed to moderate and tone police critical and contrarian perspectives; attributed to the tokenistic approach of having diverse groups of external stakeholders attend such meetings but with opaque internal processes in areas of governance, content moderation and product and risk mitigation that rarely beyond corporate procedure.

The Digital Divide therefore, refers to the gap between individuals and communities that have access to digital technologies and communications and those who do not. This gap as indicated by the COVID 19 pandemic, can have significant impacts on Indigenous Peoples, who are often among the most marginalized and disadvantaged populations in many countries.



Here are some key ways in which the digital divide affects our journey towards self-determination:

Limited Access to Information: While recognizing our Constitutional rights, States have historically considered Indigenous Peoples' fight for self-determination in direct conflict with itself and sought to keep us out through policy & practice. Control over access to information and kinds of information imparted to IPs has been part of Statecraft. Keeping vital and critical information whether it is educational resources, healthcare information, government services and news out of the reach of remote indigenous communities has been a tool of political control keeping us largely ignorant and ineffectual in advocacy, political processes and mobilizing social movements centred on recognition of our lands, rights and territories. Lack of access to the internet acts as a multiplier which further inhibits access to information especially public interest media and limits the engagement in online discourses which in turn blocks our ability to make informed decisions and stay connected to the broader world.

Economic Disparities: With rapid technological advancements that are aimed at reducing the need for human skills in manufacturing processes and increasing the value proposition of AI driven analyses, the digital divide can perpetuate economic disparities as many job opportunities and businesses require digital skills and access to online resources. Indigenous Peoples who form a native and non-native internet userbase with niche skills will find themselves redundant in terms of employment and entrepreneurship opportunities.

Educational Challenges: The pandemic has also normalized remote working and e learning modules have irreversibly changed classroom environments. Lack of access to digital tools, techniques and connectivity adversely affect the educational prospects of indigenous children.

Cultural Preservation: Missing data means missing people. Inclusive digital technologies can be instrumental in preserving indigenous languages, traditions, and cultural heritage. Documentation of indigenous cultures both tangible and non-tangible can be done in audio visual, written, verbal and nonverbal formats. Online resource hubs and digital libraries have the potential of preserving non digitized information collectively or individually owned by indigenous communities. Indigenous data sovereignty relies on the digitalization of indigenous traditions, histories and spiritualities. Without access, Indigenous Peoples' languages, histories and way of life are endangered leaving no intergenerational transfer of cultural knowledge to future generations.

Health Disparities: Online health information, resources and communities are often the reason for timely interventions in life-or-death situations. As evidenced during the pandemic, public health services or telehealth services, especially in remote or underserved indigenous communities are vital. Not having access or having limited access retards the healing of indigenous communities both in terms of mental and physical health, especially when the indigenous communities live in heavily militarized conflict zones with frequent internet shutdowns.

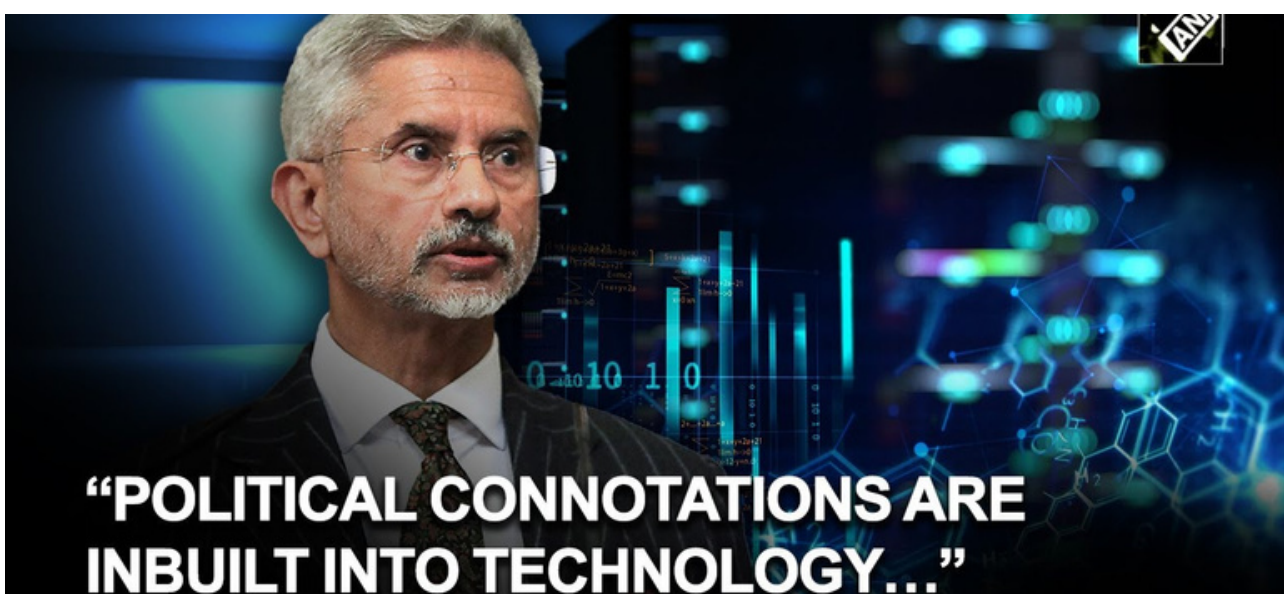


ARE DIGITAL PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURES AN ABUSE OF CITIZENS' PRIVACY AND RIGHTS?

The first 3 days of the Global Technology Summit held in December was hosted by Carnegie India and the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India in New Delhi focussed on “Geopolitics of Technology” turned out to be in essence, a platform provided by Carnegie India to the GOI to showcase its efforts in the DPI (Digital Public Infrastructure) domains. The keynote speech and following interview by and of the EAM S. Jaishankar by Carnegie India head Rudra Chaudhuri cemented the above-mentioned aim and context of the 3-day conference which was intentionally a virtual who’s who of India’s tech entrepreneurs with the participation of Nandan Nilekani, Co-founder, Infosys, Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw, Founder, Biocon as speakers alongside government representatives Meenakshi Lekhi, current Minister of State for External Affairs and Culture of India and Rajeev Chandrasekhar incumbent Minister of State for Skill Development and Entrepreneurship and Electronics and Information Technology of India.

True to expectations, the event was a networking and advertising space for neoliberal thinktanks, scholars, policy makers and practitioners with the odd tech journalist from corporate media scouting for stories.

Conspicuous by its absence was the fact that there was no engagement on the themes of censorship, digital dictatorships and internet shutdowns which India has held top position of globally, accounting for 82 shutdowns in 2022 alone.



Closed door participation

Hosted by Carnegie US, the closed-door meeting was held to platform diverse opinions and perspectives on the complexities of AI governance and to map the progress of the contributing authors which will be published early next year in the form of a research document.

The aim was also to talk about sensitive and complex issues related to the development, deployment, and regulation of artificial intelligence AI technologies in a safe and secure environment for participants to engage in open and honest discussions without the fear of government scrutiny where the participants from the global north could get comfortable with being uncomfortable by the lived realities of those from the global south (Africa, APAC). A promising start to real meaningful inclusion of marginalized voices instead of the usual rhetoric and tokenism.

One of the key questions asked was, “What exactly are we looking to regulate?”

The answer to which was addressed to some extent by opening the discussion to aspects of AI governance like guidelines, standards, and frameworks that address ethical, legal, and social implications of AI. The multilayered risks were also assessed from a variety of angles such as its impact on gig workers, Indigenous Peoples, data gathering from localized contexts, and shared concerns over privacy, security, employment, and other societal aspects, and work on mitigating strategies.



In terms of policy development, it was not obvious who among the participants were policy makers though there were a couple of policy researchers in attendance.

The closed-door meeting involved representatives from various sectors, including USAID, academia, and civil society. It remains to be seen what outcomes and future actions will emerge from the publication on AI governance through this international collaboration which I presume should lead to the development of common principles and standards for AI governance.

It's important to note that while closed-door meetings can be beneficial to discuss certain aspects of AI governance, public participation and Press interventions will ensure transparency and forming broader accountability frameworks that are really the only way to ensure real pushback. It is a fallacy to expect the developers of AI to self-regulate and therefore pressure groups must exist at various focussed layers from policy development to research to CSOs monitoring rights violations, to legal access and Press coverage. The dangers of closed-door discussions often lead to a creation of a monoculture and networks of privileged where the issues are gatekept by a few. Striking a balance between confidential discussions and open engagement with the public ensures that decisions made in closed settings are accountable, ethical, and aligned with broader societal values.



DISINFORMATION AND CHALLENGES TO DEMOCRACY

In a freewheeling conversation hosted by Digi X, whose “...vision is to help make sense of, and help shape, digital developments in the region, while also facilitating the contribution of regional and multidisciplinary perspectives to global digital developments.”, disinformation was the key topic at a session by a group of digital experts and activists in Chiang Mai

Disinformation campaigns must be reviewed and monitored based on localized context in terms of technology facilitated GBV and Indigenous Peoples in countries where disinformation campaigns are rampant. The advent of election season in countries coincides with the online abuse of activists, journalists and advocates who are critical of governments. Each social media platform has different algorithm codes for eg Twitter and Facebook have different algorithm codes.

There is a great need to build awareness and capacity on combating disinformation campaigns by indigenous groups as this is a critical part of self-determination and advocacy in digital rights forums as well as generating data and evidence of harms that have multiple and intersectional impacts on IPs.

The Chinese government is fostering disinformation campaigns in Asia which have had a detrimental impact on democracies in the region. Shrinking civic spaces offline coincide with shrinking civic spaces online. Content farms generate fake news funded by governments to derail Oppositions as well as tampering with elections.

However, disinformation goes hand in glove with a total takeover of legacy media (mainstream, media groups, vernacular media and broadcast channels) by the State. The fake news circulation on social media can be combated since it is visible to all. The problem arises when fake news is circulated via messaging apps such as Line, WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger. The end-to-end encryption of messages means there is no proper way of monitoring the categories of content and circulation of disinformation. WhatsApp in India has a huge reach of 400 million subscribers and is a conduit for surveillance of minorities and quick action in propelling hate crimes on the ground. Despite repeatedly being asked to share data on the kinds of fake news, Masato Masato Kajimoto, Associate Professor of journalism at the University of Hong Kong request was denied by Meta. WhatsApp has taken measures to curb the flow of disinformation through product level changes. I am not aware of policy level changes. This might be another area an expert can shed light on.

Do disinformation campaigns work in changing the narratives in favour of the powerful? And do they have a tested outcome in terms of changed behaviours? Research suggests by themselves it is unlikely but with a 360 communication/propaganda strategy it would result in favouring the ones who are winning the war of narratives by focusing on legacy media, social media and messaging apps as a composite whole. Tik Tok is another key platform that requires more research to generate insights and test theories.



RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that AIPP's MOs (member organizations) start documenting cases of online abuse targeted at discrediting key people in the movement that are critical evidence for advocacy. Indigenous perspectives must be recorded in the media and covered by indigenous journalists who are often themselves the target of disinformation campaigns through their ground reporting which invariably speaks truth to power.

The IVAN (Indigenous Voices in Asia Network) includes indigenous journalists and media practitioners from seven countries i.e. India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Thailand, Cambodia, Malaysia and the Philippines. The reason for not having alliances with media practitioners in Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam is that we cannot conduct proper due diligence as there is little to no freedom of the Press in these countries as they are State owned and run media. We would also risk endangering the existing group given the precarious political landscape of each of the countries we function in.

The group consists of seasoned IP journalists writing for mainstream media groups as well as community journalists who cover indigenous affairs with journalistic rigour and a sharp news sense. Each year through the media fellowships and with the collaboration and guidance from the country focal persons we have populated the network to include more indigenous journalists.

The work collectively has a reach of half a million people worldwide. We are also a circular economy which provides paid opportunities and skills sharing by the network members for the network members.

It is imperative that CSOs and MOs work closely with the network as credible fact based ground reporting is crucial in evidence based advocacy. This is a win win situation for the movement as all ground will be covered in effective implementation of strategies.



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