

Session Title: The Distributed Denial of Democracy: Threats to Democratic Processes Online^[1]_[SEP]

Date: 12/21/17^[1]_[SEP]

Time: 10:40 AM – 11:40 AM^[1]_[SEP]

Session Organizer: Morgan Frost, Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE)

Session Co-organizer: Sarah Moulton, National Democratic Institute (NDI)^[1]_[SEP]

Chair/Moderator: Daniel O'Maley, Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA)^[1]_[SEP]

Rapporteur/Notetaker: Morgan Frost, Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE)

List of Speakers and their institutional affiliations:

Daniel O'Maley, Deputy Editor at the Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA)

Mishi Choudhury, Legal Director of the Software Freedom Law Center (SFLC)

Martha Roldos, Executive Director of Fundacion Mil Hojas

Jehan Ara, President of P@SHA, the Pakistan Software Houses Association,

Chris Doten, Chief Innovation Officer at the National Democratic Institute (NDI)

Matt Chessen, Diplomat and Technologist, U.S. Department of State

Hanane Boujemi, Co-chair of the United Nations Dynamic Coalition on Internet Rights and Principles

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Key Issues raised:

The title of the session, “The Distributed Denial of Democracy” refers to the online use of multiple actors or channels to deny citizens access to, or to interrupt the flow of, legitimate political discourse thereby undermining democratic culture and practice. Political parties, governments, and other actors have figured out how to shape and control the internet, disrupting a true democracy. Internet shutdowns, for example, silence the voices of many and these shutdowns are often motivated with political agendas. Women are also often disproportionately targeted with online violence, in attempts to silence their voice and discourage them from participating in online dialogue. Democracy advocates must now find unique and innovative ways to preserve and protect democratic processes online. These challenges also require a multi-stakeholder solution.

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If there were presentations during the session, please provide a 1-paragraph summary for each presentation:^[1]_[SEP]

Daniel O'Maley opened the panel by highlighting that as the prevalence of internet-based media platforms has grown, so has online activity by individuals and organizations that seek to silence or exclude voices online. He also noted that challenges to democracy online are not the product of governments alone. For example, social media platforms are also undermining the business model that supports independent media and the circulation of high-quality news and information. Similarly, online violence against politically active women is a much more distributed practice that has the effect of silencing the voices of women and discouraging their participation in public dialogue. The threat to democratic governance online is fundamentally a multi-stakeholder problem. It is something that no single stakeholder can resolve. Ensuring that the future of the internet empowers universal human rights and democratic values will require cooperation from government policymakers, the private sector, and civil society.

Martha Roldos emphasized that in Ecuador, the internet was considered to be the last frontier. Both journalists, governments, and citizens alike moved to the internet to express their views. However, during this time, there were many censorship laws and the government used innovative approaches (ie. bots, trolling) to suppress the voices of journalists and increased online harassment against women in the online space. Fake news also became a common tactic used by the government. These actions made

it extremely hard for journalists to partake in the freedom of expression. Now, Ecuadorian journalists are on the front lines trying to stand up for a true and open space online by pushing a human rights agenda, continuing to publish news about corruption and initiating information campaigns to combat fake news online.

Jehan Ara stated that in Pakistan, there is a strong need for the private sector to be involved in policy dialogue, especially with policies pertaining to the online space. In addition to the cyber crime bill that continues to be a challenge, there have been multiple takedowns of platforms and mobile services, often being disguised as a “security issue”. Many women also do not want to be openly visible on social media because they feel threatened. The challenges will continue, including threats to privacy and platforms striking deals with the government to make more money. Thankfully, the private sector has woken up and started to become activists themselves. More business people are now activists and engaged in public policy advocacy than you would expect. It is also important to remember that when the private sector works with civil society and others to have a unified voice, this multi-stakeholder approach is a real catalyst for change. Ara emphasized that if you meet with government, engage with them, they may be willing to become your champions.

Mishi Choudhury noted that political parties have figured out how to use the internet to shape political discourse. In fact, the problem may be too large for just one solution. Most governments using the internet to shape or misshape politics often only focus on the political or the economic effects, and not the human effects of their actions. The Software Freedom Law Centre has created an internet shutdowns tracker to help highlight internet shutdowns in India as a major issue. In 2017 alone, there were 65 internet shutdowns in India. These shutdowns have had a severely negative impact on almost every sector. One example, in particular, is that when these shutdowns happens, doctors in hospitals are unable to access their online data to continue surgeries. These issues are global. They impact everyone.

Chris Doten stated that the National Democratic Institute focuses on improving citizens access to political processes, and often works on observing elections in several countries around the globe. Elections are often pivot points, which comes with a rise in the challenges to democracy online. In the field of computational propaganda, there is an increase in the flow of content. There are now targeted attacks on those who were once originally regarded as gatekeepers of truth. We now see what we define as the “manufactured consensus” - where propagation of false information across multiple platforms by multiple individuals makes it appear to be a commonly shared opinion or belief. The act of relaying false narratives over and over again in the online space shows that the whole democratic system can be undermined, even allowing or discouraging others to participate in the dialogue. To a certain level, we can do more to improve the digital literacy of others, helping users become more informed and intelligent consumers. But, we may be living in a world where democracy advocates may now have to use other types of innovative technology to counter such rhetoric.

Matt Chessen emphasized that preserving freedom of expression should be at the forefront of the agenda to combat all these issues, and that is because the same rights that are offline, should also be in replicated in the online space. When it comes to the internet, it should be based on interoperability and reliability and it must be secure and open. Through Matt’s work, he has seen several different times of how AI increases computational propaganda. Emerging AI tools will provide propagandists radically enhanced capabilities to manipulate human minds. These threats are very real, and must be countered to protect freedom of expression.

Hanane Boujemi stressed that internet shutdowns are one of the major threats to democratic processes online, but there are also other threats for instance content platforms having a hand in shaping public

opinion. Boujemi's work at the United Nations Dynamic Coalition concentrates on soft norms as a framework that can be addressed at the global level. The purpose of internet rights, as Boujemi described, was easy to digest, but they have also unexpectedly been able to influence important government policy processes in countries such as New Zealand and Italy. Boujemi also predicted that in the next ten years, focusing on how to democratize the internet will be a top concern.

Please describe the Discussions that took place during the workshop session: ^[11]_[SEP]

There was a discussion surrounding how soft norms and frameworks fit into already existing laws and regulations. Boujemi described that regulations are sometimes slow to adapt democratic values. Laws and regulations relating to freedom of expression for example, is not always in line with the freedom of expression democratic values we believe in. Law takes many different forms and can be manipulated. Soft norms will provide a foundation of democratic values to consider when laws are being changed, created, or abolished.

Another discussion was related to the voice of independent media and how it is often difficult to combat disinformation, especially if government are working with others to continue to manipulate rhetoric. Martha Roldos stated that to do good journalism takes time and effort, and people need to value that. It's a challenge to provide high-quality content and thwart disinformation when clicks are likes and prioritized.

One final important discussion was the need for various sectors to come together and solve the issues. Ara explained the importance of the local private sector working with other civil society organizations and some government officials to advocate for a more democratic internet.

Please describe any Participant suggestions regarding the way forward/ potential next steps /key takeaways:

One very glaring outcome of this panel was that the threats to democracy online affects every person, every sector, every region and every country. Although the effects may be different, they all have the negative impacts on democratic processes online. Finally, because these issues are multi-stakeholder, so should be the solution. Working together across various sectors and countries to be innovative and preserve and protect democracy in the online space should be a main priority.

The second outcome of the panel is the need to address the issues of internet shutdowns, disinformation, and violence against women in the online space. These issues are cross-cutting, and need immediate attention. Raising awareness on these issues is key.

The final outcome was that norms and principles truly have made impacts on shaping the internet for good. O'Maley explained that although internet norms and principles alone may not be enough to create real change, broad coalitions that support it and political will to enable it into action can truly make a valuable impact. Which is why the Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA), Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE), and the National Democratic Institute (NDI) are also fostering a network of open internet advocates who champion the democratic values and principles that should guide the future development of the internet. Both the principles and more information on how to join this network can be found at openinternet.global.

Gender Reporting

Estimate the overall number of the participants present at the session: [L1L1] [SEP1SEP1] 40

Estimate the overall number of women present at the session: [L1L1] [SEP1SEP1] 20

To what extent did the session discuss gender equality and/or women's empowerment? This session highlighted how women need to be respected and protected in the online space.

If the session addressed issues related to gender equality and/or women's empowerment, please provide a brief summary of the discussion: This panel had both men and women, with a majority of women speakers. This session discussed the problems that women face when participating online. In the online space, women, more often men, are subject to harassment when participating in online dialogue. [L1L1] [SEP1SEP1] Roldos, for example, addressed the targeted silencing of women journalists in the online space. Choudhary also addressed violence and abuse against women, as she highlights that platforms tell you to get offline or get thicker skin, but this is not the answer. Democracy needs everyone, but women get disproportionately abused and thrown out of the discourse.