

The Role of the Internet: Challenges to Liberty Online

Friday, 19 February 2016

- Chair: Reuben Dieckhoff, Friedrich Naumann Foundation, Southeast Asia
- Premesh Chandran, Malaysiakini, Malaysia
- Syed S Kazi, Digital Empowerment Foundation, India
- Andy Budiman, Serikat Jurnal Untuk Keberagaman (SEJUK), Indonesia

This session dealt with information censorship and the effect that the internet has had on the worldwide liberty movement.

Greater mass surveillance, the use of encryption services and bans on websites by governments have resulted in serious violations of freedom of speech in Asia.

Drawing on India's experience, Syed S Kazi mentioned that laws concerning freedom of speech are vague, non-consultative and often used arbitrarily against dissidents who express contrarian opinions online. Another serious issue is that 80% of India's rural population lacks access to the internet.

Digital Empowerment Foundation is seeking to alleviate these problems by providing online connectivity to rural communities. Its work is critical in creating new opportunities for commerce and encouraging communities to voice out their opinions to local governments.

Mr Kazi noted that the internet is 'the great equaliser of India' and has the power to reduce social and economic inequality between the rich and poor. He also related the story of 3,500 traditional weavers from the province of Chanderi, who are now using computer technology to make beautiful designs and market their products for a profit.

Premesh Chandran of Malaysiakini spoke next about the myriad risks involved with using social media and conducting business online in Malaysia - such as exposure to government surveillance and information theft from other parties. He briefly explained the benefits of internet connectivity and mobile applications such as Facebook, Uber and other peer to peer sharing websites. He cautioned that the use of these new technologies also carried certain risks, such as cyberbullying on social media sites and online fraud.

Andy Budiman spoke next about Indonesia's experience. He noted that liberal Indonesians have successfully used social media to advocate equal rights for the LGBT community and counter radical Islamic movements. He said that the proliferation of social media is widespread, and that Indonesians now live in a glasshouse – where people are constantly watching others and are being watched themselves.