

Internet Governance Forum 2015

10th – 13th November 2015, Joao Pessoa, Brazil

The Internet Governance Forum (IGF) is a multi-stakeholder, democratic and transparent forum facilitating discussion on public policy issues related to Internet governance by all stakeholders. The discussions at the 2015 forum were framed around the theme 'Evolution of Internet governance: Empowering Sustainable Development', supported by eight sub-themes – Cybersecurity and trust, The Internet economy, Inclusiveness and diversity, Openness, Enhancing multi-stakeholder cooperation, The Internet and human rights, Critical Internet resources and Emerging issues.

The issue of hate speech online was the focus of a Workshop held on 12th November. 'Dangerous speech online: Identification and strategies', focused on the South Asian region, exploring the complex tangle of issues around online hate speech and implications for disempowered groups, Internet enabled anonymity, its cross-border nature and the effects of regulation on freedom of expression. The workshop was moderated by Professor Urs Gasser, Executive Director, Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University. The panel included Professor Susan Benesch, The Dangerous Speech Project, Ankhi Das, Regional Director Facebook for South Asia and representatives from India, Pakistan, Singapore and Sri Lanka.

After a brief introduction by the moderator, Professor Benesch clarified the terminology used in her definitions of hate speech and dangerous speech. This was followed by examples of hate speech challenges and phenomenon in their respective countries presented by Adnan Chowdry and Nighat Dad of Pakistan, Ritu Srivastava from India, Roshini Wickremesinha from Sri Lanka, representing the Centre for Policy Alternatives and a participant from Myanmar. The harassment of women where dangerous speech online has translated to physical violence, the subtleties between political speech and hate speech online and the evolving challenges of countering hate speech were highlighted by the panelists. Dr. Cherian George from Singapore summarized challenges common to the region.

A discussion of strategies, especially non-legal ones, to deal with online speech ensued. Frank La Rue, UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression stressed the responsibility for defining hate speech vests with government and not private enterprises since it is the responsibility of government to protect citizens, unlike private enterprises which are not accountable to citizens. Ankhi Das from Facebook acknowledged that online platforms have a role to play on ensuring acceptable social practices to protect users, especially when there is a nexus to violence. She reiterated the potential of Facebook and other online platforms for positive counter speech and the basic safeguards introduced by Facebook, such as authenticating identity and shutting down offending profiles when reported.

The fact that the root of hate speech triggers are intrinsically social in nature and hence require a response broader than legal intervention was discussed. The panel agreed that a legal response alone will not yield positive results. Chinmayi Arun, Centre for Communication Governance at National Law University Delhi commented that law does have merit as it symbolizes power and authority, and hence should not be dismissed as a response. The futility of enacting new legislation where existing laws are not properly implemented to protect victims was discussed. It was accepted that a government can

respond by condemning harmful practices and acts by non-legal means such as issuing statements which can be effective. Professor Benesch identified counter speech as a response, not only when wielded by politicians, but by celebrities or respected religious leaders where it can have a positive impact and influence. Special Rapporteur Frank La Rue in summing up stated that what is needed is engaging society from bottom-up, where all stakeholders are engaged in healthy debate and solutions. The moderator in his concluding remarks stated that the multi-dimensional, complex nature of hate speech requires collaboration between government, platform providers and the empowerment of users to both counter hate speech and protect the vulnerable.

At a post-roundtable discussion later in the day, the representatives from the various countries shared experiences of countering hate speech online and discussed strategies and ideas ranging from non-legal government intervention, implementation of existing laws, and cooperation by platform providers to minimize space for harassment, the use of technology in design and monitoring, as well as innovative counter speech methods.