

Internet Rules 2025: Southeast Asia Cohort

Case Study on Freedom of Expression

Online Freedom of Expression of Papuan Activists in Indonesia

Members: Zana (facilitator), Jose, Sangeetha, Yasmeen, Zia

Division of labour:

Background

In Indonesia, Papuan activists, including students, journalists, community organizers, and human rights defenders, use online platforms to document violence, discrimination, and political grievances stemming from decades of conflict and marginalization in Papua and West Papua. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok, and X (Twitter) have become essential tools for Papuan communities to share information, raise awareness, and connect with solidarity networks across Indonesia and globally. However, their attempts to exercise freedom of expression online frequently meet state surveillance, digital repression, platform-level censorship, and intimidation from non-state actors.

Papuan activists increasingly report that their posts are taken down, their accounts suspended, and their online organizing monitored. At the same time, racist disinformation and hate speech against Papuans, often portraying them as violent, separatist, or “anti-national”, remain widespread and under-moderated. This uneven digital environment suppresses Papuan voices while amplifying hostile narratives, making genuine advocacy high-risk and highly unequal.

There are a number of challenges Papuan activists face in being able to exercise their freedom of expression online:

- Indonesia’s Electronic Information and Transactions (ITE) Law has been used against activists criticizing state violence or resource extraction projects in Papua and students have been detained for posted protest content online, leading to self-censorship;
- Activists report that police or intelligence officers monitor their social media accounts and that WhatsApp groups used to coordinate have been infiltrated;
- Content moderation systems on social media platforms lack Papuan-language capacity, leading to automated removal of activist content or failure to detect harmful speech. Further, content about human rights abuses is sometimes removed due to mass reporting by nationalist groups or automated detection systems;

- Papuan activists, especially women, face severe trolling, misogynistic abuse, doxxing, and racist slurs, and disinformation portrays Papuans as “criminals,” “troublemakers,” or “backward,” fueling online violence;
- The government imposes internet shutdowns in Papua, justifying it as a security measure but it effectively suppresses communication and documentation of abuses.

Various stakeholders contribute to this situation in many ways:

- Government: Enforces restrictive cyber laws; monitors online speech; pressures platforms to suppress “negative” narratives and imposes internet shutdowns.
- Social media companies: Provide the primary space for Papuan voices but fail to invest in adequate moderation systems and transparency.
- Telecom companies/ISPs: Implement connectivity restrictions (e.g., internet shutdowns, SIM bans) and comply with surveillance requests.

The cumulative effect of arrests, takedowns, harassment, and surveillance pushes Papuans to self-censor. The restriction of online expression undermines Papuan activists’ ability to document human rights abuses, counter racist narratives, mobilize communities, and access global solidarity. The chilling effect of surveillance, platform censorship, and harassment reduces political participation and silences Indigenous narratives already marginalized in national media.

Group Exercise

Part I - Discussion

1. What are the key barriers to online freedom of expression faced by Papuan activists in this case?

state surveillance, digital repression, platform-level censorship, and intimidation from non-state actors

2. How do laws such as the ITE shape the digital environment for marginalized groups like the Papuans?

ITE is used to monitor posts and contents that are about Papua to justify censorship, even detention

I think it creates a chilling effect which leads to self-censorship. Punitive actions by the state deter people from expressing dissenting views and as such it limits the online discourse.

3. How do platform governance failures, especially around language, moderation, and political sensitivity, affect the Papuan community?

Some platforms, especially the mainstream media, have brought a result to construct mass perception about the Papua community. In several cases, mainstream media tend to define what happened in Papua by using languages that are connotated “demonizing” the marginalized community (such as calling them criminals, separatists, discriminatory terms, and so on) whereby this practice could simply be one of the legitimate gateways for some authorities or non-state actors (interconnected interests between the state actors and the non-state actors) to put some labels on anyone who are against the oppression of Papuan people or Papuan people themselves, moreover regarding to the accusation of “coup attempt” (Article 106 Indonesian Penal Code). This matter is mainly influenced by a pool of profoundly nationalistic narrative which is accommodated by the Indonesian authorities as an attempt to distort the historical timeline and to justify the happening violence acts in Papua. Therefore, platforms should collaborate and engage in an effort of creating inclusive space and to combat against the classical narrative propagated by the state (“state propaganda”) in order to bring the factual cases up to the surface about the marginalized communities, in this context are Papuan people.

Content moderation systems on social media platforms lack Papuan-language capacity - this demonstrates how platforms which are largely based in Global North countries often negate the realities of those in Global Majority context.

Further, content about human rights abuses is sometimes removed due to mass reporting by nationalist groups or automated detection systems - automated systems cannot understand context. This form of removal benefits the perpetrator because often the state (the perpetrator) is well resourced and they can mobilize supporters for mass reporting.

4. What gender-specific risks do Papuan women activists face online?

Women activists face severe trolling, misogynistic abuse, doxxing, and racist slurs, and disinformation portrays Papuans as “criminals,” “troublemakers,” or “backward - this is a form of technology facilitating gender based violence. The online space mimics and amplifies the gender inequality that we are dealing with offline.

5. How do internet shutdowns or connectivity restrictions intersect with freedom of expression and the right to information?

Internet shutdowns and connectivity restrictions directly cut off access for Papuan to communicate with communities outside them. In turn, people who aren't Papuan are also unable to gain information about what's happening in Papua

The reason for the shutdown is to silence dissenting voices and to restrict the online dissemination of the government's abuses - this is a restriction of the freedom of expression and the right to information.

The internet shutdown is also not compatible with human rights norm when it comes to the necessity and proportionality

6. What **advocacy positions** or policy recommendations could address these gaps?

Sangeetha - Platforms include community, civil society voices and representation as part of the content moderation work - although I do believe that content moderation is a harmful work.

Yasmeen -

Zia -

Part II - Developing an advocacy strategy

Step 1: Based on the case study, develop a problem statement that articulates your position (link back to above)

1. **Yasmeen** - Better interpretation of ITE law, this law often criminalised activists not just Papuan activists. How can this law be better interpreted and replicated for activism?

We discussed infringement of privacy - there are reports where police and officers monitor social media accounts. Is this surveillance lawful, legitimate, etc.

2. **Sangeetha** - thinking of a criminal justice system that is not always for justice, that can punish other people marginalised. Law is not evenly distributed, law can punish rather than addressing the root cause - but there are people who seek justice through law, we can co-exist. These laws are remnants of colonial frameworks

3. **Zia** - Emphasizing inclusivity of information access (providing comprehensive educational basis especially about the digital security guidelines both formally or informally) and legal assistance as extra-parliamentary steps because in some cases the authorities could easily criminalize and defame social activists or people who bring collective awareness by the implementation of multi-interpretative regulation or practice in any means (doxxing, online terror, smear campaigns, etc.).

Vote: Sangeetha (1), Zia, Yasmeen (1), Zana - (1)

Step 2: What are the human rights at stake? Name all that are relevant.

(Example: freedom of expression)

Problem statement: Better interpretation of ITE law, this law often criminalised activists not just Papuan activists. How can this law be better interpreted and replicated for activism?

Better interpretation - what does 'better' mean?

Step 3: What is your advocacy objective?

(Example: To get X to _____ about _____ in Y country and ask for this practice to come to an end)

Step 4: What are the most appropriate spaces/forums where you can advocate for this objective?

(Example: national courts, national legislative assemblies, municipal offices, social media, news channel, regional or international forums)

Step 5: Who are the stakeholders relevant to addressing this situation?

*Name **all the ones** you can think of.*

Problem statement: Better interpretation of ITE law, this law often criminalised activists not just Papuan activists. How can this law be better interpreted to not discriminate against activism?

Sangeetha - Ministry of digital, communication, whichever government agencies that were involved in the surveillance. Telecom companies/ISPs - who complied with the surveillance request, social media platforms, feminist, women rights org, Access Now

Zia- Legal Aid Institute, civil organization/CSOs who are focusing in digital security concerns (such as SAFEnet), mass organizations or local communities that are most likely vulnerable to ITE law

Yasmeen - Police authorities, policymakers, journalists, media platforms

Zana - Papuan activists, educate on the danger of surveillance, awareness building, capacity building, digital security approaches that is more community-informed rather than adhering to the individual approaches many has

Step 6: Pick a maximum of three advocacy targets you will engage

(Example: Government of the country where the issue is taking place/ other Governments/ digital rights groups/ gender rights groups/ private sector/ Commercial interests bodies/ media/ technical experts/ general public etc.)

Vote:

1. Govt agencies -
2. Telco -
- 3. CSO - Sangeetha, Zia, Yas**
- 4. Legal aid institutes - Zia, Yas**
5. police auth -
- 6. journalists + media platforms - Sangeetha**

Step 7: Analyse the target

Advocate for the improvement of Indonesia's ITE Law: (Law No. 11 of 2008, amended by Law No. 1 of 2024) regulates electronic information, transactions, IP, and digital activities, covering online contracts, data protection, and prohibiting defamation, pornography, gambling, hate speech, and hoaxes, but has faced criticism for its broad defamation clauses (Art. 27(3)) stifling free speech, leading to recent Constitutional Court rulings to annul vague parts and further amendments aiming to balance digital security with rights, with ongoing debate about implementation and government power

Problem statement: Better interpretation of ITE law, this law often criminalised activists not just Papuan activists. How can this law be better interpreted to not discriminate against activism?

CSO like SAFEnet - they do contribute to interpreting ITE laws that in its practice targeted any social activist. SafeNET also handles reports regarding to criminalization of activists (especially in digital ecosystem)

	Target 1	Target 2	Target 3
Who is the target?	CSOs who are focusing in digital security concerns (such as SAFEnet)	Legal institutes aid	Journalists and media platforms
Target's power/influence over the Issue (unknown, limited power, moderate power and significant power)	Varies from significant to limited Discussions: - Power depends on narrative, issue etc. might be limited on changing policies	Moderate or limited Discussions: - They might know the approach, but they need to listen more the communities impacted - Different ways to read the laws (especially about the multi-statutory interpretation articles in ITE law)	Significant Discussions: - Depends on the media, like national media might be already biased
Target's level of opposition to or support for the issue:	Allies	Neutral	Indifferent

(Ally, neutral, indifferent and opposed)			
Target's interest in the issue: (none, low, medium and high)	High Discussions: - Not "interest" but "stake" - Does it align with their vision?	Low Discussions: - What are their areas of work?	"Stake" High
Level of knowledge of the issue: (none, low, medium and high)	Medium Discussions - Digital security is often based on the Global North framework, are they community-informed approaches? - Still has to do with their visions - what is at stake?	Low	Medium As a network, they do know a bit but might need more
Existing level of access to the target: (none, low, medium, high) <i>(Start thinking about how you would go about accessing the target?)</i>	Low-medium (Who are we as a CSO who want to approach others?) How to access the target? - Introduce	Medium How to access the legal aid institutions: - Same as approaching CSOs due to	High How to access media and journalists? - List of available media that we can vet

	through mutual contact(s) due to mistrust with govt - Depends on the CSO - meet in person, etc. due to security reason	security - If not, write email	through and pick to strategise - Email them
What do you want the target to do?			
Based on what you want the target to do, what is the best possible strategy? - Communication - Persuasion - Pressure - Other?	(still depends on the extent of safety, and what can the CSO does and aligns) Pressure the govt State their stance as a CSO	- Assess risks before we decide what is the strategy	Pressure the govt through... Narrative building and narrative changing (communication)

Step 8: What are the tactics you will employ to advocate to these targets?

(Example: presenting at a forum/social media campaign/lobbying etc.)

Step 9: What are the documents you need to prepare to engage with these targets? Write a brief line or two about what it will contain.

Step 10: What are the resources you need for carrying out this strategy?

Step 12: Who are the networks you will need help from at the local, national, regional, global level?

Step 13: What are the challenges you anticipate in this process?

Lack of support - from target advocates, activist burnout etc.

Step 14: What are the risks involved in engaging in this advocacy? What can you do to address them?

Online violence - mass coordinated - can also have gendered elements

Discussions and questions from feedback:

1. Interest vs stake - we all have stakes in it, but are these folks interested to do anything about the issue? Both stake and interest are important to strategise