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Internet Governance: Priority Issues for ASEAN

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SYNOPSIS

Effective Internet governance is vital in ensuring a secure, interconnected, and digitally inclusive system that fosters economic growth and regional integration. This commentary discusses how ASEAN can play a bigger role in developing the rules, especially with its focus on speeding up digital development and transformation in the region.

COMMENTARY

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines [Internet governance](#) as the “complementary development and application by governments, the private sector, civil society and the technical community, in their respective roles, of shared principles, norms, rules, decision-making procedures, and activities that shape the evolution and use of the Internet”. This covers many of the daily legal, economic, and social issues that states grapple with.

Internet governance is also the term now used to discuss issues such as domain names and Internet Protocol addresses, technical standards, cybersecurity, data privacy, digital rights, access and inclusion, and content regulation.

Since the advent of the Internet in the 1990s, states have tried to find ways to govern issues such as who should assign domain names, how information found on the Internet is to be regulated or controlled, what constitutes a cybercrime, the Internet's role in development, etc. However, there are Internet libertarians who believe that the Internet should remain as free of government intervention as possible, and not be a space to be governed.

The Internet Governance Forum (IGF) is a good example of how complex the issue has become. Currently in its 18th iteration, the debates over various issues and differences on how Internet governance should take place have become more complicated and nuanced as technology progresses and matures.

We are presently no closer to bridging the tension that exists between the free, open, multi-stakeholder model championed by the West and the multilateral model preferred by states that are more paternal or authoritarian.

Due to the extensive impact of the Internet, the issues that Internet governance needs to resolve have become global and can affect every user and being on this planet. Internet governance is now not a choice, but a collective and strategic necessity that all states and stakeholders need to undertake in a collaborative effort.

This is especially important now at a time when more states are thinking about undertaking digital transformation. There is a need to ensure that the requirements and rights of all states are protected. Singapore and the ASEAN member states (AMS) are not exceptions to this.

Internet Governance in ASEAN

ASEAN's digital economy and digital society ambitions are detailed in the [ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2025](#) (ADM2025). The regional grouping has made notable headway in addressing certain Internet governance issues, especially in areas linked to digital transformation and the development of the digital ecosystem.

ASEAN has, in fact, been taking steps on Internet governance from as early as 2016. For example, at the 2016 Asian Telecommunications and Information Technology Ministers Meeting, the [Framework on Personal Data Protection](#) was adopted to “strengthen the protection of personal data in ASEAN...with a view to contribute to the promotion and growth of regional and global trade and the flow of information”.

ASEAN has also changed how it deals with Internet governance, choosing to address it as a digital and digitisation issue rather than just a matter involving information technologies. To enable this, ASEAN expanded the scope of its ASEAN Telecommunications and Information Technology Ministers Meeting (TELMIN) to become the ASEAN Digital Ministers Meeting (ADGMIN) in October 2019. This was not a cosmetic name change as ASEAN was actively seeking to govern the Internet better.

In 2021, as the digital economy continued to expand in the region, the ADGMIN adopted the *ASEAN Data Management Framework* to establish [common frameworks and appropriate data protection measures](#). Besides this, it has also considered developing [regional guidelines](#) beyond the scope of Internet governance, such as those for AI governance and ethics.

Next Steps for ASEAN

It is uncommon for a diverse group of states with different levels of digital maturity to be interested in, and to play an active role in Internet governance. To strike while the

iron is hot, ASEAN should and can do more to tackle the challenges of digital transformation and to enact more efficient Internet governance measures in the region, and in turn, share its experience globally.

In our opinion, the top three Internet governance issues that ASEAN should give priority to in 2024 are access and inclusion, cybersecurity cooperation, and content regulation.

Access and Inclusion

Firstly, there is an urgent need for the AMS to invest in infrastructure to improve connectivity, particularly in rural areas. The [ASEAN Secretariat publication](#), *ASEAN Rapid Assessment: The Impact of COVID-19 on Livelihoods Across ASEAN (2020)*, observed that “only 53% of rural children and adolescents have an internet connection” and “while mobile penetration is high in most ASEAN countries, many still do not have access to unlimited internet on their mobile devices”.

AMS also needs to explore domestic policies for Internet access to be made more affordable, while at the same time promoting digital literacy and skills development to ensure that their populations are ready for technological advancements that will occur in the near future.

Cybersecurity Cooperation

Secondly, ASEAN needs to continue strengthening its work in cybersecurity cooperation to cope with digitalisation in the region. ASEAN has developed the *ASEAN Cybersecurity Cooperation Strategy* to enhance [cybersecurity cooperation](#) among its member states.

In addition, the ASEAN-Singapore Cybersecurity Centre of Excellence (ASCCE) and the ASEAN-Japan Cybersecurity Capacity Building Centre (AJCCBC) were set up to support cybersecurity cooperation and collaboration in the region.

Cybersecurity cooperation mostly takes on the form of information sharing, capacity building, and cooperation in research and development. For ASEAN to progress as an entity, more collaboration and harmonisation, and knowledge sharing are needed.

Content Regulation

Finally, ASEAN needs to pay attention to the challenges of content regulation as member states increase their connectivity. Content regulation is a delicate task requiring a multi-stakeholder approach that involves governments, civil society, think tanks, and tech companies in the policy discussion and development process.

ASEAN has already published the *ASEAN Guideline on Management of Government Information in Combating Fake News and Disinformation in the Media (2023)* to provide [guidelines](#) for AMS. However, we should note that this only addresses fake news and disinformation and does not include the control of harmful online content, which may conflict with freedom of expression issues.

ASEAN could consider involving more stakeholders to leverage different expertise and resources for Internet governance and safer and more effective use of the Internet.

Conclusion

These three Internet governance issues are areas that ASEAN has already started work on and can provide global leadership for. Successfully resolved, they could form a development blueprint for developing states desiring to avoid tensions in cyberspace and bring ASEAN closer to what it hopes to achieve through ADM2025.

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