

# APAC Insights #4

## 2020 in Retrospect: Is this the Year that Reshaped our Digital Future?

### Discussion Summary



16 December 2020

#### 1. Introduction

The [APAC Insights series](#)<sup>1</sup> brings together thought leaders and subject matter experts to share views and insights on current issues related to the Internet and its use in the Asia-Pacific region. Each session takes place on Zoom and is broadcasted live on [Livestream](#)<sup>2</sup> and [Facebook](#)<sup>3</sup>. A Q&A segment provides an opportunity for attendees to ask speakers questions.

The [APAC Insights #4](#)<sup>4</sup> held on 16 December 2020 was hosted by Rajnesh Singh, Regional Vice President of Asia-Pacific, and featured a diverse panel to discuss some of the key Internet policy issues that have surfaced as a result of events in 2020, and how they could shape the future of the Internet. The speakers for this session included:

- Anju Mangal, Head of Asia-Pacific, Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI), World Wide Web Foundation, Fiji
- Charles Mok, Entrepreneur and former Legislative Councillor, Hong Kong
- Nikhil Pahwa, Founder, Medianama, India

The next section provides a summary of the discussions.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.internetsociety.org/events/apac-insights/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://livestream.com/internetsociety/apacinsights4>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?id=56134108238&story\\_fbid=10157602476678239](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?id=56134108238&story_fbid=10157602476678239)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.internetsociety.org/events/apac-insights4/>

## 2. Discussion Summary

The year 2020 has brought disruption and change that few people alive today have seen. The pandemic has been felt in every corner of the world, impacting on routines, institutions and industries that underpin our daily lives. On top of this are numerous natural disasters and extreme weather events, stock market crashes (and recoveries), civil unrest, and escalating trade wars, further compounding the challenges that we face.

Amidst these turmoils, people have turned to the Internet to cope. But this increased dependence on the Internet has resulted in scrutiny on several fronts, with the rise in cyberattacks, disinformation and attempts to shape online narratives that have spillover effects on the physical world.

Speakers highlighted some key trends in 2020 that could have significant implications on the future of the Internet.

One major trend is increased attention on the tripartite struggle between end-users, governments and big tech companies. Events in 2020 have brought to the fore the power of big tech companies and their impact on limiting competition, allowing the manipulation of social narratives and influencing political decisions, and exploiting users' personal data.

Governments have also begun demonstrating their power to rein in big tech companies, assert digital sovereignty and control technology development. In the fight against big tech companies, the Indian government, for example, has encouraged the development of local platforms and databases, and built a national ID system to power the economy. Competition regulations are also being used to pushback against foreign tech companies. Speakers suggested that other countries may start following suit, although India and China are unique in their scale and large user base. They also have relatively more resources, infrastructure and skills to promote these digital interventions.

Smaller countries are also joining forces, and we have seen the emergence of blocs among European Union, Association of Southeast Asian Nations and Latin American countries to counter the dominance of some countries when it comes to trade, Internet technology and regulations. Speakers indicated that these blocs and large countries like India and Indonesia have great opportunities to define new technological and regulatory shifts in the evolution of the Internet. One example given was leapfrogging existing baseline personal data and privacy regulations, which are rapidly becoming outdated, to looking at regulations for artificial intelligence, and achieving algorithmic accountability and transparency.

These power plays among and between governments and big tech companies are resulting in a move away from a user-centric Internet – a key principle that the Internet was founded on – leaving end-users with little recourse to challenge both state and private powers. In India, for example, the Personal Data Protection Bill has the potential to hamper innovation and create room for mass surveillance systems. We need to ensure



that human rights remain at the centre of regulations, and strong checks and balances are in place to protect users, and take into consideration their privacy rights and safety concerns.

In the effort to control the pandemic, digital tools, such as contact-tracing apps, have been deployed that may have long-term implications on people's privacy and security. The pandemic has also resulted in citizens being more accepting of governments' attempts for things like movement and contact tracking in the interests of health and safety. However, this lays a foundation for digital surveillance. Coming out of the pandemic, countries will probably be requiring some sort of "vaccine passport" with centralised systems potentially collecting huge amounts of data, including biometrics. People may have little choice but give up their privacy if they wish to travel, and some governments may take the opportunity to enlarge their data collection efforts and their ability to surveil.

The two fundamental elements for user-centricity are freedom of choice and ability to exercise control upon one's own online activities. Speakers reflected that we cannot depend on governments and big tech companies to be user-centric, therefore, we need to empower users with technology, such as the application of self-sovereign identity principles that enable a shift towards more individual control over digital identities and personal data. Breakthroughs and adoption in this area are expected, particularly if they are coupled with increased awareness and demand from users for platforms to interoperate, and for data portability.

Another important trend is the felt digital divide during the pandemic, and the growing recognition for universal connectivity. With work, education and essential services moving online at an unprecedented pace during the pandemic, the need to accelerate efforts to connect the unconnected with quality broadband is more important than ever. This requires addressing numerous barriers related to geography and terrain, commercial viability, affordability of devices and data plans, digital skills, and socio-cultural norms that are preventing those living in rural and remote areas, women and girls, and poor and marginalised groups from benefiting from the Internet. We need to make sure that we are not disenfranchising people by providing low-quality connectivity and cheaper phones with low processing capacity. Developing programming capabilities to enable the creation of relevant content and services in local languages is also important.

Looking into the future, speakers hoped that the globe will collaboratively progress towards universal connectivity by 2030 and other areas of actions, as laid out in the United Nations Secretary-General's [Roadmap for Digital Cooperation](#)<sup>5</sup>, including addressing online gender-based violence and improving cybersecurity.

In addition to coping with the pandemic, many countries in Asia and the Pacific had to bear the brunt of natural disasters as well. Therefore, Internet resilience becomes even more critical when multiple events affect a country – such as natural disasters and the pandemic.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/content/digital-cooperation-roadmap/#:~:text=Global%20Connectivity-,Achieving%20universal%20connectivity%20by%202030,with%20the%20Sustainable%20Development%20Goals>.

Speakers also expressed serious concerns about how things will unfold with more government control, more surveillance and more geopolitics of tech, as well as the move towards national sovereignty, and possibly even conflict and war. There will probably be a lot more discussions and regulations around personal data, and hopefully human rights, privacy and free speech will be at the centre of these dialogues, with technologies developed to put more control in the hands of users.

### 3. Quotes

Anju Mangal, Head of Asia-Pacific, Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI), World Wide Web Foundation, Fiji

*"When we are speaking of reshaping the digital future, one solution doesn't fit all. Particularly for smaller communities and countries that continue to struggle, ... it is necessary for policymakers, lawmakers and governments to become more involved in how [tech] companies deal with essential issues like ... data regulation, cyberbullying ... and online gender-based violence."*

*"If you want to close the digital divide and get rid of online gender-based violence or reduce the gender gap, it is important to have more digital skills and digital literacy."*

*"We have been advocating for an open and secure web for a long time. But some governments are shutting down the Internet or banning social media ... How do we tackle that? ... I think we need to have a multistakeholder approach, ... we need to bring in the governments, civil societies and big tech companies to the table to ... make sure everyone remains connected, everyone is secure and everyone has a voice online."*

Charles Mok, Entrepreneur and former Legislative Councillor, Hong Kong

*"The good old days of one single Internet and ... one standard, and the US taking the leadership role (whether that is the good old days or not) ... that's probably gone."*

*"How do we empower the users to really take control. That has to be from technology."*

*"From the technology community and the user community, there is a renewed urge for ... systems to interoperate ... like if I'm switching between phone companies, I can keep my numbers ... and I can move my Facebook data over to another social media [platform]. ... Empowering users to have that [data] portability ... is a good example ... for people to understand the advantages of having that freedom."*

*"Governments are finding people to be more accepting of these [contact-tracing] apps for their own safety – people are worried about getting COVID. ... citizens are getting used to being surveilled and giving up some of*

*their privacy for some particular reason, in this case health. Coming out of the pandemic, because people are so eager to travel, [people] give up [their] privacy, and people get used to it. That is a worry ... and some governments may take it as an opportunity to enlarge the data they collect and the ability to surveil."*

Nikhil Pahwa, Founder, Medianama, India

*"You will see more blocs coming up to counter the dominance of US and China."*

*"For me, the Holy Grail of meaningful Internet access and usage will be when people can program in their own languages. The Internet is not just about consumption, but also about creation."*

*"What we need to do going forward is ensure human rights remain at the centre of all regulations everywhere, and strong checks and balances are put into place. We need that more than anywhere else in digital identity systems, which are lacking right now."*

Disclaimer: Views expressed in this report are those of the speakers and may or may not reflect official Internet Society positions.

