Issue Paper: Asia-Pacific Bureau Social Media

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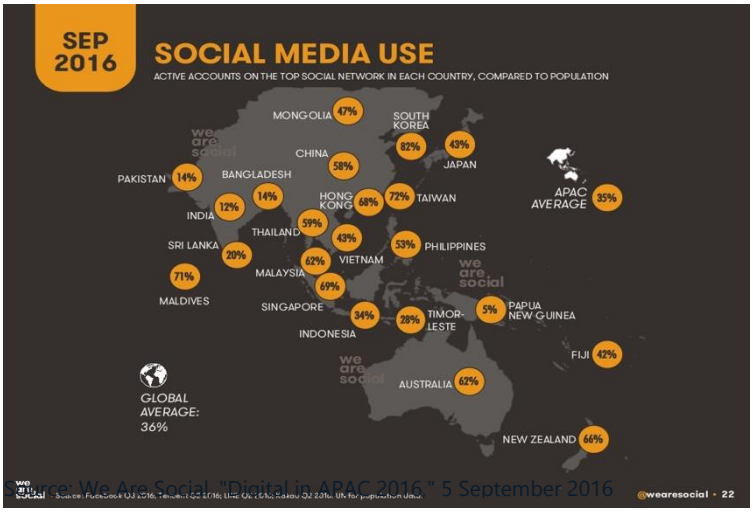
The Issues

Social media is a key driver for people to go online, but there is a huge disparity in its use among Asia-Pacific countries, from a 5% penetration in Papua New Guinea to 82% in the Republic of Korea (see Figure 1)

Studies have shown that social media is a key driver for people to go online.[1] It is one of the top activities on the Internet, particularly in developing countries, and is often people's first experience with the Internet.[2] These platforms have surged in popularity, in parallel with the growth of mobile technology and tend to be optimised for mobile use.

Social media sites have mainly been used for communication, but they are also creating new business models and incorporating multiple services (e.g., shopping, e-payment and banking, and arranging transportation).[3]

Figure 1. Social media penetration rates in the Asia-Pacific region



Source: We Are Social, "Digital in APAC 2016," 5 September 2016

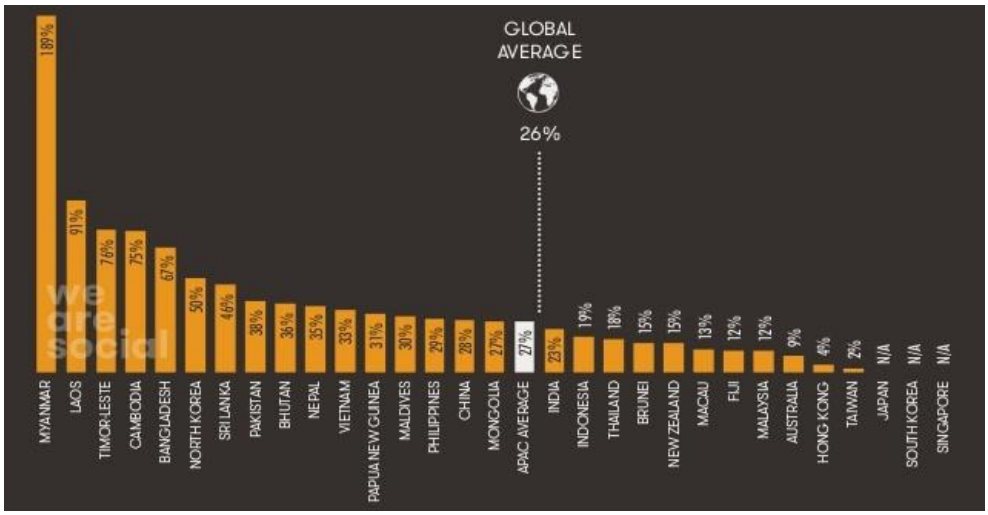
For governments, these platforms provide an opportunity to better engage with citizens: **77% of national government portals in the Asia-Pacific region have social media networking tools.**[4]

Businesses, entrepreneurs and others are using them for marketing and branding, selling their products and services, and customer service and feedback.

[1] GSMA, "Accelerating Digital Literacy: Empowering Women to Use the Mobile Internet," 2015, http://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/DigitalLiteracy_v6_WEB_Singles.pdf; and World Economic Forum, "The Impact of Digital Content: Opportunities and Risks of Creating and Sharing Information Online," January 2016.
[2] ITU, *Measuring the Information Society Report 20*16 (Geneva, 2016).
[3] World Economic Forum, "The Impact of Digital Content: Opportunities and Risks of Creating and Sharing Information Online," January 2016.
[4] United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *United Nations E-Government Survey 2016* (New York, 2016)

For consumers, social media has empowered them to share experience to a global audience, particularly related to products and services. Consumers find that taking their complaints on social media is the fatest way to get a response. The amplification of consumer's voices on social media has influenced corporations to shift to more consumer-centric strategies.[5]

Figure 2. Growth in social media use in the Asia-Pacific region, 2016



Source: We Are Social, "Digital in APAC 2016," 5 September 2016.

Civil society organisations use social media for campaigning, advocating for change and empowering marginalised voices. In Cambodia, for example, human rights organisations and trade unions have used social media platforms to shed light on the plight of women garment factory workers, allowing for the issue to receive international exposure. This puts pressure on the big brands who source their products from factories there, and on government authorities. Since 2011, the minimum wage in Cambodia's garment sector has more than doubled from USD 61 to USD153, and social media has contributed to this change.[6]

Social media use, however, is constrained by the Internet penetration rates of a country and the widening digital divide in the Asia-Pacific region. Nevertheless, it continues to grow remarkably in emerging economies such as Myanmar, Lao PDR, Timor-Leste, Cambodia and Bangladesh (see Figure 2).

Is social media limiting the use of the Internet?

Despite its benefits, studies have found that many users do not look beyond the few social media platforms to which they have been exposed, and thus do not fully benefit from the opportunities of the Internet.

Several factors contribute to this confinement:[7]

- The move from browser-based interactions on desktops to app-based experience on mobile devices.
- Mobile operators offering zero-rated access, where customers are not charged for selected applications.
- Lack of affordable mobile data packages, which result in unwillingness to explore the Internet for fear of losing money.
- Lack of understanding of the Internet's potential, and low digital literacy.

Findings from a GSMA study in India, Indonesia and Kenya noted that women using mobile Internet often find themselves stuck on "application islands", which means that the they are unable to expand their mobile Internet usage beyond the few applications that they are already familiar with, such as Facebook and WhatsApp. As the Internet is viewed through the lens of one or two applications and services that users are

[5] See Jo Causon, "Customer complaints made via social media on the rise," *The Guardian*, 21 May 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/media-network/2015/may/21/customer-complaints-social-media-rise; and Timothy Tiah, "I slammed this milk company on social media. Here's how the CEO responded," *TechInAsia*, 26 October 2015, https://www.techinasia.com/talk/wins-for-farm-fresh-ceo.

[6] Alexandra Demetrianova, "Internet, social media and labour rights in garment factories: Do the campaigns work?" in *Global Information Society Watch 2016: Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Internet* (APC and IDRC, 2016).

[7] GSMA, "Accelerating Digital Literacy: Empowering Women to Use the Mobile Internet," 2015, http://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/DigitalLiteracy_v6_WEB_Singles.pdf; and World Economic Forum, "The Impact of Digital Content: Opportunities and Risks of Creating and Sharing Information Online," January 2016.

familiar with, there is a lack of understanding of the depth and breadth of the Internet that traditional PC users have through web browsers and search engines.[8]

In a global survey by the World Wide Web Foundation in nine informal settlements,[9] including in New Delhi, Jakarta and Manila, 97% of the respondents (women and men) on average used social media, and in most cases, over half reported clicking on links to take them outside of Facebook, but less than 30% sought information online (see Table 1).

Table 1: Results from a global survey by the World Wide Web Foundation

	Women Internet users using FB (%)	Men Internet users using FB (%)	Women FB users following link outside FB (%)	Women Internet users seeking information online (%)	Men FB users following link outside FB (%)	Men Internet users seeking information online (%)
New Delhi	98	96	49	17	71	28
Jakarta	90	94	82	26	85	28
Manila	97	95	48	18	71	28

Source: World Wide Web Foundation, "Women's Rights Online: Translating Access into Empowerment," October 2015

On the other hand, research in Myanmar shows that Internet users do primarily use Facebook, including to connect with friends and for entertainment, but they also search for and consume a variety of content, including politics, news and health information inside the platform.[10] LIRNEasia's field research in South and South-East Asia found entrepreneurs using Facebook as a learning tool to improve their livelihood (for example, hairdressers at the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum look at pictures of celebrity hairstyles and offer to recreate them for their clients).

Zero-rating

The same global survey by the World Wide Web Foundation found that eight in ten respondents used Facebook and just under half used WhatsApp. The apps are popular because of the availability of "zero-rated" access from some mobile operators, user interfaces that work on more basic phones and local language content.[11]

Zero-rating involves mobile carriers, through a prior agreement with specific content providers, offering free mobile data to allow customers to access particular online content or services at no additional cost. Since mobile Internet users tend to pay for their Internet on a capped and metered basis, zero-rating is promoted as a subsidy that allows users to save money, and operators/providers to increase their customer base.

The scheme can be applied to any content or service online, but is frequently employed for social media and messaging apps. A common zero-rated application is Facebook Flex, a video- and image-free version of Facebook. Also a Facebook service, Free Basics, is presented as a solution to allow users who have never been online to use Facebook Flex or other zero-rated services, and if they like it, become paying consumers of the "full" Internet.[12]

But zero-rating, especially Free Basics, has been controversial, primarily due to its alleged incompatibility with net neutrality—the concept that all content, application, service, device, sender and receiver should be treated equally on the Internet. More specifically, the arguments centred around the limited number of

[8] GSMA, "Accelerating Digital Literacy: Empowering Women to Use the Mobile Internet," 2015, http://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/DigitalLiteracy_v6_WEB_Singles.pdf.
[9] Informal settlements are areas where groups of housing units have been constructed on land that the occupants have no legal claim to, or occupy illegally. Source: OECD, "Glossary of Statistical Terms: Informal Settlements," https://stats.oecd.org/glossary/detail.asp?ID=1351.
[10] Cited in Helani Galpaya, "Zero-rating in Emerging Economies," Global Commission on Internet Governance Paper Series No. 47, February 2017, https://www.cigionline.org/sites/default/files/documents/GCIG%20no.47_1.pdf.
[11] World Wide Web Foundation, "Women's Rights Online: Translating Access into Empowerment," October 2015, http://webfoundation.org/about/research/womens-rights-online-2015/.
[12] Free Basics is available in 12 Asia-Pacific countries—Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Maldives, Mongolia, Myanmar, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Thailand, Timor-Leste and Vanuatu. Internet.org by Facebook, "Where we've launched," https://info.internet.org/en/story/where-weve-launched/.

applications made available, who selects which applications are available, and how this could potentially prevent users from having access to other applications e.g., from new startups and players.

In 2015, when mobile network operators in India announced zero-rated packages, a coalition of activists, private companies, academics and others campaigned successfully under the "Savetheinternet.in" banner to assert the importance of keeping the Internet neutral. In February 2016, the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India banned all differentially priced data.

Nonetheless, a recent study provides evidence that zero-rating in emerging economies where the Internet is still unaffordable has allowed users to go and stay online, and shift to the full and open Internet for the first time. With the goal of achieving connectivity for the poor, the study explores models of zero-rating that are more likely to ensure net neutrality, are easier for the regulator to enforce and monitor, and have lower potential for future harms.[13]

Privacy, security and safety of social networks are key concerns

The opportunities for individuals to become content creators have underpinned the rise of social media. These platforms have become important spaces for freedom of expression and the voicing of issues that are not covered in mainstream media.

Everyday, innumerable bits of content, such as status updates, images and videos are being uploaded on the Internet. The ease and speed by which these can be shared, modified, copied and aggregated have enhanced communication, to help save lives during emergencies for example. But at the same time it has resulted in a rise in fraud, cyberbullying, hate speech, revenge porn and threats of violent and terrorist activity.[14]

Studies show that more women than men who are active on social media receive threats or comments that directly attack their gender, safety and right to expression.[15]

In response, governments in several countries are blocking social media sites: to limit public exposure to content that may ignite social or political unrest; prevent criticism of a government, spiritual belief, or of political or religious leaders; and prevent perceived risks to national security and hate speech. However, doing so affects freedom of expression, as well as the opportunities that social media offers to businesses, civil society organizations and governments.

Meanwhile, respondents of the surveys by GSMA and the World Wide Web Foundation mentioned earlier were often not aware of the privacy and security risks they face when using social media—neither did they know how to adjust the privacy settings in their accounts.[16] This might lead them to exercise less care in the information that they share online.

Ordinary Internet users likewise lack understanding of how and which kinds of personal data are collected by social media platforms, and the ways by which their data are being used to generate commercial revenue, for instance through ad targeting.

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[13] Helani Galpaya, "Zero-rating in Emerging Economies," Global Commission on Internet Governance Paper Series No. 47, February 2017, https://www.cigionline.org/sites/default/files/documents/GCIG%20no.47_1.pdf.
A survey by the Alliance for Affordable Internet in eight developing countries, including Bangladesh, India and the Philippines, found that 88% of people using zero-rating had used the Internet before using the zero-rated plan. Users typically combine different mobile data plans, and zero-rating plans allow them to remain online, rather than get online for the first time.The survey, however, neither targeted specific groups nor analysed the data by income group, or by rural and urban locations. See Alliance for Affordable Internet, "The Impacts of Emerging Mobile Data Services in Developing Countries," http://a4ai.org/the-impacts-of-emerging-mobile-data-services-in-developing-countries/.

[14] See Issues Paper on Digital Safety of Children and Youth.

[15] Broadband Commission, *Cyber Violence Against Women and Girls* (2015), http://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2015/cyber_violence_gender%20report.pdf?vs=4259.

[16] GSMA, "Accelerating Digital Literacy: Empowering Women to Use the Mobile Internet," 2015, http://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/DigitalLiteracy_v6_WEB_Singles.pdf; and World Wide Web Foundation, "Women's Rights Online: Translating Access into Empowerment," October 2015, http://webfoundation.org/about/research/womens-rights-online-2015/.

The table below shows the standard terms of agreement of popular social media sites that have an impact on users' privacy rights.

	Facebook	Twitter	YouTube
Unfettered right of provider to access user data	✓	✓	✓
Access to private chat, emails	✓	✓	✓
Access to location, GPS, IP address, Wi-Fi points and cell towers w/o further user consent	✓	✓	✓
Right to delete any user data without notice	✓	✓	✓
Right to modify any user data without notice	✓	✓	✓
Right to share user data with law enforcement	✓	✓	✓
Right to share user data with advertisers without user opt-out	✓	✓	✓
No clearly stated deletion policy for user data and metadata	✓		✓

Source: Emily Taylor, The Privatization of Human Rights: Illusions of Consent, Automation and Neutrality (Centre for International Governance Innovation and Chatham House, 2016).

Personal information is already being used by corporations to offer differential prices to consumers. It can also be used by those in position of power to discriminate against specific groups, which in turn may deny access to services and employment, and lead to harassment and violence.

A combination of policies and regulations, education, and technical solutions are required to address issues related to online privacy and security.[17]

Fake news is undermining the potential of social media to facilitate debate and enable exchanges

There is growing concern on the amount of false information and "fake news" available, and the speed by which they travel on social media sites. For example, of the 1,900 news pieces reported in the lead up to the gubernatorial election to elect the Governor of Jakarta in Indonesia, some 1,000 were confirmed as fake news.[18]

Governments have responded in the following ways:[19]

- Indonesia has announced that it will soon launch a new national cyber agency to tackle the country's cyber challenges, including fake news.
- Malaysia has launched Sebenarnya.my, a website that allows the public to share unconfirmed news with government agencies, to verify online sources and debunk false information.
- In the Philippines, a proposed bill (the Social Media Regulation Act 2017) will mandate social media companies to verify the identity of users before registering them on their networks, to prevent them from creating fake accounts.
- Singapore is planning to introduce stricter laws through the Broadcasting Act to address the rise of misinformation online.

It should be noted that while social media is being used to spread fake news, it can also be used to verify news.

Controlling and regulating fake news could potentially affect freedom of expression. A project that brought together technologists, academics and media experts resulted in three categories of intervention: (1) hiring

[17] See Issues Paper on Online Privacy.
[18] BBC, "How fake news and hoaxes have tried to derail Jakarta's election," 18 April 2017, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-39176350.
[19] Global Voices, "Fake news used to justify tighter media laws in Southeast Asia," 10 April 2017, https://www.ifex.org/asia_pacific/2017/04/10/fake-news-media-laws/.

human editors; (2) crowdsourcing; and (3) technological or algorithmic solutions.[20] More broadly, social media companies may need to be more transparent about the algorithms they set to personalise and boost content, grounding these on an ethical framework, and allowing users to have more control over the content they create and share.[21] Education that promotes critical thinking is also essential to tackling fake news.

With a growing number of people, especially young people, accessing and sharing news on social media platforms, the proliferation of fake news is a serious issue.[22]

The Opportunities

Social media reduces barriers to online services

With the growing number of people—currently at 1.4 billion—on social media in the Asia Pacific region,[23] it is not surprising that these platforms are now being used to deliver online services. It is fortuitous that social media sites are also generally accessible to persons with disabilities—Facebook and Twitter, for instance, have dedicated teams to address accessibility issues.

In Bangladesh, government agencies are using Facebook to connect with each other and with the public, instead of creating a new platform that users will need to learn to use. To date, all Deputy Commissioners' Offices at the district level have Facebook pages that aim to better engage with citizens and allow them to voice their grievances. A Facebook group has also been established among government officials to promote public service innovation, which has claimed to break down hierarchical barriers and nurture a peer-support and mentorship network.[24]

Social media has the potential to contribute to financial inclusion as it begins to incorporate financial services, including e-payment and application for loans and insurance. In China, lenders are using social media to credit rate applicants, and banks are asking people to use it for references. China has even given Tencent and Alibaba credit information bureau licenses.[25]

To assist in disaster emergencies, Facebook initiated a Safety Check feature in October 2014, allowing users to confirm their or their friends' safety, and to share this with their network. The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement has been providing tracing and restoring family links services for many years, and so do local government authorities as well as embassies. However, these require prior registration—neither are they intuitively known to citizens. By contrast, Facebook's Safety Check is part of an application that many survivors are already familiar with, making it easier to share and receive information, while also freeing up resources to address the more challenging issues in an emergency.[26]

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[20] Nicky Woolf, "How to solve Facebook's fake news problem: Experts pitch their ideas," *The Guardian*, 29 November 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/nov/29/facebook-fake-news-problem-experts-pitch-ideas-algorithms.

[21] Eli Pariser, "Beware online filter bubbles," *TED Talks*, March 2011, https://www.ted.com/talks/eli_pariser_beware_online_filter_bubbles?language=en; and Evgeny Morozov, "Moral panic over fake news hides the real enemy - the digital giants," *The Guardian*, 8 January 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jan/08/blaming-fake-news-not-the-answer-democracy-crisis.

[22] Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2016* (Oxford, 2016), http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/. The study surveyed 50,000 online news consumers in 26 countries (mostly developed countries), including Australia, Japan and the Republic of Korea. The study found that 51% of people with online access use social media as a news source. Of the 18-to-24-year-olds surveyed, 28% cited social media as their main news source, compared with 24% for TV. Facebook was the most common source—used by 44% of all those surveyed—to watch, share and comment on news.

[23] We Are Social, "Digital in APAC 2016," 5 September 2016, https://www.slideshare.net/wearesocialsg/digital-in-apac-2016.

[24] Access to Information, "Social Media in Public Service Innovation," http://a2i.pmo.gov.bd/innovation-lab/public-service-innovation-ecosystem-psie/social-media-in-public-service-innovation/; and Access to Information, Report on the Mid-Term Evaluation of the Access to Information II Project," November 2015.

[25] Richard Eldridge, "How Social Media is Shaping Financial Services, *The Huffington Post*, 21 January 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/richard-eldridge/how-social-media-is-shapi_b_9043918.html.

[26] Tim Luege, "How Facebook helped restore family links after the Nepal earthquake," *Social Media for Good*, 26 April 2015, http://sm4good.com/2015/04/26/facebook-helped-restore-family-links-nepal-earthquake/.

Asia-Pacific, the most disaster-prone region in the world, leads the use of social media for emergency response and recovery

In the aftermath of the 2015 Nepal earthquake, the Prime Minister's Relief Fund, the National Police and the National Emergency Operations Center created Twitter accounts to interact with citizens.[27] A consequent study showed that Twitter was an effective platform for communication and collaboration between emergency responders and the general public, increasing the former's ability to meet the needs of survivors.[28] Social media has contributed to the shift in the typical disaster response approach—from a top-down, command-and-control scenario, to one that engages a wider group of stakeholders, including affected citizens.

After every disaster, Facebook groups and Twitter hashtags emerge specifically to identify needs and coordinate assistance. The Government of the Philippines was one of the first governments to standardise and use hashtags to disseminate information and respond to urgent needs during disasters. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs built on the lessons gained in the Philippines to elevate this standard to the global level to promote more consistency across countries and disasters. This could help responders reduce the amount of time needed to find relevant information.[29]

Additionally, programmes that build on social media platforms for disaster response are springing up in the Asia-Pacific region. Rappler, a local news site in the Philippines developed Project Agos, combining social media analysis, crowdsourcing and a machine learning classifier. Agos will scan social media, including SMS sent to a unified number, for appeals for help, and situation reports nationwide. It automatically analyses and plots the data on a web-based map so that local government officials and responders can visually identify areas in need of help and what exactly is needed.[30]

As only 35% of the Asia-Pacific's population are active social media users,[31] it is important that disaster response initiatives incorporate social media among the tools for information dissemination, communication and analysis. Stakeholders learned from the Nepal earthquake that social media monitoring was not useful in breaking down needs geographically. The digital divide between rural and urban populations, as well as between different socio-economic groups, led to a bias in data.[32] Jalin Merapi, a web-based organisation formed to respond to the crisis after the volcano eruption in Indonesia in 2010, uses a combination of community radio, telephone, SMS, and websites alongside social media.[33]

Alignment with the SDGs

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) do not specifically mention social media, but refer to ICT and various technologies and innovations as a means to achieve the SDGs. The relevant targets include:

- Significantly increase access to information and communications technology and strive to provide universal and affordable access to the Internet in least developed countries by 2020 (SDG9c).

[27] UN-APCICT, "Reference document on social media for disaster risk management," 2016, http://www.unapcict.org/ecohub/resources/reference-document-on-social-media-for-disaster-risk-management.
[28] Rajib Subba and Tung Bui, "Online Convergence Behavior, Social Media Communications and Crisis Response: An Empirical Study of the 2015 Nepal Earthquake Police Twitter Project," in *Proceedings of the 50th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences* (2017), https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/bitstream/10125/41183/1/paper0034.pdf.
[29] Jessica MacLean, "Can standardised hashtags be effective in emergency responses?" *European Interagency Security Forum*, 24 March 2015, https://www.eisf.eu/news/can-standardised-hashtags-be-effective-in-emergency-responses/.
[30] Rappler, "#ProjectAgos: A call to action," 20 September 2013, http://www.rappler.com/move-ph/39377-introducing-project-agos.
[31] We Are Social, "Digital in APAC 2016," 5 September 2016, https://www.slideshare.net/wearesocialsg/digital-in-apac-2016.
[32] ACAPS, "Lessons Learned: Social Media Monitoring during Humanitarian Crises," 21 September 2015, https://www.acaps.org/sites/acaps/files/resources/files/lessons_learned-social_media_monitoring_during_humanitarian_crises_september_2015.pdf.
[33] Ade Tanesia and Zaki Habibi, "JALIN Merapi Community Information System in Response to Mount Merapi's 2010 Eruption," http://www.amarc.org/documents/Caribbean_Conference/CR_ResponseJALIN_MerapiEruption_EN.pdf.

- Fully operationalise the technology bank and science, technology and innovation capacity-building mechanism for least developed countries by 2017 and enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology (SDG17.8).

Social media platforms can be used as a tool to foster continuous interactions, sharing and exchanges among the various partnerships, task teams and multi-stakeholder forums that have been established to promote, monitor and review the achievement of the SDGs.

Questions to Think About

- What are some good policy practices for promoting the responsible and productive use of social media to achieve the SDGs?
- How do we balance freedom of expression with spreading false information and abuse through social media platforms?
- What are the strategies that will allow users to gain more control of the algorithms set by social media companies, and that will ensure more diverse content?
- The Asia-Pacific has great linguistic diversity. How does this affect the use of social media across and between countries e.g., if there is a natural disaster that affects multiple countries?
- With billions of pieces of information generated on social media every day, how do we organise and navigate this information for context and relevance?
- What can we learn and adopt from new business models such as WeChat's integrated services?