

Ground SAFE

Assessing the digital security needs and practices of human rights defenders in Africa, MENA, South Asia, and Southeast Asia.

#groundsafe

March 2021

SUMMARY



The Oxen Privacy Tech Foundation



Human rights defenders (HRDs) are being targeted by growing numbers of digital attacks, making effective digital security practices more important than ever.

GROUND SAFE identifies key threats HRDs are facing and makes recommendations for improving digital security knowledge and practice on the ground.

FINDINGS

Human rights defenders are being affected by digital attacks in four main ways:

1. Personal

Human rights defenders are monitored online and targeted with hate speech, inciting physical attacks and death threats, and putting human rights defenders and their families in danger.

2. Reputational

Activists and civil society organisations face a barrage of disinformation — often from sources positioning themselves as credible commentators — who work to undermine the reputation of individuals and organisations.

3. Legal

Cyber laws are being used to quash freedom of expression and target critical voices. Social accounts are being hijacked and used to generate damaging and libelous content, enabling authorities to arrest and prosecute human rights defenders.

4. Infrastructure

Internet throttling and shutdowns are increasingly being used to prevent activists from organising and publicising their protest actions, and to stifle information flow to and from the outside world.

DIGITAL THREATS: **HIGH CONCERN** DIGITAL SECURITY: **LOW ADOPTION**

WHY?

- Low awareness of digital security threats and their consequences
- Secure tools being difficult to use and often not working effectively
- Digital security training programs failing to engage and build capacity
- Organisation-level policies related to digital security being weak or non-existent

INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS
and diaspora use **iPHONES**

APP BUNDLING
AGAINST
net neutrality

Mobile operators often
SUBSERVIENT
TO GOVERNMENT

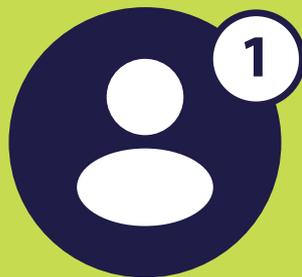


MOST HRDS USE
ANDROID
MOBILES
DUE TO
PRICE

SOCIAL
MEDIA

SURVEILLANCE

IS ON THE RISE



On Facebook
many HRDs don't
SEPARATE
WORK FROM
PERSONAL

STATE
SPONSORED
CYBER
ARMIES

GMAIL
DOMINATES



Most HRDs don't know how to use
PGP
OR FIND IT
DIFFICULT

Instant messaging has
REDUCED USE OF EMAIL

RECOMMENDATIONS

Increase awareness of digital threats and vulnerabilities

- A common language is needed to describe threats, vulnerabilities, and mitigation strategies
- Documentation of digital security incidents faced by HRDs must be improved
- Increase media stories and public discourse about digital attacks targeting HRDs

Build secure tech tools and apps that work effectively

- Improved analysis and understanding of the needs of HRDs in their local context
- Localise for language
- Establish user-testing and feedback groups that represent the diversity of HRDs
- Be transparent about the weaknesses and functionality gaps of tech tools
- Diversify and decentralise the design and creation of secure tools
- Identify new sources of funding and investment

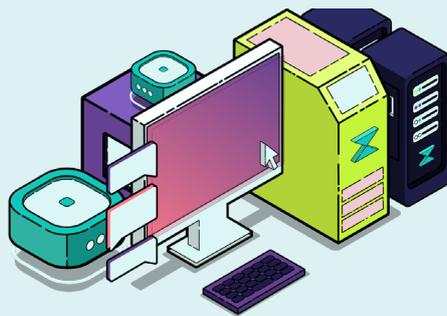
Improve digital security training and practice

- Real and relatable examples of digital threats and attacks are needed
- Digital security training programs must be localised and led by local trainers

- Incorporate tool practice within training programs
- Training programs must be designed to engage the target participants

Enhance organisation-level digital security practices

- Inform management and board members of civil society organisations about digital threats to their work
- Provide organisations with digital security procedures and policy templates
- Digital security compliance as a prerequisite for donor funding



You can find the full Ground Safe report, with region and country snapshots, more detailed data, and additional recommendations, hosted at <https://optf.ngo>

If you have questions, comments, or suggestions for future research, you can contact us at: **team@optf.ngo**

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