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Social media users say “OK” to blocking during times of unrest

MANY SRI LANKANS REMAINED UNAFFECTED BY THE SOCIAL MEDIA BLOCKS OF MARCH 2018, ACCORDING TO THE **AFTERACCESS** SURVEYS RECENTLY LAUNCHED IN SRI LANKA BY REGIONAL DIGITAL POLICY THINK-TANK, LIRNEASIA.

More than half (58%) of Sri Lankan social media users aged 15-65 thought that government blocking social media or internet during times of national unrest was the right thing to do. Only twenty-six percent (26%) thought otherwise while 16% did not express an opinion. These findings were part of the AfterAccess survey results recently released by regional digital policy think tank LIRNEasia.

Of Sri Lankan social media users who remembered the social media block of March 2018 (90%), the majority (64%) said it had no impact on their social media use. As many as 50% of these who were unaffected said they that didn't rely on social media to keep in touch with family and friends. Twenty-two percent (22%) of those who said they were unaffected simply used Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) to bypass the block.

A third (33%) of social media users who remembered the block said that it affected them. While the main effects were inability to access social media content (59%) and communicate with relatives (33%), only 5% said the block affected their business activities.

"The findings are indeed surprising, and in no way do we seek to justify the use of social media blocks," said lead researcher for the Asia components of the surveys and CEO of regional digital policy think tank LIRNEasia, Helani Galpaya. "The fact that citizens opted to connect through VPNs and other means raises the question of how effective these bans really are at quelling the spread of hate speech. People will find ways to communicate with their networks, so it does not necessarily mean that rumors and hate speech will be curtailed. It probably just means that they moved offline."

The findings are part of AfterAccess, an international-award-winning effort to collect robust demand-side data on access to and use of mobile phones, internet, social media and online platforms in the Global South.

The AfterAccess Asian report highlights key areas for development in ICT sectors of Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Cambodia and Nepal. In Sri Lanka, 2,017 households and individuals were surveyed from 100 Grama Niladhari divisions in all nine provinces. The sampling methodology was designed to ensure representation of the target group (population aged 15-65) at a national level

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with 95% confidence interval and a +/-3.3% margin of error. Data was collected between December 2018 and January 2019.

The methodology used in Sri Lanka is comparable to that used across all 23 survey countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The AfterAccess database is thus the most rigorous and comprehensive database on mobile phone and internet access and use in the Global South. The current data includes information collected via 38,005 face-to-face interviews of households and individuals. The data allows for disaggregation by gender, rural or urban setting and age among other factors.

This research was conducted with financial support from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada, the UK Government's Department for International Development (DFID), the Ford Foundation and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA).

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