

Battles of Imagination: Reclaiming Our Digital Future at DRAPAC26

Hyra Basit

As human rights defenders, technologists, and advocates gathered in Manila for the 2026 Digital Rights Asia-Pacific Assembly (DRAPAC26), a striking truth anchored our conversations from the very first plenary: the future of our region depends entirely on the stories we tell about technology and what people believe. We are locked in a 'battle of imagination'. If we allow state actors and big tech to dictate the narrative of what is secure, necessary, or inevitable, we cede the future of our civic spaces.

As a DRAPAC fellow, balancing the heavy realities of escalating digital surveillance with the inspiring regional solidarity, channeled through the Filipino spirit of bayanihan (collective cooperation), was my biggest takeaway. Here are my core reflections from the frontlines of the assembly.

The Spyware Crisis:

The sessions on targeted surveillance painted a sobering picture of how spyware is weaponized across South and Southeast Asia, often originating from Israel and adapting locally. In India and Bangladesh, we are seeing dangerous trends where service delivery apps are leveraged to spread surveillance tools. Compounding this, domestic courts frequently stall, greenlight these practices, or claim a "lack of evidence." A glimmer of hope came from Thailand, where a year-long litigation effort successfully identified 35 human rights defenders and academics targeted by Pegasus spyware. While NSO Group attempted to deflect by hiring top-tier local counsel, the fact that they had to show up at all marks a critical step forward. Furthermore, we are facing a shift where 'hack-for-hire' operations are proving cheaper and harder to trace than commercial spyware. The looming 'second stage' which includes using AI to execute attacks and systematically delete forensic evidence, threatens to make future intrusions entirely invisible. Having shared our experiences, it was clear that civil society organizations cannot fight this alone. There is an urgent, immediate need to develop and scale low-budget forensic tools so that grassroots groups can detect and prove cyberattacks without needing million-dollar budgets.

Child Protection Legislation and the Dangers of False Security:

One of the most nuanced debates centered on youth radicalization and the wave of new child protection laws sweeping the region. While the intent to protect minors is vital, the current execution is heavily flawed. As the issue of social media bans came up, the overwhelming opinion seemed to be that sweeping social media bans inherently backfire. They disproportionately isolate young girls from supportive networks, while youth simply move on to gaming platforms and alternative spaces anyway. They also act more as a mirage of safety; rigid legislative bans create a dangerous sense of false security for parents, masking the deeper need for critical thinking.

We cannot treat digital literacy as a one-off, check-the-box presentation. To protect the next generation, digital literacy must be a continuous, holistic, and human rights-based program.

Encouragingly, the youth are already adapting by crowdsourcing their own lists of shifting terms, emojis, and coded language to stay safe and navigate these spaces on their own terms. Bayanihan was of course a recurrent theme throughout the three days. If the threats are interconnected, our defenses must be too. Whether discussing the UN Cybercrime Convention (where 70+ signatories are currently drafting rules) or analyzing Google's amicus curiae brief in the El Salvador newsroom case, the solution always pointed back to collective infrastructure. We saw this practically in the digital security trainers' sessions, where tools like the Microsoft Digital Security Guide were analyzed. We don't need to reinvent the wheel; we need to share the wheels we have.

DRAPAC26 reminded us that while the state's tools are well-funded, our collective imagination is resilient. By investing in shared forensic resources, continuous rights-based digital education, and cross-border legal solidarity, the APAC digital rights movement is moving from a patchwork of isolated responses to a unified regional framework. The stories we tell next are the ones we build together.