

PERSPECTIVE

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Combating Fake News in Southeast Asia

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Favoured solutions by Southeast Asian governments and the tech industry are not having the desired effect in reducing disinformation, which by all accounts is a growing problem.
- Global tech giants like Facebook and Google need to increase their public take-downs of content by fake news syndicates and reduce financial incentives for actors to produce disinformation.
- Credible, independent media – including public service media – are key actors in countering ‘fake news’ in Southeast Asia, but need more funding and direction.
- Media literacy programmes and internet access remain important tools for democracy.

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INTRODUCTION

From governments to NGOs, to global platforms like Facebook and Google, from academics to journalists to policy makers, to young and old people in the global North and global South, almost everyone agrees that disinformation and ‘fake news’ is a growing problem. What they tend to disagree on is how to find solutions to this growing problem. Governments in Southeast Asia, for example, have often preferred to bring in specific regulations and laws to provide greater tools for police to arrest citizens who create and distribute material. These laws are, however, controversial and have been met with criticism from civil society groups and political opposition. Most notable was Malaysia’s 2018 ‘anti-fake news laws’ introduced by the previous Barisan Nasional government, but repealed by the new government led by Pakatan Harapan. New Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad argued: "When you have a law to prevent people from airing views, then we are afraid that the government itself may abuse it, as has happened in the past. We do not want any government, whether this or the next one, to abuse such a law"¹ In Indonesia, the highly controversial Electronic Transactions Law (UU ITE) was created in 2008 to address commentary online, and has been used increasingly to arrest citizens for creating or distributing hoax news. In the Freedom House 2016 ‘Freedom of the Net’ Report, it was argued that UU ITE “continues to represent a serious threat to internet freedom. Often resulting in pre-trial detention, charges facilitate retaliation for online expression, even in cases that never make it to court”² The police arrests during the 2019 election have been highly politicized, to suggest that arrests were made only against those who spread material against President Joko Widodo.

Global tech companies like Facebook, Google and Twitter have been slow to recognise the growing problem of disinformation and the damage that their platforms can have on a society’s pluralism, public sphere and democratic quality. In Southeast Asia, they have funded ‘fact-checking’ organisations whose role it is to counter fake news material – first by exposing the material as ‘hoax’ on their own websites, and second by establishing more direct links to platforms like Facebook in order to have the fake news content taken down. However, research on the role of fact-checkers suggests that they are having minimal impact in countering disinformation.³ As the *New York Times* described it, these (quite lowly-funded) fact-checking organisations in Southeast Asia are ‘feeling overrun’.⁴ Fact-checkers can take away the important work of journalists, and if the response time from platforms is too slow, the messages would have already been spread widely on social media and messenger platforms like WhatsApp. As such, social media companies “stand accused as using civil society collaborations as PR stunts to rehabilitate their image”.⁵

What then, is the solution to the growing problem of fake news? This paper argues for two immediate solutions required in Southeast Asia that go beyond stricter laws or platform-funded local fact-checkers. First, global platforms need to take more responsibility in administering ‘take-downs’ and identifying inauthentic sites. Second, credible spaces for independent media – including public service media – need a larger vision to be developed and to be more properly funded. The conclusion to this paper sets out longer-term directions for countering fake news as we move into the third decade of the twenty-first century.

PLATFORM ‘TAKE-DOWNS’

In 2019, Facebook and Twitter have seemingly trialled a new approach, which is to more transparently yet sporadically take down content deemed ‘inauthentic behaviour’. In early 2019, Facebook Inc took down hundreds of accounts, pages and groups in Indonesia linked to a group called ‘Saracen’. The accounts on both Instagram and Facebook, according to Facebook, taken down for using ‘fake accounts and frequently posted about local and political news including topics like upcoming elections, alleged election fraud, candidate views, and alleged misconduct of political figures’.⁶ Saracen members, who have spread hate speech against the president and other political figures, had already gained notoriety and were arrested two years earlier by the police.⁷

In mid-2019, Facebook took down 200 profiles, groups and pages of a key public relations and social media campaigner in the Philippines, Nic Gabunada, who was widely reported as being the key strategist behind President Duterte’s social media pages and campaigning. Unlike some other take-downs, here Facebook decided to directly name Gabunada in their press conference. Gabunada’s personal Facebook account was also taken down. In this case, Facebook only took action recently, whereas media organisations like *Rappler* had acted two years earlier in exposing trolls used to promote Duterte’s campaign and subsequent administration.

In early October in Indonesia, 42 Facebook pages and 34 Instagram accounts that were connected to the issue of growing hostilities in West Papua were taken down by Facebook Inc.⁸ Facebook named a company, InsightID, saying the network spent about 300,000 USD on Facebook advertisements paid for in rupiah, and was linked to a centre founded by Indonesian Vice-President Jusuf Kalla. The extensive social media operation of West Papuan ‘trolls’ was exposed a few weeks earlier by an investigation jointly done by the BBC data analytics researcher and researchers at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute.⁹

In these high-profile cases, it seems that the hard work of exposing fake news ‘factories’ and disinformation producers is first done by credible journalists and researchers, and Facebook and Twitter then respond, sometimes years later. More work needs to be done by platforms themselves to mitigate matters before they become a huge problem. The ability to detect the problem at that stage would be too late. In many cases this would mean social media platforms not accepting the money in the first place, as Twitter has recently decided to do with regard to political advertising.

Nevertheless, the public ‘take-downs’ and the naming and shaming of actors involved in creating these sites should be encouraged and expanded given that the problem of ‘inauthentic behaviour’ will continue to grow. It is worth noting that the creation of disinformation has been increasingly “amateurised”, involving not only public relations professionals but also university students. The identities of disinformation creators are also now more effectively camouflaged than before.

The general feeling from those in the PR industry, journalists, and academics who research disinformation is that Facebook and Twitter are far too slow to respond, while YouTube (owned by Google) is doing even less than others and needs to take more responsibility in the way in which viral videos rapidly spread disinformation through WhatsApp and Telegram in the region. Our previous study on disinformation in the Philippines found that

YouTube has become a cesspool of conspiracy theory and hyper-partisan news channels that use creative manoeuvres to avoid content policing.¹⁰ Given that platforms have not taken greater responsibility in reducing fake news ‘factories’, governments in Southeast Asia have more easily been able to justify the introduction of laws which regulate ‘fake news’.

CREDIBLE, INDEPENDENT MEDIA

By definition, the antithesis of ‘fake news’ is ‘truthful news’. While tech platform ‘take-downs’ of fake news remain the responsibility of private companies in Silicon Valley, there is still much that governments and industry in Southeast Asia can do to improve the information society – and ‘truthful news’ in their various countries. Countries that maintain trusted, independent news sources are more able to combat ‘fake news’, because their citizens are able to identify responsible, credible journalism from hyperpartisan disinformation. For example, in Australia, fake news is far less of a problem than in Southeast Asia. Disinformation spread via social media platforms did not play a dominant role in the 2019 Australian national election discourse. A Roy Morgan survey found that Australians trust their independent, national broadcaster the most, and trust Facebook the least.¹¹ This is not to say that Australia is a bastion of media independence and quality journalism. Indeed, Rupert Murdoch-owned print and cable television media have consistently campaigned for the Liberal party through hyperpartisan content. But disinformation producers and fake news ‘factory’ syndicates operating as profitable businesses via social media-driven disinformation are far less prevalent in Australia. Other examples of reliable public service broadcasting include NHK in Japan, and the BBC in the UK.

The rise of ‘fake news’ is a reflection of longer-term socio-political dysfunctions in a region with authoritarian legacies where citizens have learnt to distrust mainstream media and official sources as state propaganda. During Indonesia’s New Order authoritarian rule, for example, the practice of passing on information, rumours, and gossip became a heightened aspect of being an Indonesian citizen, as well as a way to understand the real story or to get extra information. A non-government source, particularly if it is someone that is trusted, became more believable. This practice continues in Southeast Asia today, and has simply moved online to personal WhatsApp communication, closed Facebook groups and micro-influencers on Instagram.

The solution to disinformation cannot be found in overly general anti-“fake news” laws promulgated in the region. More efforts should be spent on improving mainstream media and the journalistic quality in the region, building trust between the public and official news media. A trusted, independent public broadcast and news service is not a prominent fixture in Southeast Asia’s media landscape. Funding is a huge problem, of course. Much of Southeast Asia’s public media looks more like the United States model, where television station PBS is underfunded and ignored by viewers, and overpowered by privately owned cable news stations like Fox and CNN. As we have seen with the US 2016 election and disinformation production, the US is hardly a model worth following, yet when media executives in Southeast Asia discuss their vision for their company’s future and the trends in the industry, they often point to the US.

Indonesia's government-funded news sites, Bernama (print), TVRI (television) and RRI (radio) still maintain legacies of reporting from the New Order authoritarian regime. TVRI in particular continues to broadcast speeches of the president and is rarely critical of the government in power. As such, its ratings have fallen to a paltry 1.5% of audience share over the past ten years. TVRI remains full of "organisational problems, ranging from limited resources and a large, mainly unmotivated staff to an extensive, but mainly outdated technical infrastructure".¹² TVRI's annual budget in 2013 was US\$74 million. The same year, the average annual budget for a private television company was USD 172.8 million. In 2015, disbursement of budget funds to TVRI was delayed, and some staff did not receive salaries for a month.¹³ Understandably, younger Indonesians have grown up with little fondness for state-funded broadcasting, and are more accustomed to the entertaining television news provided by stations like TVOne and MetroTV, and news from social media platforms accessed via mobile phones.

Malaysia's government-funded media are currently at a time of great flux, but also great opportunity. The country's electoral authoritarian regime under the Barisan Nasional (1957-2018) kept a close watch on media practitioners and organisations through licensing and funding. The state-run television stations, such as news from station TV3, were propaganda services for the Barisan Nasional and were generally not allowed to broadcast critical commentaries. Newspapers like *Utusan Malaysia* and *The New Straits Times* had become UMNO party-pamphlets by the time the 2018 election came about. As such their circulation was rapidly dropping. In October 2019, without funding from the political apparatus of the state, *Utusan Malaysia* announced it would close down. Others are sure to follow. The challenge for the new government is to make sure that independent media are supported and grown in Malaysia in place of these outlets, and that their professional practice of journalists working for news media in Malaysia shifts from being 'pro-government' to more credible, trusted sources rather than mouthpieces of the state. If they are not grown financially and with a vision for independence, Malaysian citizens will quickly move to online and social media platforms as reliable sources of information. Facebook pages and WhatsApp groups – bastions of disinformation – will be seen as the most credible sources of information while mainstream media channels will be ignored or seen as pointless government propaganda.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that two immediate solutions to the growing problem of fake news are for global tech platforms to increase their take-downs of disinformation producers, and for Southeast Asian national governments to properly fund independent, critical public service media. However, combating the growing trend of disinformation production requires far more work. Philippines media scholar Jonathan Ong has argued for a 'process-driven approach' to regulation, in particular by requiring PR companies to declare their digital media spending during election time, and for greater self-regulation in the industry.¹⁴ In Indonesia's West Papua province, the government practiced the policy of slowing down the internet or even stopping internet access altogether during times of political unrest. This is not to be encouraged in the region more broadly, given that disabling information sources could lead to dangerous precedents for governments to control space, but also because citizens are safer in times of conflict and violence when they receive access to more information.

In this regard, increasing internet speeds and access in rural areas is more important than finding ways to curtail it. Millions of Southeast Asians are currently sitting ‘on’ the internet divide: they have *minimal* access to the internet, largely use WhatsApp and Facebook on their mobile phone, and not much else. They communicate largely with family and community groups on these platforms (particularly in areas where Facebook’s ‘free basics’ operates, and therefore place significant trust in those minimal sources of information. They are certainly not verifying controversial content by accessing fact-checking websites or google ‘reverse-image searches’. Increasing access to the wider range of sources that the internet can provide will ultimately be in the country’s best interest economically, and also improve the larger digital public sphere.

Of course, improving the broader digital public sphere requires more than internet access alone. Digital literacy programmes in educational institutions are important and need to be developed in Southeast Asia. One study in Indonesia found that the vast majority of digital literacy programmes occur only at university levels,¹⁵ with school level programs slow to adopt to the rapidly shifting digital life of ‘always online’ students who talk about their phone as being an extension of their body.¹⁶ In this regard, these programmes should be created by academic specialists and independent NGOs along with support from education ministries.

Finally, Southeast Asia needs to continue create, nurture and support online space for open, transparent, digital media that encourage this new generation of *prod-users* (citizens who regularly both consume *and* produce digital media), which enables the participatory nature of digital media to find solutions to society’s problems. Amongst Southeast Asian youths, issues of rising inequality, government corruption, environmental degradation and climate change are central issues on which digital media can have a positive impact rallying resistance towards and ultimately negating. There is much to gain in creating a digital public sphere as a force for change rather than a ‘weaponized’ instrument that needs to be blunted.

¹ <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2019/04/09/dr-m-malaysia-stands-firm-over-repeal-of-anti-fake-news-act#dVJ4Js4wW01QWRjy.99>

² <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2016/indonesia>

³ <https://www.newmandala.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Digital-Disinformation-2019-Midterms.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/09/business/facebook-philippines-rappler-fake-news.html>

⁵ <https://www.newmandala.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Digital-Disinformation-2019-Midterms.pdf>

⁶ <https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2019/01/taking-down-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-in-indonesia/>

⁷ <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/indonesian-police-uncover-fake-news-factory>

⁸ <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/teknologi/20191004180933-185-436840/facebook-dan-instagram-hapus-akun-terkait-papua-barat>

⁹ <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2019/09/03/twitter-analysis-identifying-a-pro-indonesian-propaganda-bot-network/>

¹⁰ <https://www.newmandala.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Digital-Disinformation-2019-Midterms.pdf>

¹¹ www.roymorgan.com/findings/7641-media-net-trust-june-2018-201806260239

¹² <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01292980802618098>

¹³ <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/publications/mapping-digital-media-indonesia>

¹⁴ <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/2020-philippines-disinformation>

¹⁵ <https://theconversation.com/researchers-find-indonesia-needs-more-digital-literacy-education-84570>

¹⁶ <https://www.insideindonesia.org/the-hoax-emergency>

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