



*POLICY BRIEF*

# Charting the Path for an Asia Pacific Regional Fact Checking Coalition

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# Charting the Path for an Asia Pacific Regional Fact Checking Coalition

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## 1. Introduction

The pollution of our digital information ecosystem with the proliferation of false and harmful information has become a global critical challenge. Information disorder<sup>3</sup> thrives during times of crisis or heavy political debate, such as during a pandemic or political election season. During these times, there is a void of credible information that is filled with a sea of false and misleading information. The void of credible and trustworthy information is where disinformation actors thrive. The proliferation of disinformation is organised and done purposefully to manipulate and shape public opinion for the benefit of certain political and economic elites. A study by the Oxford Internet Institute in 2021 found evidence of cyber troop social media activities in 81 countries<sup>4</sup>. Industrialised disinformation has increasingly become a lucrative business model in the age of digital media.

Additionally, the Internet and social media have become a main source of information for the public. In the beginning of 2023, data report<sup>5</sup> reported that Internet penetration has reached 75.67% (516.5 million) and social media use has reached 63.77% (435.31 million) of the

total population in the ASEAN region. The average time spent on the internet by the young generation aged 16 to 24 in Southeast Asia is 10 hours a day<sup>6</sup>.

Fact-checking has become a first-response strategy to combat the rampant dissemination of information disorder. A study by Porter and Wood (2021)<sup>7</sup> suggest that fact-checking does effectively increase the accuracy of facts and decrease belief towards misinformation. However, they also found that the initial propagation of misinformation can still potentially be harmful for the public, despite being fact-checked. One other limitation of fact-checking efforts is that the volume of mis-/disinformation outweighs the number of fact-checkers available. Furthermore, the continuously developing forms of mis-/disinformation, for example manipulation or creation using AI technologies, make it increasingly more challenging to respond quickly. Additionally, a national survey study by the Safer Internet Lab in October 2023<sup>8</sup> found that the Indonesian public 45.4% of respondents have never independently verified information and only 18.6% have used fact-checking articles as reference from official fact-checking websites.

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<sup>3</sup> Information disorder consists of misinformation, disinformation and malinformation, <https://firstdraftnews.org/long-form-article/understanding-information-disorder/>

<sup>4</sup> Bradshaw, S., Bailey, H., Howard, P. N. (2021). Industrialized Disinformation: 2020 Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation. *Computational Propaganda Research Project*. <https://demotech.oii.ox.ac.uk/research/posts/industrialized-disinformation/>

<sup>5</sup> Kemp, S. (2023). Posts Tagged Southeastern Asia. Datareportal. <https://datareportal.com/reports/tag/Southeastern+Asia>

<sup>6</sup> Kemp, S. (2021). The Social Media Habits of Young People in Southeast Asia. Datareportal. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-youth-in-south-east-asia-2021>

<sup>7</sup> Porter, E. and Wood, T. J. (2021). The global effectiveness of fact-checking: Evidence from simultaneous experiments in Argentina, Nigeria, South Africa, and the United Kingdom. *PNAS*, 118(37). 1-7.

<sup>8</sup> Fernandes, A., Krisetya, B. A., Fahrizal, D. N., Sumaktoyo, N., Eriyanto, Hadi, R. A. (2023). Rilis Survei Opini Publik: Proyeksi dan Mitigasi Gangguan Informasi Pemilu 2024. *The Safer Internet Lab*. <https://saferinternetlab.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/PPT-Rilis-Survei-Nasional.pdf>

The following policy brief aims to investigate how a regional fact-checking coalition can be realized and be a sustainable solution to help complement existing fact-checking initiatives.

## 2. Landscape of Fact Checking Efforts

The landscape of fact-checking involves a diverse variety of stakeholders. At its core are the fact-checkers, individuals actively dedicated to debunking information disorders. The Duke Reporter’s Lab (2016)<sup>9</sup> have compiled a database of fact-checking websites found globally, identifying 424 active sites up to when this report is written. In general, the database identifies two types of fact-checking sites; independent organizations and/or fact-checking media. The mushrooming of fact-checking efforts results in a further expansion of the types of actors involved, involving other entities beyond the fact-checking itself, such as supporting organizations like Internews, which offer aid to fact-checking groups, as well as the formation of coalitions such as the IFCN which lays out the guiding principles for fact-checking organizations to adhere to.

We suggest that fact-checking actors include a variety of types (Table 1).

**Table 1. Categories of fact-checking actors**

Category	Members	Description	Examples
Independent fact-checking organization	Individual	Most commonly is run by professional fact-checkers.	MAFINDO (Indonesia), VERA Files (Philippines), Japan Fact Check Center (Japan)
Media	Individual	There is a growing trend of media companies conducting their own fact-checking initiatives.	Liputan6 Cek Fakta (Indonesia)
University	Individual	Most commonly associated under the department of media studies or school of journalism. Many junior fact-checkers also start as journalism students who interns at fact-checking organizations	FactRakers (Philippines)
Government	Individual	In some cases, a government body reports on mis-/disinformation for the public	Ministry of Communication and Informatics (Indonesia)
Independent coalition (country-specific)	Coalition	This type of coalition commonly involves a variety of actors, for example including journalists, media associations and professional fact-checkers. Pooling resources and expertise of a variety of actors to conduct fact-checking together.	CekFakta (Indonesia), Cofact (Thailand)
Standard-setting network	Coalition/ Network	The IFCN and EFCSN establishes a standard of fact-checking and applies it to its network of fact-checkers	IFCN, EFCSN
Regional	Coalition	These efforts foster collaboration between fact-checkers in the region.	Africa Check, EDMO
Regional media	Coalition/ Network	In some cases, a global media agency such as AFP	Agence France-Presse, Fact Crescendo

<sup>9</sup> Duke Reporters’ Lab. (2016, October 17). Fact-checking Sites. Sanford School of Public Policy. <https://reporterslab.org/fact-checking/>

The roles we may see performed by actors in the landscape of fact-checking include:

### **1) Fact-checking**

This activity involves the primary task of verifying claims or information circulating within society. Fact-checkers investigate claims by tracing their sources, comparing them with credible sources, and seeking evidence to prove the truthfulness or the falseness of the claim.

### **2) Advocacy**

This activity includes promoting the importance of accurate information. Advocacy may also involve recommending policies that support fact-checking initiatives, raising awareness about the impact of misinformation, and encouraging media literacy and critical thinking skills among the public.

### **3) Research**

Research plays a crucial role in efforts to understand misinformation and develop strategies to address it. Research done can uncover patterns of misinformation, test the effectiveness of fact-checking methods, or explore new approaches to mitigate misinformation.

### **4) Actor-centric approach**

Fact-checking resources have been unable to keep up with the exponential spread and impact of hoaxes compared to fact-checking initiatives. Therefore, there are initiatives to focus on actors who produce and spread disinformation. For example, by identifying them, reporting them to platforms and authorities, and exposing them to the public. This approach highlights the need for collaborative efforts between fact-checking organizations, media outlets, tech companies, policymakers, and the public.

### **5) Standardization of efforts**

A number of fact-checking coalitions focus on developing guidelines and standardization of practices to ensure the quality of fact-checking

efforts across members. Standardization of efforts include defining best practices for transparency and accountability, and certifying fact-checking organizations that adhere to these standards. Standardization and certification help enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of fact-checking initiatives.

### **6) Funding**

Securing adequate funding enables fact-checking organizations to carry out their activities, expand their reach, and innovate in the fight against misinformation. Funding is essential for sustaining fact-checking efforts and supporting the infrastructure needed to combat misinformation effectively.

## **3. Recurring Issues of Fact-checking Initiatives and Suggested Approaches**

Ongoing fact-checking initiatives face a variety of challenges. This section dissects how challenges are faced by ongoing efforts and by respective actors active in combating against information disorder. Additionally, it offers possible recommendations to address these challenges effectively. The types of challenges faced are categorized based on the primary actors or issues involved. This helps to identify the specific areas where these challenges arise and allows for a more targeted approach in addressing them.

### **3.1 Fact-checking**

#### **Recurring Issue: Manpower**

Two main challenges concerning manpower exist in the realm of fact-checking actors. Firstly, the profession of fact-checking is relatively new, therefore, in some countries the sheer amount is still scarce. Moreover, fact-checking remains a niche area within the broader field of media and journalism. Additionally, there is a lack of diversity among fact-checkers for example a lack of

representation in specific local languages. Secondly, there is a disparity in skills amongst fact-checkers, this applies between those with and without journalism backgrounds, and within the fact-checking community as a whole.

### **Suggested Approach: Enhance professionalism and skills in fact-checking**

To address the first issue, there needs to be greater incentives for individuals to become professional fact-checkers. Recruitment of fact-checkers should also be done in a way to recruit a diverse range of fact checkers in order to ensure proper representation of various perspectives. To tackle the disparity in skills, there needs to be a clear breakdown of what set of skills are needed to produce quality fact-checking content. In the process of fact-checking, three important roles exist: 1) monitoring, 2) verification, and 3) dissemination. Fact-checkers should be divided according to these roles to efficiently detect, clarify information, and distribute their content to reach a wider audience. Moreover, a background in journalism provides a strong foundation for understanding information and recognizing potential biases or manipulations.

In order to ensure that the quality of fact-checking is fairness and unbiased, organizations need to firstly choose what to fact check. A fact-checking body should be neutral and nonpartisan, thus although fact-checkers have an open platform for people to submit their stories, it is important to wisely choose what to fact-check. Only fact check issues that are urgent and potentially harmful for the public at large, spread widely across multiple platforms, refrain from further disseminating or needlessly circulating low-level information disorder.

Additionally, there is an urgent need to strengthen monitoring skills with technological proficiency. For instance, utilizing tools to identify misinformation. Until now, fact-

checkers have heavily relied on reports from the public and independent investigations for monitoring efforts. However, the use of monitoring tools can help identify disinformation more comprehensively and make priorities in selecting which content to fact check based on the virality and impact. Integrating these technological tools into the fact-checking process can significantly enhance its effectiveness and efficiency in combating misinformation.

### **Recurring Issue: Ever-evolving strategies of information disorder**

The forms of information disorder continue to develop throughout time. There is a significant increase in more audio and visual-based information disorder such as manipulated or generated pictures and videos, as opposed to the traditional, text-based kinds. Additionally, we observe that the development of AI technologies in generating information could exacerbate this challenge by creating harmful content such as through manipulated images/videos and deepfakes. These emerging forms of content pose increasingly difficult obstacles to the process of fact-checking. Furthermore, AI technologies can be exploited to further expand the reach of information disorder effectively. We do see the potential of AI-generated threat growing, however, multiple of our sources suggest that even at this stage of "cheap fakes", where AI-generated or manipulated content may lack sophistication and believability, many members of the public are still being deceived.

### **Suggested Approach: Continuous advancement of skills**

To directly address the problem of the ever-evolving strategies of information disorder, it is important to hold periodical assessments of fact-checking efforts as well as in-depth research on the ongoing trends of disinformation and strategies of public opinion

manipulation. Furthermore, there needs to be regular collaboration between fact-checkers to develop their respective skills. There needs to be an emphasis on educating the public with MIL. Moreover, there should also be close collaboration with researchers and universities in the development of AI-technologies to combat information disorder.

### **3.2 Audience/Public**

#### **Recurring Issue: Low levels of public viewership of fact-checking results**

A national survey study by the Safer Internet Lab in October 2023<sup>10</sup> in Indonesia found that only 45.4% of respondents tend to verify the information they receive before further sharing it, furthermore, only 18.6% of respondents have visited fact-checking websites. This study suggests that there is a need for evaluation of current fact-checking efforts to be more accessible and reach a broader public. There needs to be improvements in how fact checked reports are made in order to attract public attention and gain their trust.

#### **Suggested Approach: Broadening Fact-checking dissemination across platforms and formats, as well as building trust through interactivity**

Fact-checking content should be made more accessible for a broader audience, this is possible through broadening dissemination through different platforms, as well as formatting the content to be more accessible for a wide range of audiences (such as people with disabilities) and to tailor fact-checking content to adapt to the format of the platform (for example short videos on TikTok or YouTube Shorts). Furthermore, in order to entice viewers, fact-checked content should be made interesting for the audience, such as in audio-visual format, rather than solely text-based. It is also imperative to fact-check issues

that are relevant for the public, to bridge the gaps of information that may emerge during periods lacking trustworthy information. Collaborations with platforms can be cultivated in order to provide space for the content to reach a broader public.

Additionally, it is also essential to build trust with the public by enhancing interactivity, not only to create content in various appealing formats, fact-checkers should consider providing feedback, such as interacting through comments, emojis, and other means. This is crucial to demonstrate that the fact-checking organization is present and actively involved in the community. Moreover, it is important to show that the fact-checking organization exists for the benefit of the community, beyond just performing the function of verifying information.

### **3.3 Platform**

#### **Recurring Issue: Ad hoc and limited scope of communication and collaboration with fact-checking organizations**

As part of their action to combat disinformation online, CSO fact-checkers actively bring up issues and concerns to platforms for action to be taken. However, in some cases, the existing relationship is more heavily one-sided, where fact-checkers have the more active role in monitoring and reporting information disorder to platforms.

#### **Suggested Approach: Harmonization and two-way collaboration, strategic partnership with platforms**

In order to ensure the effectiveness of fact-checking efforts, there should be harmonization between the work of platforms and fact-checking organizations. This should be achieved through enabling two-way

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<sup>10</sup> Fernandes, A., Krisetya, B. A., Fahrizal, D. N., Sumaktoyo, N., Eriyanto, Hadi, R. A. (2023). Rilis Survei Opini Publik: Proyeksi dan Mitigasi Gangguan Informasi Pemilu 2024. *The Safer Internet Lab*. <https://saferinternetlab.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/PPT-Rilis-Survei-Nasional.pdf>

collaboration, in which both actors proactively and regularly implement fact-checking results, as well as streamlined communication between the actors involved. For example, one way this can be done is for platforms to support ads for fact-checking content, pushing its visibility.

## 4. The Role of an Asia-Pacific Regional Fact-checking Coalition

This section proposes how the establishment of a regional fact checking coalition can be part of the greater solution to face the challenges of current efforts. As individual fact-checking efforts increasingly develop across the Asia Pacific, now is very timely for the establishment of a regional fact-checking coalition. A regional coalition will expansively widen the network reach of actors in the region. Enabling further collaborations and developments across a diverse range of active actors. We propose a set of preliminary main goals of a regional fact-checking coalition as follows:

### 4.1 Fostering a network of fact-checking actors in the region

The establishment of a regional coalition in the Asia Pacific will be a first in the region. Reflecting from the experience of coalitions in other regions like Europe and Africa, creating a regional coalition will facilitate mutual familiarity. Fostering familiarity will in turn pave the way for numerous benefits through collaborative efforts.

### 4.2 Establishing common fundamental principles

As highlighted before, fact-checking is done by a variety of actors, each with different roles, perspectives and relevant backgrounds. Establishing a shared understanding amongst

all stakeholders is essential to ensure that fact-checking efforts align with a unified vision and approach. Although we establish fundamental principles to ensure a shared understanding, individual organizations should retain their autonomy in conducting fact-checking in accordance with those principles, thereby facilitating decentralization.

Taking into account the existing fundamental principles of fact-checking highlighted by the IFCN<sup>11</sup>, EFCSN<sup>12</sup>, and ASEAN<sup>13</sup>, as well as thorough discussions with our sources, three fundamental principles integral to fact-checking are:

#### 1) Transparency

The principle of transparency emphasises openness and clarity throughout the fact-checking process. This includes the methodologies and reasoning behind fact-checking efforts and transparency in organisational operations, as well as information regarding funding sources and their utilisation. Transparency builds trust and encourages accountability. It is essential for maintaining the credibility of fact-checking initiatives.

#### 2) Accountability

The principle of accountability emphasises fact-checkers' responsibility to uphold high standards of accuracy, fairness, and neutrality in their work. Fact-checkers need to be held accountable for their assessments and conclusions. Their fact-checking process should be open and transparent so that it can be scrutinised and verified by the public. Accountability also builds trust and credibility.

#### 3) Independence

The principle of independence emphasises the autonomy and impartiality of independent fact-

<sup>11</sup> The Code of Principles, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1br2vpJKurfl0rxysT-PbtanUIpFciziJ/view>

<sup>12</sup> The European Code of Standards for Independent Fact-Checking Organisations, <https://efcsn.com/code-of-standards/>

<sup>13</sup> ASEAN Norms to empower, prevent and protect the citizen, [https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Guideline-on-Management-of-Government-Information\\_adopted.pdf](https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Guideline-on-Management-of-Government-Information_adopted.pdf)



checking organisations. It ensures that fact-checkers are free from bias or conflicts of interest that could compromise the integrity of their assessments. The principle of independence also applies to financial independence and editorial autonomy. Fact-checkers should be free to examine claims objectively without external interference or pressure.

As the identified underlying fundamental principles of fact-checking, coalition members should embody these principles as integral aspects of their identity as fact-checkers. These principles can be developed to serve as guiding criteria for determining the qualifications of members seeking to join the coalition.

#### **4.3 Extensive knowledge sharing**

Facilitating regular knowledge-sharing and skill development among fact-checkers is crucial for continuous improvement in their expertise. By aligning their efforts with a cohesive vision, stakeholders can collaborate and complement each other more efficiently and effectively towards combating information disorder. Knowledge-sharing will enable the efficient advancement of technology and skills in fact-checking by preventing duplication of efforts and the need to start from scratch. For instance, within a coalition, a diversity of experts will naturally accumulate, and knowledge exchange will help reduce the costs associated with technological advancements. Furthermore, knowledge-sharing will create a unified approach, especially in fighting against cross-border disinformation, where information disorder specific to sub-regions may circulate in various languages but exhibit consistent patterns of narrative and dissemination.

#### **4.4 Conduct database building and research**

Robust research is imperative to continuously develop efforts according to how things are advancing. Research in this context encompasses two components: 1) investigation

of current trends of information disorder and how it is experienced by society, and 2) periodic monitoring and assessing the effectiveness of fact-checkers themselves. Collaboration in data sharing and database building among coalition members is vital. The coalition must maintain a central repository, which can then be utilised to inform platform and government policies. Moreover, a regional coalition has the potential to empower the influence of fact-checkers when engaging with other stakeholders like governments or platforms due to its broader representation compared to individual organisations.

#### **4.5 Amplify the voice individuals**

A regional fact-checking coalition can help amplify and build a stronger presence to voice the challenges and garner support from other stakeholders such as social media platforms or governments. This united front of fact-checkers will have a bigger chance of implementing change.

#### **4.6 Develop and extend the reach of advocacy efforts**

Fact-checking actors possess expert knowledge regarding verifying information and combating information disorder. Given their proactive stance in defending information integrity, fact-checkers are ideally positioned to actively advocate and advance Media and Information Literacy (MIL) in society. Given that many fact-checking organisations are already active in advocacy efforts, exchanging and comparing material for advocacy efforts will allow a far more extensive reach of the public in the region. This will increase public awareness of the issue and build a common understanding among the public regarding information disorder and strategies to address it, cultivating a more informed and vigilant society.

#### **4.7 Collaborative efforts for sustainable funding opportunities**

It is imperative to secure funding through financial support from diverse sources to ensure the sustainable operation of the coalition. Considering the experiences of other coalitions, fundraising can be obtained from foundations, trusts, grants, corporate sponsors, and donations. Furthermore, an alternative source of income can be through becoming a service provider such as establishing a media and information literacy curriculum, providing training support, or offering consultancy services. Another potential avenue is to formalise the coalition's status as an organisation with the authority to publish content. This would entail obtaining official recognition and accreditation, which would grant the coalition the ability to disseminate fact-checked information through various media channels.



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