

## Event Report

### Regional and Transnational Responses Towards Disinformation in Southeast Asia

Jakarta, 14 November 2023

#### Background

Disinformation campaigns conducted by both foreign and domestic actors are posing a severe threat to democracies, human rights, and social cohesion across Southeast Asia. The rapid development of the internet has allowed disinformation and hoaxes in the region to become more easily widespread. While the sources of disinformation are multifaceted, the region currently lacks sufficient resilience. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is working to improve its systems for detecting and combating cross-border computational propaganda. While the ASEAN Ministerial Conference on Cybersecurity established the ASEAN Cybersecurity Coordination Committee in 2018, its mandate remains focused on critical infrastructure rather than the growing threat of computational propaganda.

There is an urgent need for enhanced multi-stakeholder coordination and discourse to develop rights-respecting responses to the complex crisis of disinformation in Southeast Asia. Regional early warning systems, platform accountability, legislative best practices, and civil society support all need strengthening in a comprehensive approach. This roundtable discussion aims to: (1) contribute to the formulation of actionable policy recommendations for responding to foreign state-sponsored and domestic computational propaganda, grounded in respect for human rights; (2) enable cross-country learning and coordination on detecting and analysing, influence operations, particularly surrounding elections; (3) increase transparency around government demands for content takedowns and platform responses; and (4) foster sustained multi-stakeholder discourse for collaborative solutions that avoid censorship pitfalls.

This writing serves as an event report and a summary of the discussions held during the Regional and Cross-Border Responses Towards Disinformation in Southeast Asia, which transpired on November 14, 2023, in Jakarta. The event featured insightful presentations from two distinguished speakers, offering a comprehensive baseline overview of the disinformation landscape within the region. It is crucial to note that the ensuing discussions strictly adhered to the Chatham House Rule, ensuring a candid and open exchange of ideas by maintaining the principle of no attribution. This approach fostered an environment conducive to the free

flow of information, enabling participants to delve into the intricacies of regional responses to disinformation without the constraint of direct attribution to specific individuals.

## Summary of Events

### Welcoming Remarks

#### Yose Rizal Damuri

Executive Director, Centre for Strategic and International Studies



Executive Director of CSIS, Yose Rizal Damuri, welcomed all the participants of the roundtable and provided a brief explanation about the Safer Internet Lab (SAIL) initiative which aims to identify policy gaps and points of interventions within the upstream part of the disinformation campaigns. Dr. Yose mentioned one common characteristic of misinformation and disinformation: it has a strong nature of cross-border aspect in it. Disinformation could be easily produced in one country and distributed across the region. Therefore, considering the cross-border nature of the issue, disinformation needs to be taken seriously with appropriate regional arrangements and measures.

## Opening Remarks

### Nursodik Gunarjo

Director of Media Management, Ministry of Communications and Informatics

Director of Media Management at the Ministry of Communications and Informatics, **Nursodik Gunarjo**, explained the priorities undertaken by Indonesia during its ASEAN chairmanship this year, with particular emphasis on addressing the issue of fake news and disinformation. He reflected on the Indonesian experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, where misleading and false information regarding the pandemic was spread across the globe, internationally and domestically. He underscored that fake news and disinformation have become a global major issue. Since 2017, ASEAN has taken various strategies and measures to counter the rise of disinformation by educating the public on digital literacy, and addressing fake news and misinformation through the establishment of frameworks and guidelines.

Nursodik Gunarjo mentioned that under Indonesia's Chairmanship of ASEAN 2023, the Guideline on Management of Government Information in Combatting Fake News and Disinformation in the Media was endorsed. It sought to provide a framework on how governments can respond to false or misleading information that is being disseminated in the media or on social media platforms; to establish standards and good practices for government information officers; to promote accuracy and reliability, improving transparency and accountability in government communications; to improve coordination and collaboration between government agencies, especially during times of crisis or emergency; and to ensure that government communications are transparent and accountable. This guideline project is implemented by the Ministry of Communication and Informatics of the Republic of Indonesia under the review of the ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting Responsible for Information from the Working Group on Information, Media, and Training (SOMRI WG-IMT).

## Opening Remarks

### Monica Ari Wijayanti

Deputy Director at the Directorate of ASEAN Socio-Cultural Cooperation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs

**Monica Ari Wijayanti** began her opening remarks by mentioning the increasing amount of internet users globally, where most of them rely on online news and social media to keep themselves updated with the latest news. These shifts posed challenges, including the much-accelerated rate of misinformation, disinformation, and even hate speech. Referring to Nursodik's previous explanation of the steps taken by ASEAN, Monica also added to that by mentioning that since 2017, the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Pillar under the ASEAN SOMRI has been consistently making concrete efforts to tackle disinformation issues, starting with ASEAN Ministers Responsible for Information (AMRI), roundtable discussion on fake news and communicating the right information, and have since adopted several key documents such as the Framework and Joint Declaration to Minimize the Harmful Effects of Fake News in 2018, Core Values on Digital Literacy for ASEAN in 2018, and Joint Statement of the ASEAN Ministers Responsible for Information to Minimize the Negative Effects of Coronavirus Disease in 2019.

However, amidst these achievements, she acknowledged the stark reality of the digital divide. Not all citizens in ASEAN have equal access to this transformative force, with disparities in internet usage and access to technology persisting across rural and urban areas. Looking beyond 2025, ASEAN must chart the course for more effective and innovative responses to secure the future of ASEAN and its people. She mentioned that promoting media and information literacy, strengthening fact-check networks, and multi-stakeholder collaboration are among the priorities that need to be done together.

## Overview of the Safer Internet Lab (SAIL) Project

### Beltsazar Krisetya

Researcher at the Department of Politics and Social Change, CSIS

**Beltsazar Krisetya** provided explanations of the overall SAIL project, the national study findings of the initiative, and its plans going forward. In its first year, SAIL has managed to align its directives and interests with Google, a tech company that shares similar concerns regarding the spread of disinformation. Next year, SAIL is also looking to expand its

partnership with other regional bodies and other regional entities as well. In the past year, SAIL has conducted three different research on disinformation which focuses on (1) actors and perpetrators of disinformation campaigns, (2) users of disinformation campaigns, and (3) how platforms can come up with a co-regulation and co-governance solution of all parties' concerns, government, regional organisations, tech platform, and civil society.

### **Presentation on the steps taken by ASEAN in addressing disinformation in Southeast Asia**

#### **Jonathan Tan Ghee Tiong**

Head of Culture & Information Division at the Sustainable Development Directorate of the ASEAN Secretariat



**Jonathan Tan** began his presentation by sharing the key observations that he has made on the trends of information and its consumption. He noted that there is a condition of information overload worldwide, but only 0.5% of the digital data generated was being analysed. This backdrop allows for the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation. In addition, the use of social media and the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) have been reshaping the information landscape.

Jonathan Tan mentioned that fact-checking has become a challenge in countering disinformation in Southeast Asia. One of the issues at hand is the rising use of AI to create



deep fakes, which has now become a formidable challenge as the internet traffic landscape is visual-oriented. Several ASEAN member states have established their own fact-checking agencies, however, their operational sustainability remains a question. Moreover, he argued that with the rapid technology development, including AI, fact-checking efforts are insufficient in countering fake news, and more upstream efforts are needed.

The regional body ASEAN has taken several initiatives since 2017 which include roundtable discussions, the establishment of declarations and frameworks, as well as the creation of the ASEAN Task Force on Fake News (TFFN) in 2019. With the heightened spread of fake news throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, ASEAN established the ASEAN Task Force on Fake News in 2022. The 16<sup>th</sup> AMRI also produced the Da Nang Declaration, which highlights the need for ASEAN to develop literacy in all its forms. In addition, Jonathan Tan also underscored the value of quality journalism where the media sector must strengthen its capacity in local and community reporting to allow for enhancement in its role to limit the harmful effects of fake news.

### **Presentation on the Philippines' experience in addressing disinformation in the country**

#### **Genalyn Macalinao**

Department of Information, Communications, and Technology of the Philippines



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[saferinternetlab.org](https://saferinternetlab.org)



[secretariat@saferinternetlab.org](mailto:secretariat@saferinternetlab.org)



**Pakarti Centre Building**

Jl. Tanah Abang III No. 23 - 27  
Central Jakarta, DKI Jakarta 10160

**Genalyn Macalinao** shared her insights about the approaches taken by the Philippines in combatting disinformation. Among them is the creation of a task force called Kontra Fake News which is tasked to go after the spread of fake news during the 2022 Philippines presidential election, and the establishment of regulatory measures such as the 2012 Cybercrime Prevention Act, 2020 Anti-Terrorism Act, and Republic Act 11469. The Philippines government also collaborates with tech companies and major social media platforms to address disinformation on the digital landscape.

In a dedicated effort to combat disinformation and address the pervasive issue of "fake news" in the digital sphere, in August 2023, the Department of Education established the Media and Information Literacy (MIL) Program, which seamlessly integrates into the formal education curriculum. By doing so, it aims to enhance students' critical thinking and digital literacy skills, providing them with the tools necessary to navigate the complexities of the digital landscape responsibly and foster a more informed and media-literate society in the long run. Moreover, the campaign extends beyond the classroom, encompassing community-based training sessions and family-oriented programs, emphasising a holistic approach to media literacy. This multifaceted strategy underscores the government's determination to build a resilient society capable of discerning and countering disinformation effectively.

## Discussion

### All participants

The roundtable discussion on “Formulating Regional and Transnational Responses towards Disinformation in Southeast Asia” was attended by 18 participants (F:8, M:10) from various institutions including fact-checking civil societies organisations, think tanks, universities, Indonesian ministries, global online information platforms and regional institutions. The discussion was held with the Chatham House Rules, where participants shared their insights on the topic anonymously from various points of view. The attendees are asked how to better address disinformation in the region in their respective knowledge and roles, and to share their experiences and insights in countering disinformation.

There is a suggestion to impose tighter regulations on social media and fake news, using a top-down model. The Southeast Asian country that implements very strict social media regulation is Vietnam that introduced a 24-h take-down policy in 2022 and the region may

learn from its experience going forward. Another type of cooperation suggested is formalising ties between the government and influencers or Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) on social media platforms, where the KOLs should submit certain information to the government if they have more than 10,000 followers online, as well as sharing government-approved information to their followers.



In the region, there is an increasing trend of identity politics influencing the information landscape in social media platforms. Such situations escalate in frequency and reach around the time of political elections. There is an example of a rising social media platform, which has become influential and widely used closer to election, for example TikTok was popular leading to the 2022 Malaysian general elections, on which platform disinformation has been found and called for racial disharmony leading to riots. In responding to the issue, TikTok has been engaging closely with the Malaysian government and civil societies as to managing the uptick of disinformation and identity sentiments. There is a suggestion for Southeast Asian



governments to impose more stringent standards on transparency reports from digital platforms to identify whether the measures taken by the platforms have been effective.

The discussion resumed to raise the point that social media platforms operate differently in one country to another based on the country's respective laws and regulations. It was mentioned that there are several challenges faced by online social media platforms in controlling the spread of malicious content. Those challenges include (1) moderating content becomes harder as the volume uploaded in the platform increases, (2) varieties of local languages and cultures in Southeast Asia pose identifying violators of community guidelines –that are often using English and global norms as a reference– more difficult, (3) government pressures towards the platform changes with political dynamics, and (4) users understanding of the platform's guidelines varies between demographics.

There was a concern that social media platforms are treating the users and governments only as a market. With this approach, therefore, there is a perceived lack of willingness from the social media platforms to change their policies without pressure from the market. This situation is especially true when social media platforms are competing amongst themselves to gain profit from the market. To address this concern, it was recommended that stakeholders in the region work together in a holistic approach with concerted manners, not only addressing literacy, or fact-checking, but everything altogether.

Peace and mediation processes in Southeast Asia can be disturbed by disinformation and one of the recommendations raised is by working with political parties to identify and change problematic uses of social media among themselves. As important actors in elections, political parties' behaviours formulate election norms and acceptable codes of conduct, which in the wider sense influence national and regional peace.

Legislation is critical in confronting misinformation. Adopting comprehensive legislation that particularly target the transmission of false information provides a legal basis for holding malicious actors accountable. Furthermore, regulatory measures might incentivise digital platforms and media outlets to implement stricter content moderation procedures and fact-checking processes, therefore encouraging responsible information transmission. However, creating effective law requires striking the correct balance between combating disinformation and preserving free speech. A lesson learned from Singapore was raised on the well-known legislation of the 2019 Protection for Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act

(POFMA). It enables authorities to tackle the spread of fake news or false information. The term “POFMA-ed” has become popular in the country to describe the case in which someone is caught spreading false statements or facts across the internet by the authorities. While this regulation was perceived beneficial during the COVID-19 pandemic in combating fake news and disinformation, the public perception towards this legislation grew negative during the 2020 Singapore general election as it was used to POFMA-ed those who were of the opposition. This raised a concern over the impartiality of fact-checking and the sentiment felt regionally. On this point, there was even a question raised, “Who are checking the fact-checking agencies?”.

Concern over fact-checking was addressed by several lesson-learned examples from the region. In Indonesia, a community of fact-checkers is self-regulated by relying on its reputation and having valid data as the reference of information. Meanwhile, governments in Southeast Asia also posted clarifications on disinformation spread in their country on their official websites. An example was raised in regards to the world’s largest crowdsourced online encyclopedia Wikimedia on mechanism of “decentralised multistakeholder approach”. The approach designed to address malintent edits and disinformation shared on online platforms was verification done by teams of thousands of human reviewers assisted by AI models to identify disinformation threats. However, this approach may be difficult to implement in Southeast Asia due to the many platforms that exist in countries in the region.

Concerns of online platforms and fact-checking organisations propelled the recommendation that ASEAN should have policies or regulations that enable the request of platforms and institutions transparency in terms of their business and ownership models. Additionally, it was perceived as important that the region incorporate multi-stakeholders approach that includes active engagement of civil society organisations in shaping national and regional regulations and norms.

There is no single answer or solution as to how the region could create a regulatory framework to control the spread of disinformation online, as there are many actors and many approaches that can be taken to address the issue. Hence, a collaborative approach is suggested to be taken. There is a recommendation that in order to formulate a regional response, the perception of social media platforms, governments, political parties and other stakeholders in the region should be identified, acknowledged and taken into account.

As societal digital literacy is perceived as a crucial issue, it is suggested that addressing disinformation also includes an educational approach, including by working with the Association of Southeast Asian Teacher Education Network (AsTEN) to integrate and promote media literacy programs across the curricula of high school, college, and university. As the challenges vary from one country to another, disinformation programs or toolkits should be country-customised based on the country's respective working systems and approaches. There was a recommendation for the regional study to look into and collaborate with Digital Quotient (DQ) Institute that is working on establishing worldwide standards for digital intelligence that assures the safety, empowerment, and well-being of people, organisations, and countries in the digital era.

A recommendation is also proposed to maintain integrity and foster quality journalism. A recent study on public trust towards the media is declining across the globe and only very few Southeast Asian countries have more than 50% of its population saying that they generally trust what they read on the media. On the other hand, the public's trust in the media is crucial in understanding information and distinguishing between fake and credible news. As the integrity of journalists and quality of journalism hold a significant place in the spread of disinformation, they recommended that trust towards media should be explicitly measured periodically to help the region combat disinformation and misinformation.

There was a concern about the information limitation and internet shutdown done by the government in the region. An example includes internet throttling in 2019 Papua to prevent chaos or conflict that may arise from the spread of disinformation but may pose dangerous risks in the sense that the shutdown of the internet deliberately prevents fact-checkers from accessing the information and disinformation that were distributed around the region. Once the shutdown is lifted, fact-checkers will be overwhelmed with the sudden flow of information. They also noted that disinformation is not only enabled by actors with malicious intent to manipulate the public but also by the absence of information.

There was a growing concern regarding digital rights in Southeast Asia over how the government is using disinformation law to pressure journalists and fact-checkers. As such, the region should not only rely on regulatory measures to combat disinformation in the region, but also recommend to (1) reframing the categorization of disinformation as harmful content instead of illegal content, and (2) engaging with digital platforms and encourage the shift of perception in labeling disinformation as harmful content instead of the illegal one to avoid

bureaucratic issues in identifying the legality of the content, considering that national and international guidelines about what is considered illegal may be different. The protection of press freedom is also regarded as an essential part of combatting disinformation in the region.

Many transnational development and civil society organisations in the region have worked in the field to counter misinformation and disinformation by conducting capacity-building initiatives such as training and group discussions for youths, disabled communities, transgenders, and other vulnerable groups. They usually work in collaboration with national and local fact-checking institutions. In their work, it was observed that public awareness in countering disinformation is important and can be bolstered by strong engagements with influential actors, which in traditional society include religious figures and local community leaders.

There was a recommendation to conduct studies to monitor the landscape of disinformation in the region because research results are beneficial in formulating the right policy. An example of research undertaken by the ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation on the use and impact of ICT on peace, reconciliation, conflict, and conflict management in the region includes the proliferation of fake news on social media. From the study, three recommendations are proposed: (1) policymakers should understand how digital governance and social harmony is bound to each other and how the supply chain works in the modus operandi of disinformation campaigns, (2) ASEAN should come up with common norms in countering disinformation, and (3) governments should encourage and allow CSOs and ordinary citizens to participate in combatting disinformation.

Closing the discussion, a recommendation was made regarding the digital platforms business model as there are concerns about the incentivisation of people's consumption of social media, or the “attention economy”, which rewards content that attracts popularity and viewers. This was considered as a loophole that needs to be addressed considering that those who benefit from creating disinformation can incentivize fake news and disinformation. Therefore, the region needs to come up with common norms or joint declarations with the platforms to agree on a common denominator to ensure the safety of the digital ecosystem. As a consensus, the meeting also agreed that there is a need for digital literacy to prevent more victims of disinformation and education is one of the means to achieve it.