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Foreign, Commonwealth
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BCSMF briefing paper

Defending election integrity from disinformation in Southeast Asia

March 2024

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In November 2023, the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) co-hosted the [6th Bali Civil Society and Media Forum](#) (BCSMF) with the [Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#) and other partners as well as the inaugural [Democracy Action Partnership](#) (DAP). This briefing paper expands on the insights and recommendations exchanged during the BCSMF working group on defending election integrity from disinformation as well as discussions around the harms of gendered disinformation during DAP's [violence against women in politics](#) workshop. Over 200 civil society and media reformers from across the Southeast Asia region and beyond participated in the two forums.

This thematic focus aligns with [WFD's works on elections](#), which focus on facilitating incremental changes that support improvements not just ahead of a looming poll, but across multiple election cycles. [WFD's electoral integrity approach](#) uses critical junctures across the election cycle and opportunities to explore participatory inclusion, media and social media influence, and civic engagement by monitoring and assessing ongoing events to contextualise emerging trends and challenges, and their potential impacts on electoral integrity.

This briefing paper presents eight recommendations to strengthen current measures against disinformation based on the discussions that took place during BCSMF and DAP. Overall, the analyses put forth by the authors of this briefing paper point towards the need for an open, transparent, and inclusive multi-stakeholder regional approach to combating disinformation and restoring public trust in elections and democracy in Southeast Asia.

The topography of disinformation in Southeast Asia

Disinformation thrives amid contentious debates on specific issues. It could lead to an overwhelming influx of information that blurs the line between what is trustworthy and what is not. This is particularly evident during times of political debates and processes, in which disinformation has become a powerful tool for propagating messages and setting political agendas. In Southeast Asia, disinformation campaigns have strategically influenced electoral processes and swayed public opinion.

The industrialisation of disinformation has become a lucrative business model backed by political and economic actors seeking to shape public opinion for their own benefit. An Oxford Internet Institute report found evidence of cyber troop activity in 81 countries in 2020, highlighting the global scale of this issue. The authors of this report defined "cyber troops" as government, military, or political party actors who manipulate public opinions on social media in another report published in 2017. In Indonesia, the cyber troop industry is comprised of online buzzers, influencers, and coordinators—each with their respective roles in the business—to disseminate manipulative narratives. Similar tactics have been observed in other Southeast Asian countries—such as the "trolls" in the Philippines and "influence operations" in Thailand.

Meanwhile, the media industry is still adapting to the new landscape of the business. The rise of "click-driven" advertising revenue model, for example, poses a significant challenge to journalistic code of ethics as it tends to compromise the quality and trustworthiness of media content in the pursuit of profit. Consolidated ownership of media companies among elites with competing political and economic agendas further exacerbates the spread of disinformation.

The impact of disinformation during elections is multifaceted and detrimental to society. Ahead of the 2024 Indonesian elections, a Safer Internet Lab survey in September 2023 found that information disorder negatively impacts public trust in the integrity of elections, election management bodies, and overall support for democracy. This erosion of trust undermines democratic processes and weakens the foundation of democratic governance. The survey also revealed that political disinformation persists in public mind even years after being debunked. As disinformation often targets the most vulnerable populations, it also deepens polarisation among social groups.

Where current intervention falls short

Southeast Asia is well known for its diverse political, social, and cultural landscapes, which also presents a tremendous challenge in tackling disinformation. Each country faces unique challenges—from the exploitation of ethnic and religious divisions to the suppression of opposition voices that challenge the status quo. This heterogeneity makes it difficult to implement a one-size-fits-all approach to combating disinformation. In other words, strategies must be tailored to each country's specific needs and circumstances.

The involvement of state actors and political elites adds to the complexity of disinformation in the region. Governments have at times been accused of engaging in state-sponsored disinformation campaigns to maintain their grip on power and silence dissenting voices. The blurred lines between the state and the spread of false information pose a significant challenge to the promotion of transparency and accountability in the public sphere.

Despite counter-disinformation measures implemented by countries in Southeast Asia, current intervention often falls short in several key areas. Lack of a coordinated regional response, for instance, is a major shortcoming. While individual countries have taken steps to promote media literacy, moderate content, and tighten regulations, there is a need for greater collaboration and information sharing across the region. A coordinated regional approach would not only enable countries to pool resources, but also facilitate an exchange of best practices and the development of a more comprehensive strategy for tackling cross-border disinformation threats.

Another area where current intervention falls short is in addressing the root causes of disinformation. Many of the measures implemented to date tend to be reactionary in nature. This includes efforts such as fact-checking and content moderation. On the other hand, proactive strategies aimed at building resilience against false information has not gained much traction. Investment in long-term initiatives, such as education reform and promotion of media independence, is crucial for creating a more informed and discerning citizenry.

The effectiveness of current intervention is often hindered by the lack of transparency and accountability in the policies and actions of both governments and technological companies. Without clear guidelines and robust oversight, counter-disinformation measures are at risk of being misused to stifle legitimate speech and suppress dissent. Striking a balance between protecting freedom of expression and curbing the spread of false information remains a significant challenge for policymakers across Southeast Asia.

Improving current measures

1. Preventing the misuse and under-regulating of disinformation measures

Key actions
- ✓ Ensure the transparency and accountability of counter-disinformation measures to safeguard freedoms of speech and expression, such as by developing a grievance redress mechanism and public oversight model.
- ✓ Create an open and transparent participation opportunities for non-government actors to influence the design and implementation of counter-disinformation regulations.
- ✓ Monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of counter-disinformation measures and consistently adapt the regulations to respond to latest trends and development.

Regulators seeking to tackle disinformation often face a conundrum between under and over-regulation. On one side, there is a high public demand for governments to effectively safeguard the information ecosystem from false and harmful content. On the other side, excessive measures and insufficient oversight could lead to unaccountable practices that jeopardise individual rights to free speech and expression.

National governments and legislatures hold the power to develop laws on content moderation. Such regulations should ensure that there is a proper demarcation to the scope of authority that mandated institutions have in countering disinformation while providing capacity building support. In practice, these institutions must be able to balance between protecting the interests of the state, the public, and businesses proportionally to ensure accountability.

Continuous consultation with non-government stakeholders, such as civil society organisations, academic and research institutions, and the private sector, is a prerequisite to creating and implementing a balanced measure against disinformation. A more open and transparent civic engagement model is imperative if governments were to succeed in striking that balance. To do so, governments need to create public participation opportunities in policymaking that go beyond a tokenistic and performative level. Meanwhile, in addition to advocating for comprehensive and effective regulations, non-government actors could act as watchdogs that monitor the implementation of those regulations and propose reforms based on evidence of abuse in enforcement.

A similar inclusive approach is also necessary in the development and enforcement of regulations by non-government actors. This includes technological companies that operate social media platforms as well as professional associations in the media sector. Proactive steps to spearhead the formulation of recommendations, guidelines, codes of conduct, non-binding resolutions, and standards by these actors would complement legal measures and help governments to adapt to the constantly changing topography of disinformation.

2. Institutionalising multi-stakeholder collaboration

> **Key actions**
> - ✓ Establish a regional platform to foster collaboration between stakeholders for the purposes of knowledge sharing and exchanging best practices.
> - ✓ This regional collaboration platform must be multi-stakeholder and has a clear mandate to coordinate and undertake collective action that amplifies counter-disinformation measures beyond the domestic context of a particular country.

This intervention is aimed at creating a shared understanding and facilitating an exchange of ideas and experiences to effectively combat disinformation through a sustainable platform. This platform could take many different forms—forums, coalitions, association, and so on, it is important that it is designed to enable a wide range of stakeholders to share and learn from best practices, collaborate, coordinate, and act jointly to tackle disinformation.

In the status quo, there are several existing platforms that facilitate collaboration among stakeholders, but mostly at a domestic level. Given the cross-border spread and impact of disinformation, it is crucial that stakeholders foster a sustainable, continuous collaboration model at the regional level to ensure that actions against disinformation are coordinated, comprehensive, and effective.

There is a wide range of civil society organisations that deal with issues within and related to the digital information ecosystem. Collaboration among these organisations, especially where there are overlapping missions and objectives, could strengthen the collective positionality of civil society actors while broadening access to advanced tools and intensifying knowledge sharing across the region. Contribution from governments and the private sector to institutionalise the multi-stakeholder collaboration platform could help ensure its longer-term sustainability.

3. Establishing a regional fact-checking coalition

Key actions
- ✓ Establish a regional fact-checking coalition to improve fact-checking expertise and facilitate a cross-border consolidation of resources and knowledge.
- ✓ Conduct regular evaluation of fact-checking effectiveness to adapt with the emerging trends and challenges of disinformation.

The evolving complexities of disinformation, especially with the rise of Artificial Intelligence technologies, demand fact-checking actors to continuously build their capacity to adapt to emerging trends and challenges. A regional coalition of such initiatives could help facilitate an exchange of expertise among these key actors and strengthen their ability to counter disinformation effectively.

At present, there are distinct types of fact-checking actors—from independent civil society groups, media outlets, academic experts, to government-sanctioned taskforces. Collaboration among these actors through a regional coalition could lead to greater impact as they share resources, exchange knowledge and expertise, and support one another in improving the effectiveness of fact-checking initiatives.

Meanwhile, governments can support the establishment of a regional coalition of fact-checkers in Southeast Asia, especially in terms of providing adequate resources and recognising the role of the coalition in leading the fight against disinformation. However, governments need to tread carefully in doing so to avoid interference with the independence and impartiality of fact-checking initiatives. A regional coalition could also help technological companies, who plays a vital role in this issue, in intensifying collaboration with fact-checking actors across the region. By engaging with a coalition, as opposed to individual actors, technological companies could streamline the procedure of flagging false and harmful content on their platforms and engage in an iterative consultation to continuously improve the effectiveness of their community guidelines in safeguarding citizens from disinformation.

4. Promoting transparency and accountability in social media governance

Key actions
- ✓ Increase disclosure requirements for content moderation and advertising practices of technological companies.
- ✓ Establish a multi-stakeholder mechanism to oversee the governance of social media platforms involving government, private sector, and civil society representatives.
- ✓ Strengthen relevant regulations around freedom of information, digital rights, and open data to ensure the fulfilment of citizens' rights to information.

A multi-stakeholder approach to social media governance must be further developed to ensure a balance between self-regulation preferred by technological companies that operate digital platforms, legal measures enforced by government authorities, and public oversight spearheaded by civil society organisations. With each stakeholder bringing their unique capabilities and expertise, this approach could help improve the governance of the information environment by embedding the principles of transparency and accountability.

Governments can introduce regulations that incentivise technological companies to be more transparent and accountable. This could be done, for example, by establishing a multi-stakeholder oversight and advisory mechanism comprised of government, private sector, and civil society representatives that formulate recommendations for better policies and dispute resolution over social media content. The involvement of government representatives in such mechanism is essential to encourage compliance and assert sufficient authority.

Civil society organisations offer a wealth of expertise that could help safeguard digital platforms from disinformation and other harmful content. Those with expertise in digital rights and public accountability, for example, would be able to inform relevant authorities and technological companies of how their policies impact regular citizens. Meanwhile, those with expertise in freedom of information and open data could help direct resources towards research and fact-checking initiatives that keep citizens safe from disinformation without infringing on their rights to access information.

Social media platforms possess vast data sets (such as content circulation, virality, and advertising) that are not consistently disclosed to the public. Technological companies who operate these social media platforms should therefore increase the disclosure requirements related to their content moderation and advertising practices. A mandate from relevant authorities for social media platforms to provide detailed reports of their content moderation and advertising practices would enable greater oversight into the opaque governance of social media platforms that exacerbates the spread of political disinformation.

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5. Incorporating critical thinking in media and information literacy

Key actions
- ✓ Establish a shared understanding of media and information literacy programmes that embed critical thinking skills. A benchmarking exercise against existing practices in other countries could help stakeholders in designing inclusive curricula that respond to the unique needs and challenges of different population groups.
- ✓ Monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of media and information literacy programmes regularly to ensure that they are meeting the desired objectives.
- ✓ Continuously adapt media and information literacy education curricula based on the results of monitoring and evaluation to respond to emerging trends and challenges.

The primary goals of this intervention are to empower the public as responsible consumers and producers of digital information through the development of media and information literacy skills. This is aimed at embedding an inclusive and contextual media and information literacy programme into the education curricula while expanding its reach to all segments of the society across physical, social, economic, political, and cultural dimensions.

To do so, governments need to establish partnerships with experts who can develop comprehensive and contextual media and information literacy curricula and programmes. The experience of other countries, such as Finland for instance, could help governments in Southeast Asia to make sure that their media and information literacy programmes contribute to building societal resilience to disinformation.

Participation of stakeholders in the private sector, particularly technological companies, is equally important in the incorporation critical thinking skills through media and information literacy programmes. As operators of digital platforms, technological companies are currently responsible to moderate social media content. A more literate society would help these companies to better manage their platforms as the need for content moderation diminishes. As such, it is in their best interests to ensure that media and information literacy programmes are accessible and supported with sufficient financial and technical resources.

Meanwhile, civil society organisations could contribute to ensuring that the most vulnerable groups in society also have adequate access to media and information literacy programmes that are specifically tailored to their needs and circumstances. This includes social groups that normally lack access to formal education, such as persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, impoverished communities, refugees, and other minority groups.

6. Empowering the media ecosystem through profit-sharing

Key actions
- ✓ Introduce regulatory measures that incentivise the adoption of profit-sharing business model between media organisations and technological platforms.
- ✓ Research the costs and benefits associated with the profit-sharing business model in the media landscape based on practices in other countries and regions to build a strong evidence base.

In this intervention, some prominent stakeholders are responsible for establishing a healthy digital media ecosystem. This includes journalists, media organisations, and technological platforms. Journalists are responsible for reporting factual and credible information while adhering to professional and ethical standards. Media organisations are responsible for the production and dissemination of information to the public. Technological platforms provide the infrastructure and space for wider distribution of information in the online space.

In the age of digital media, collaboration between these three stakeholders is critical to the health of the larger information ecosystem. With the ever-increasing reliance on views and clicks on technological platforms to generate advertising revenue, media organisations are struggling to survive. A profit-sharing business model could incentivise the production of high-quality journalism and deter disinformation actors.

Governments could urge a widespread adoption of the profit-sharing business model through regulatory measures. These regulations could establish the benefits of doing so, such as ensuring fair compensation for content creators (including media organisations), incentivising high-quality journalism, and cultivating mutually beneficial partnerships between stakeholders. Effective implementation of these regulations could in turn address the systemic inequalities within the increasingly digital media landscape.

In practice, implementation of the profit-sharing business model would require a conducive media environment and information ecosystem. To do so, press councils across Southeast Asia need to foster collaboration with relevant stakeholders in the media sector, including journalists, media companies, technological platforms, and civil society organisations.

7. Expanding the evidence base for disinformation research and policymaking

Key actions
- ✓ Incentivise technological companies to enhance the transparency of digital platforms by disclosing key data sets to be used in disinformation research and policymaking.
- ✓ Establish adequate personal data protection measures to mitigate potential risks related to the release of social media data sets.

This intervention seeks to expand the sharing of data and information between technological companies, civil society organisations, and governments to strengthen the evidence base that informs research into the evolving trends of disinformation and the development of relevant counter-disinformation policies. To start with, technological companies could open public access to digital platforms data in three key areas: content moderation and use of algorithms, content engagement and impressions, and inauthentic behaviour.

First, greater transparency of content moderation and use of algorithms could help stakeholders to identify flaws, biases, and vulnerabilities in the systems employed by digital platforms. Second, access to the engagement and impressions metadata of content on digital platforms could help stakeholder understand the reach and impact of disinformation campaigns. Lastly, availability of coordinated inauthentic behaviour data could facilitate deeper investigation into the origins and tactics of disinformation campaigns. All of these could be possible only if technological companies are willing to disclose relevant data of their digital platforms for public interests and benefits.

Greater transparency and accountability of digital platforms would also allow governments to develop appropriate regulatory measures that consistently respond to the evolving trends and challenges of disinformation. However, this would require governments to first establish adequate personal data protection measures, which could be developed in consultation with civil society organisations and technological companies.

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8. Enabling a bottom-up approach to countering disinformation

Key actions
- ✓ Create a space for multi-stakeholder dialogues to agree on concrete actions and agendas that are contextual and relevant to the evolving needs and challenges of counter-disinformation efforts.
- ✓ Conduct periodic evaluation and monitoring of implemented actions.
- ✓ Secure financial resources to sustain impactful initiatives aimed at tackling disinformation.

Given the increasingly intersectional nature of disinformation, establishing forums for ongoing dialogue and coordination between stakeholders will be key to ensuring effective counter-disinformation measures. Dialogue and coordinated actions could empower communities to build resilience against deceptive and misleading narratives.

Governments could participate as an active dialogue partner alongside other stakeholders. These dialogues could bring together diverse perspectives and expertise to develop comprehensive strategies for addressing disinformation effectively. Where necessary, the government could engage these stakeholders in the process of drafting and revising regulations concerning disinformation.

Partnerships between technological companies and civil society partnerships can be fruitful in enacting change and developments that directly impact digital platforms. Financial support from these technological companies would also be vital to ensure that bottom-up approaches are effective. Civil society organisations and research institutions are also at the forefront of developing innovative approaches to fact-checking, media literacy training, and disinformation monitoring that match the needs of impacted communities.

To sustain the impact of meaningful counter-disinformation initiatives, funding should be targeted in ways that enable research-driven approaches. This includes support for projects that rigorously evaluate the effectiveness of different counter-disinformation strategies and intervention. Establishing clear frameworks for monitoring and evaluating the impact of funded initiatives will be crucial for building an evidence base of what works.

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Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) is the UK public body dedicated to supporting democracy around the world. Operating internationally, WFD works with parliaments, political parties, and civil society groups as well as on elections to help make political systems fairer, more inclusive and accountable.

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