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Disinformation, Hate speech and Incitement in Southeast Asia

Hate speech and disinformation, and its links to violence and atrocity, remain prevalent across Southeast Asia, most notably in areas where there is either the risk of conflict, or where conflict already exists. Recently, in Papua and West Papua, disinformation led to the deaths of many civilians when the fake news of a kidnapping went viral via social media, igniting tensions between Indigenous populations and minority groups living in the region, and Indonesia policing forces.[1]

To help combat the problem of fake news and disinformation, ASEAN held a two-day workshop in March 2023 to finalise a set of guidelines for ASEAN countries. The result is a document aimed at helping governments in the region to combat fake news and disinformation, stressing the need for multi-sector approaches "involving not only the information sector but also those in the fields of telecommunications, transnational crime, law, youths and education in order to protect the citizens of the ASEAN region."[2] The Guidelines will be officially launched at the June 2023 ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting Responsible for Information (SOMRI).

Over the past few years, there has been discussion about the use and misuse of deepfakes and AI in the promotion of violence, with global commentators talking about pros and cons to this recent phenomenon across many media outlets. In Asia and the Pacific, for example, deepfakes and AI have been a concern since the 2020 elections in India where fake political campaigns circulated widely, hoping to influence election results. Yet this deepfake and AI technology is now being merged with GPT (or Chat GPT) technology that can "amplify the work of malign actors to produce even more convincing media artifacts for hostile intent, further destabilizing societal trust and credibility."[3] This poses a very new challenge that is yet to be understood and regulated by legislators and media companies alike.

Recommendations

Southeast Asian governments should:
1. Realise the importance of direct fake news, hate speech and danger speech legislation, and implement this legislation in its civil and penal codes.
2. Work to recognise the difficulties associated with Chat GPT or GPT, when combined with deepfake and AI technology.
3. Work with the private sector, including social media sites and internet companies more broadly, to implement a range of generic policy measures across the region, rather than on a state-by-state basis.
4. Work with CSOs and NGOs at large-scale educational programmes for all ages and all users.
5. Learn from and work with the European Union and the European Council, and their partners, to implement measures to curb hate speech and danger speech in Southeast Asia.

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[1] Jenny Munro, "'Tricked by a Hoax'," *Inside Indonesia*, March 22, 2023, https://www.insideindonesia.org/tricked-by-a-hoax

[2] Angely Mercado, "Combating Fake News: The ASEAN Way," *Philippine Information Agency*, March 8, 2023, https://pia.gov.ph/features/2023/03/08/combating-fake-news-the-asean-way

[3] Dymples Leong, "Deepfakes and Disinformation Pose a Growing Threat in Asia," *Diplomat*, March 11, 2023, https://thediplomat.com/2023/03/deepfakes-and-disinformation-pose-a-growing-threat-in-asia/