

Disinformation, Hate speech and Incitement in Southeast Asia

While instances of hate speech and disinformation are present across the region, as tabulated by the CSIS Hate Speech Dashboard that looks at Indonesia's ongoing levels of hate speech on Twitter, and via other sources from across Southeast Asia,¹ since the outbreak of hostility in Gaza between Israel and Hamas hate speech and disinformation has spread rapidly, especially on social media platform X. In China, hate speech aimed at both Jews and Palestinians is flourishing on Weibo, with Chinese officials seemingly reluctant to remove the content.² As investigated by CNA who focused on content posted in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, there has been a growing and steady stream of disinformation and misinformation being uploaded to TikTok about the conflict, and the investigation suggests that this conflict "takes on a different, perhaps more pernicious dimension in Southeast Asia" as compared to the conflict in the Ukraine.³ This is largely due to the region's Muslim population identifying with Palestinians, with one Indonesian poster suggesting that "Indonesians were supporting the Palestinians not only because of their shared religion, but because they feel 'Israel's retaliatory actions that (could) lead to genocide should be condemned'."⁴ Across the region there are further reports of people aligning with either Israel or Palestinians due to their own government's leanings. For example, in Thailand there has been a rise in anti-Muslim sentiment due to the government's support of Israel and the many Thai lives lost when Hamas murdered over a thousand people in Israel.⁵ Contrastingly, in Indonesia there is support for Palestinians due to long-standing political and humanitarian interests in Gaza.⁶

While not directly associated with the risk of incitement due to hate speech, but more a consideration for the future, AI is being considered by ASEAN states as a means of building business opportunity without thinking through what this technology might mean in terms of human rights; that is, via an ASEAN "AI Guide" that recommend policies that are "voluntary and are meant to guide domestic regulation" but are at the discrepancy of each individual nation and where focus is on economic benefit.⁷ As reported, "the guide warns of the risks of AI being used for misinformation, 'deepfakes', and impersonation, but leaves it to individual countries to work out the best way to respond."⁸ This has come in response to EU ministers who have called for Southeast Asia to adopt the EU's AI policies that, to date, have been largely ignored. While not wanting "full harmonisation" of the EU's policies, the Dutch Minister for Digitalisation is hoping that the two regions "come together on the basic principles of human rights," something largely lacking in the ASEAN guide.

Recommendations

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.

¹ Raksha Kumar, “‘Hate Speech Can Be Found on TikTok at Any Time. But its Frequency Spikes in Elections’,” *Reuters Institute*, August 21, 2023, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/news/hate-speech-can-be-found-tiktok-any-time-its-frequency-spikes-elections>

² Frederik Kelter, “Israel-Gaza War Fuels Online Anti-Semitism, Islamophobia in China,” *Al Jazeera*, November 4, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/11/4/israel-gaza-war-fuels-online-anti-semitism-islamophobia-in-china>

³ Louisa Tang and Aqil Haziq Mahmud, “IN FOCUS: How Fake News on Israel-Hamas Stokes Outrage, Hatred and ‘Potential for Violence’ on Southeast Asian TikTok,” CNA, November 4, 2023, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/israel-hamas-tiktok-misinformation-gaza-disinformation-palestinian-fake-news-falsehoods-3894006>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Daungyewa Utarasint, “Israel-Hamas war has awakened anti-Muslim hate in Thailand,” *Nikkei Asia*, November 1, 2023, https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/Israel-Hamas-war-has-awakened-anti-Muslim-hate-in-Thailand?utm_campaign=GL_opinion&utm_medium=email&utm_source=NA_newsletter&utm_content=article_link&del_type=6&pub_date=20231104093000&seq_num=4&si=29319

⁶ Eva Mazriea, “In Indonesia, Fake News About Israel-Hamas War Triggers Concern,” *VOA*, October 14, 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/in-indonesia-fake-news-about-israel-hamas-war-triggers-concern/7310668.html>

⁶ Sebastian Strangio, “Opening of Indonesian Holocaust Museum Met with Islamist Backlash,” *Diplomat*, February 4, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/02/opening-of-indonesian-holocaust-museum-met-with-islamist-backlash/>

⁷ Fanny Potkin and Supantha Mukherjee, “Exclusive: Southeast Asia Eyes Hands-off AI Rules, Defying EU Ambitions,” *Reuters*, October 12, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/technology/southeast-asia-eyes-hands-off-ai-rules-defying-eu-ambitions-2023-10-11/>

⁸ Ibid.