

# Becoming resilient to fight fake news

Asean members should act fast, alert one another to new forms of online disinformation, and share experiences

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Ten million Chinese migrant workers entering Indonesia, a long-haired male journalist portrayed as a female election volunteer for the governor of Jakarta, as well as uprisings of Buddhists and Muslims in Myanmar – what do these have in common?

They are all bits of disinformation making rounds on online platforms and channels such as Facebook Messenger.

In the Myanmar case, Facebook had discovered that people from both sides – the Buddhists and Muslims – were spreading messages that the other camp was staging uprisings at specific locations.

It was reported that Facebook's system detected and stopped the circulation of those messages before they reached a bigger audience.

In our written submission to the Select Committee on Delib-

erate Online Falsehoods, my colleague and I made the observation that disinformation typically mirrors the political and societal fissures that pervade each country.

While the themes and content of the disinformation we see within a region such as South-east Asia may be diverse, the challenges posed to societies and governments are similar.

The less severe consequences of disinformation are the inconveniences and confusion faced by individuals; the more egregious ones inflict potentially irreparable damage to society, political systems and trust between the government and the governed. This can happen to both developing and developed societies.

Within South-east Asia, governments have adopted different approaches to combating the problem of disinformation.

The most recent move is the

Anti-Fake News Act passed in Malaysia.

The law criminalises the spread of fake news and perpetrators face up to six years of prison and a fine of up to RM500,000 (S\$169,000).

Those outside of Malaysia are not spared if what they publish or share affects Malaysia or its citizens. A Danish man has been arrested and charged with spreading false news regarding the length of time the Malaysian police took to respond to calls reporting that a Palestinian lecturer had been shot.

In Singapore, the Select Committee to study the issue of deliberate online falsehoods has gone through close to 170 written representations and eight days of public hearings, and will present its report to Parliament.

A step to take towards arriving at a sustainable strategic framework to combat disinformation is to consider the desired

outcome – what do various member states aspire to achieve for their society and the wider Asean community?

Disinformation takes many forms and shapes.

In our written submission, we used references from biology and mythology to describe the changing and unpredictable nature of online scourges, of which fake news is but one type.

Perhaps, one desired outcome for all of us in the region is to strive towards building a resilient community within Asean – a community that is able to adapt to the evolving digital space and fight the problem of disinformation, with members that act fast, alert one another to new forms of online disinformation in real-time and share their lessons.

Governments from the region are trying different approaches to counter disinformation. Other attempts made by the pub-

lic sector include government-led fact-checking (such as *Factually* in Singapore and *Sebenarnya.my* in Malaysia).

Coming back to Singapore, the Government has worked with various stakeholders to help Singaporeans be digitally smart and counter disinformation.

The broader national goal is for Singaporeans to become digitally ready so that we are able to seize the opportunities that technology affords for everyday living and our economy, while avoiding the pitfalls

*The writer is a senior research fellow from the Institute of Policy Studies and a member of the Media Literacy Council. She submitted a written submission to the Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods in her personal capacity. This article appeared in The Business Times last Friday.*