upgrade
democracy

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Regional Experts' Workshop in Bangkok, Thailand

# The Making of Misinformed Choice: Disinformation in the Context of Elections in Asia Pacific

Summary of observations
and key takeaways

DIGITAL ASIA HUB

BertelsmannStiftung

# Background and rationale

The **Reinhard Mohn Prize 2024 – Strengthening Democracy, Countering Disinformation** is investigating good practices and innovative approaches to countering disinformation worldwide. Digital disinformation is an extremely multifaceted phenomenon. It is critical that we understand what is happening, where, and how– and that we tackle digital disinformation accordingly.

There are countless, successful, and impactful initiatives and organisations that are countering disinformation and building democratic resilience every day and in every corner of the world. We aim to uplift their voices and share their "perspectives".

Our international good-practice research is supported and enriched by regional research engagements, consisting of workshops and bilateral discussions with decision-makers, experts, and relevant stakeholders, who we are bringing together in one comparatively central location in each region. The goal of these research trips is to create a space for exchange amongst experts and mutual learning of each other's contexts to jointly explore the landscape of counter-disinformation initiatives, pro-democracy mobilisations efforts, and highlight particularly promising examples and good practices. In addition, networking with and among the respective actors aims to foster strong collaborations, alliances, and knowledge transfer, including assessing ideas for their potential to successfully strengthen counter-disinformation efforts in Europe and Germany.

In a partnership with Digital Asia Hub (DAH), Upgrade Democracy's second research engagement took place in Bangkok, Thailand. The mission: to explore the findings of a unique mapping study on misinformation and disinformation in the Asia Pacific's political landscape with 16 stakeholders from 10 countries in the region. The two-day workshop brought together fact-checkers, journalists, academics, health workers, government officials and representatives of civil society groups, to dive deep into the conditions under which misinformation cycles begin, how they mutate and spread.

# Observations and Key takeaways

## Perspectives on the information ecosystem

- State-sponsored **digital disinformation is hyper-targeted**, the purpose is not to convince anyone of government policies, but to divide people into smaller and smaller groups to prevent pre-democracy mobilisation.

- Platforms respond if mandated. However, if regulation and market interests are absent, **fighting disinformation on large social media platforms puts civil society at their arbitrary mercy.**

## Perspectives on regulation

- **Beware of a counter-Brussels-effect:** Most governments in countries of the Asia-Pacific region don't act in citizens' interest – this makes calls for more regulation of social media and content moderation on platforms particularly challenging.

- If information is all about framing, then it can be misused by those in **power**. This also impacts fact-checking as a practice because an information overload by state-sponsored bad actors can overwhelm fact-checkers and public alike.

## Perspectives on responsibilities and support

- We need to move from misinformation to *decisions* **made because of misinformation**, as these may well go against one's own self-interest. With regards to elections, it is important to task governments, political parties, and news media with providing correct information, rather than putting the onus on the electorate.

- The amount of **emotional and mental labour** necessary to keep the internet clean and healthy is felt everywhere. The burden is disproportionally present in the Global Majority, though most don't get the care and counselling needed to continue performing such emotional labour.

## Perspectives on research and data access

- Research into the long-term effect of mis/disinformation on elections is challenging, both with a view to **reliable, long-term data access** to large social media platforms, and due to a myriad of offline factors that shape our social contexts.

- Information manipulation has real-life consequences. There is an immediate need for interdisciplinary approaches to better understand and counter disinformation due to its sheer complexity. **Topics such as migration, LGBTQI+, and the climate crisis are targeted in all countries.**

## Perspectives on technology

- **Generative AI** must be closely monitored by stakeholders in the years to come – it has already begun impacting the work done by researchers, civil society, and fact-checkers in the Asia-Pacific region.

- **Adaptability of civil society organisations is critical** to be able to continue educating, raising awareness, and advocating for change in oftentimes oppressive contexts. Grassroots initiatives, pre-bunking, and monitoring allow for both, bypassing censorship and building on technical amplification for scale.

## Day 1

### Kick-Off: Presentation of Research Framework and Findings

To set the scene, the research team from DAH shared their theoretical framework to garner feedback and help finetune insights into counter-disinformation efforts across various countries in the Asia-Pacific. The framework explores the concept of "informed choice" – a motivating factor for people's participation in electoral processes – and how different factors play a role in creating "misinformed choice", a phenomenon where voters have fallen prey to mis/disinformation from several sources. The full research report will be published in early 2024.

*Three key lessons stood out in an open exchange with participants:*

1. Misinformation only needs to target and/or manipulate one of the seven layers of the flow of information for decisions, i.e. choices, to end up being misinformed.
2. The narrow focus on elections helps to identify vulnerabilities of citizen choice as well as to assess the appropriateness of countermeasures to misinformation.
3. It is easier to focus on agency and action if we focus on *decisions* that are made due to misinformation, as these may well go against your own self-interest. We need to redirect attention to "misinformed choice."

### Keynote: Dr. Pirongrong Ramasoota

The Commissioner, National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission (NBTC), Thailand, talked about the role governmental fact-checking institutions play in elections but also highlighted their limitations in ascertaining if disinformation campaigns have a direct impact on election results.

The **following panel discussion** with participants from the **Philippines, Japan**, and an **APF representative** reflected on the role of misogynous (gendered, sexualised) disinformation against candidates from Thailand's Move Forward party as well as attempts to isolate pro-democracy voices, as well as huge amounts of hate speech and targeting of women and minorities during electoral periods, e. g. in **India** or the Philippines. At the same time, there was no consensus among participants as to whether disinformation campaigns do, in fact, alter the actual election results. To prove that long-term investigations and comparative data are necessary.

*Two key takeaways:*

1. Fact-checking is important, but it is dire. And fact-checkers tend to look at the incident rather than the web of information, which hampers scale.
2. Research into the effect of misinformation on elections is challenging, both with a view to reliable, long-term data access to large social media platforms and due to a myriad of offline factors that shape our social contexts.

## The Government's Role in Disinformation and its Mitigation

The discussion was kicked off with input statements on the cases of **Pakistan, Malaysia, India, and Thailand**. In general, it is quite common for governments in the Asia-Pacific region to set up governmental fact-checking units. That said, it is almost equally common that these units only "fact-check" criticism of the respective government. In some cases, participants described elaborate governmental playbooks to control information, e.g. through government-owned or aligned TV, radio, newspapers as well as threats of arrests for employees of social media companies. And if that fails to control the narrative, internet shutdowns are enforced – a punitive measure that is particularly common in India. In addition, there are numerous efforts across countries to suppress and intimidate individuals linked to pro-democracy mobilisation efforts as well as targeted campaigns to pit social groups against one another.

*Two key takeaways:*

1.  If information is all about framing, then it can be misused by those in power. This also impacts fact-checking as a practice because an information overload by state-sponsored bad actors can overwhelm fact-checkers and public alike.
2.  State-sponsored digital disinformation is hyper-targeted, the purpose is not to convince anyone of government policies, but to divide people into smaller and smaller groups to prevent pre-democracy mobilisation.

## The Role of Citizens and End Users

This round of reflection was based on input statements from **Sri Lanka, India, Singapore, and Taiwan.** The challenges for individuals and civil society organisations doing counter-disinformation work are daunting. Examples referred to constant mental stress, emotional labour, and lack of psychological support. Responses to adapt and adjust range from abandoning fact-checking to focus on developing mobile apps for online content verification; to media literacy training at the grassroots level; to developing open-source intelligence (OSINT) dashboards to track patterns of influence operations (largely of Chinese origin). The discussion kept circling back to the importance of **trust**: who to trust, on what, and why?

*Three key takeaways:*

1.  The amount of emotional and mental labour necessary to keep the internet clean and healthy is felt everywhere. The burden is disproportionally present in the Global Majority, though most don't get the care and counselling needed to continue performing such emotional labour.
2.  Adaptability of civil society organisations is critical to be able to continue educating, raising awareness, and advocating for change in oftentimes oppressive contexts. Grassroots initiatives, pre-bunking, and monitoring allow for both, bypassing censorship and building on technical amplification for scale.
3.  Trust is of paramount importance, and deeply embedded in social contexts.

### The Role of Intermediaries (Tech + Media platforms)

As conversation starters, participants heard from practitioners in **Indonesia, Thailand, and Hong Kong**.

For civil society organisations (CSOs), working with social media platforms continues to be difficult, albeit user numbers are soaring high. While alternative ways of creating alliances and joining forces are being established, for instance through UNESCO-backed Social Media Councils, response rates from platforms like TikTok vary vastly across countries: non-existent in Indonesia, reasonably supportive in Thailand. Overall, platforms play an ambiguous role in the region: they often provide significant amounts of funding for CSOs through news initiatives or support for literacy training, while also holding unchallenged power as to who gets to monitor, flag, or review content.

*Two key takeaways:*

1. Platforms respond if mandated. However, if regulation and market interests are absent, fighting disinformation on large social media platforms puts civil society at their arbitrary mercy.
2. Regulatory efforts in the EU are not just observed, they are often copy & pasted (e. g. GDPR, DSA). However, lack of due process, oversight, or even citizen participation in policy-making processes increases their potential for misuse significantly.

## Day 2

### Working through the Stack: Working Groups on Mapping Research Design

The theoretical concept of the seven layers of the information stack that can be manipulated and lead to misinformed choice was put to the test amongst three working groups, each collecting practical examples from their work. The experiences and inputs will contribute to sharpening the concept of misinformed choice in the final report (publication planned for early 2024). Moreover, these exchanges also served as inspiration for the practitioners in the field to better understand and adapt their current strategies of countering disinformation in their respective contexts and fields of expertise.

*Key takeaway:*

- Theoretical frameworks are important to practitioners, too, as they highlight the mechanisms at play and therefore provide insight into how to better adapt their strategies in the field.

### Emerging technological Threats and Election Vulnerabilities

Through group work, participants created visions of possible future scenarios, outlining how emerging technologies (like large language models, video and audio content, digital identities etc.) will shape our information ecosystems. This happened in two formats: (1) creation of a time-risk axis by mapping both risk and time horizon of different technological trends on a map, (2) creatively drafting future news headlines that illustrated the impact of different technologies.

*Key takeaway:*

- Generative AI must be closely monitored by stakeholders in the years to come – it has already begun impacting the work done by researchers, civil society, and fact-checkers in the Asia-Pacific region.

### Feedback Round

There was clear consensus that community and network opportunities matter. The focus on analysing elections helped direct conversations and learnings in an otherwise complex, interconnected, and vast field of research and counter-disinformation approaches.

*In addition, participants shared a few key points in a final reflection round:*

1. Building communities and networks of practitioners is critical, as people quickly feel isolated and exhausted. Many feel the lack of networks, reliable funding, and mental support.
2. Counter-disinformation work requires a whole-of-society approach that mustn't focus on fact-checking only. Instead, countermeasures must address all layers of the information stack – which should also be reflected in strategic funding approaches.
3. Information manipulation has real-life consequences for people's safety. This is often felt by marginalised and/or targeted communities first, as sentiments around migration, LGBTQI+, the climate crisis get exploited across the board.