

Meeting the Challenges of Information Disorder in Asia

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80+ key informant interviews and desk research covering 26 countries in Asia

- 80+ key informant interviews across Asia with fact checkers, journalists, policymakers, academics, and other stakeholders
- Desk research included global, regional, country specific academic and grey literature on theoretical frameworks, legal landscape, modes and actors of information disorder
- Geographical scope of the study: Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Malaysia, Maldives, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Tajikistan, Thailand, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam

Politics & health are two main topics where information disorder manifests

- **Politics**

- Many actors who spread disinformation are backed by the State, or at least aligned with a political party
 - E.g.: “IT cells” of political parties in India, “troll factories” in the Philippines, “buzzers” in Indonesia and “cyber troops” in Malaysia
- Elections trigger hate speech fueled by ethno-nationalistic narratives

- **Health**

- Disinformation on COVID vaccines
- Fake cures linked to ethno-nationalistic sentiments
- State backed disinformation (management of the pandemic, COVID deaths and statistics
 - E.g.: Kyrgyzstan - President and Health minister publicly endorsed a toxic root as a cure despite WHO issued warnings

Range of factors can contribute to traditional media's role in spreading information disorder

- Culture of self-censorship
 - Linked to pressure from the government and/or political parties
 - Creating pressure regarding which narratives and stories to follow
 - E. g.:
 - South Korea - Govt subsidize media companies by buying media time for govt advertising campaigns.
 - Uzbekistan - state media is unable to criticize the government or question their policies as they fully depend on govt funding
- Lack of resources and funding for independent media organizations
- Poor media ethics practices

Social media platforms actions can be slow & have misalignments with the country context

- Online disinformation and hate speech has an impact on offline violence/social unrest
 - Facebook's role in allowing the spread of hate speech that fuelled violence against Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar
- Online platforms tend to lack contextual information on countries in Asia therefore some content policies fail to work well within the Asian context
 - Facebook's 2019 decision to not fact check statements made by politicians led to misuse of the social media site by politicians and powerful proxies in 2019 and 2020 elections in Sri Lanka
- Online job boards/freelancing platforms are used to hire workers for mis- and disinformation campaigns on social media
 - Actors and voice-over artists were hired to promote criticism of India and praise of Pakistan, and to advocate the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)
 - Political campaigns hire online freelancers to create content and then introduce it onto social media platforms

Govts actions in fighting “fake news” tend to clash with freedom of expression

Some laws explicitly target information disorder, while many legislations are also used by Govts in a roundabout way

- Legislation related to “fake news” or falsehoods
- Defamation, libel or insult legislation
- Legislation related to hate speech, harassment, religion, and obscenity
- Legislation related to electronic transactions and regulation of technology
- Legislation relating to security, sedition, disturbing the peace
- Media and publishing regulations
- Legislation related to Covid-19

Ill-defined regulations are selectively executed leading to unlawful prosecutions

- In the Philippines, cyber-libel law was used to arrest Maria Ressa, executive editor of the online news website Rappler
- In Pakistan and Indonesia, blasphemy legislation, which prohibits criticism of religion, has been wielded against religious minorities
- Sri Lanka’s ICCPR Act has been used to target religious minorities, while members of the Buddhist clergy who have made incendiary statements have not been prosecuted

Govts use direct and indirect manipulations to fuel information disorder

- Use of threats, regulatory pressures and restrictions to control actions of media
 - Slander and defamation laws are used in Tajikistan to shut down media, while security services or unknown individuals have threatened and attacked journalists
 - Himal Southasian (an online news magazine) had to switch their operational base from Nepal to Sri Lanka due to legal and regulatory pressure in Nepal
 - Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) of Singapore has led to media culture of self censorship
- Tightening of censorship and freedom of expression using responses to mis- and disinformation related to Covid-19
 - Covid-19 pandemic being used as a justification to restrict freedom of expression, including actions such as the arbitrary arrest, detention, and imprisonment of critics of the government, among other abuse
 - Fines and arrests for expressing discontent or allegedly spreading false information through the press and social media, have been reported in many countries.
 - Vietnam - "Fake News" Covid Decree
 - Malaysia - Emergency (Essential Powers) (No. 2) Ordinance 2021 Part I Section 2, Part II Section 4(10)
 - Philippines - Bayanihan to Heal as One Act, No. 11469 of 2020 - Section 6(f) and Penalties

Process of fact checking poses challenges

- Lack of trained fact checkers and language barriers limit scope and capabilities in fact checking
- Having to rely on conventional tools as new tools come with many limitations
 - South Asia Factcheck faces difficulties in obtaining information when the query is in Nepalese
- Lack of a systematic approach to measure impact and reach of the fact checks
- IFCN certification: Highly important and challenging to obtain
 - Lack of assessors with local language skills at IFCN
 - Unaffordability of fees tend to slow down the process
 - Fact checkers struggle to find man-power required to commit to the certification process

Foreign funding is essential to counter information disorder but it comes with challenges

- **Credibility of fact checkers, journalists, and civil society organizations get attacked due to negative perceptions towards foreign funding**
- Common funding challenges in fact checking and digital literacy training include;
 - States restrict funding from international donors
 - Funding is short term and only cover portions of operations
 - Funding is limited to specific topics

Recommendations

- Funding
 - Funding needs to be long term to ensure operational sustainability
- IFCN Certification
 - The number of assessors representing the region for International FactChecking Network (IFCN) certification could be expanded and made more accessible
- Technological tools and techniques
 - There is a need to develop tools with local language needs in mind
- Collaboration
 - Different actors (fact checkers, academics, policymakers, those engaged in digital literacy training) should collaborate with each other to make interventions more holistic
- The dangers of legal responses
 - Care must be taken to prevent legal responses from leading to censorship and the criminalization of dissent