Social Media, Fake News, and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Sketching the Case of Southeast Asia

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As a result of lockdowns across Southeast Asia, the use of all types of social media has reached high records in the whole region. Yet, the rapid social media response manifested in the form of an infodemic – an overabundance of false and misleading information. Concurrently, the region has also witnessed a significant rise in various governmental measures targeting social media actors. In the name of combating fake news, various legal enactments, including enhanced censorship and sanctions, have been pursued by Southeast Asian authorities. These, however, are often deemed unjustified and aggressively restricting of freedom of speech and expression, especially at a time when ASEAN member states have gained notoriety for their lack of civil liberties. This article aims to reveal connections between the infodemic and legal responses in Southeast Asia on the basis of a qualitative literature review and content analysis. It looks at the term infodemic along with the proliferation of different forms of fake news in the context of Southeast Asia's social media use. It also highlights discrepancies between legal responses and the impacts of fake news during the early days of the pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic; Emergency Laws and Regulations; Infodemic; Social Media; Southeast Asia

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INTRODUCTION

From the start of the coronavirus outbreak, large-scale examples of false and misleading information campaigns were found to be prevalent on social media, ranging from scurrilous rumors and inaccurate allegations to harmful medical hoaxes and conspiracy theories. Fake news "spreads faster and more easily than this virus" and "we are not just fighting an epidemic; we are fighting an infodemic", were the words of Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the Director-General of the World Health Organisation (WHO).[1]

The COVID-19 outbreak was not the first major infectious disease to occur in the era of social media.[2] Many studies delved into the substantial role of social

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1 Delivered at a gathering of foreign policy and security experts in Munich, Germany, in mid-February 2020. Retrieved from https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/munich-security-conference

2 Since the era of social media is considered to start around 2008 with the emergence of YouTube and Facebook (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019), the first major infectious disease that occurred in this era is the 2009 swine flu.

media during previous disease outbreaks. Real-time data collected from social media posts have been considered valuable in detecting, monitoring, and mapping the spread of these diseases (Chunara et al., 2012; Lampos & Cristianini, 2012). Today, social media has matured significantly, and yet, it is getting more difficult to identify accurate and useful information, to communicate fairly, and to build trust. Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, researchers raised concerns about the prevalence of false information on social media. Analyzing Facebook posts and videos circulated within a week during the 2016 Zika outbreak, Sharma et al. (2017) discovered a surprising prevalence of misleading posts that far outnumbered those containing accurate information about the disease in the US.

In recent years, Southeast Asia has witnessed constrictions of internet freedom (Freedom House, 2020). It is also deemed the most dynamic region with regard to legislation on anti-fake news during the time of the COVID-19 outbreak. This article seeks to reveal connections between the dissemination of fake news on social media and legal responses in the region. Particularly, the article focuses on three sets of questions: (1) What is fake news and what is the role of social media in the context of Southeast Asia; (2) how can we classify COVID-19 related fake news and what are considered the harmful impacts of the COVID-19 infodemic; and (3) how do Southeast Asian governments respond to the infodemic and how are their measures perceived? To answer these questions, a qualitative literature review and content analysis have been carried out during mainly the first months of the pandemic, from March 2020 to June 2020. Information has been collected from various online sources, of which #CoronaVirusFacts Alliance[3] serves as the main data source for illustration of the situation of COVID-19 in Southeast Asia. Led by the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) at the Poynter Institute in Florida, USA, the #CoronaVirusFacts Alliance unites more than 100 fact-checkers around the globe in publishing, sharing, and translating facts surrounding the coronavirus. Launched in January 2020, the Alliance is presented as the largest collaborative project ever launched in the fact-checking world.

The article is structured along the three key thematics. The following section provides an overview on fake news and related concepts, such as infodemic, and on the use of social media in Southeast Asia. This is followed by an overview of the proliferation of different fake news reports in social media during the outbreak of the pandemic, and the socio-economic impacts of the infodemic in Southeast Asia. Finally, different governments' responses are reviewed and assessed. The article ends with several observations and recommendations.

FAKE NEWS AND SOCIAL MEDIA IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: AN OVERVIEW

The term *fake news* has a different meaning for each person and each community, and varies, with different shades of meaning, depending on the context. A review of 34 academic articles between 2003 and 2017 showed that the term fake news took on different operationalizations, including news satire, news parody, fabrication,

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3 #CoronaVirusFacts Alliance is a project led by the International Fact-Checking Network at Poynter Institute. For further information, see https://www.poynter.org/coronavirusfactsalliance/

manipulation, advertising, and propaganda, classified according to levels of facticity and deception (Tandoc et al., 2017, p. 1). Klein and Wueller (2017, p. 6), and Allcott and Gentzkow (2017, p. 51) characterize fake news as fabricated, completely untrue, and having no factual basis. Besides this status of falsity, the underlying intention of the publishers, such as the deception of the audience, the infliction of harm, or the pursuit of self-interest – such as popularity or financial gain – is also considered in definitions of fake news. Some researchers note that fake news does not necessarily refer to completely false or fabricated claims alone. Some statements can be "misleading", containing "significant omissions", especially taking claims out of context in ways that undermine truth (Dentith, 2017, p. 66) or tend to "mix deliberate falsehoods with well-known truths" (Gelfert, 2018, p. 100). Other forms of content, namely brazen hoaxes, pranks, satires, or parodies, might be included in fake news, but "they need not be slurs on the truth" (MacKenzie & Bhatt, 2018, p. 11).

Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) argue that several items of content, such as hate speech, harassment, memes, and satire, cannot even be described as 'news'. They indicate that fake news is only part of a broader and underlying issue – an *information disorder*. Information disorder is constituted of three main elements: misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information (see Figure 1).
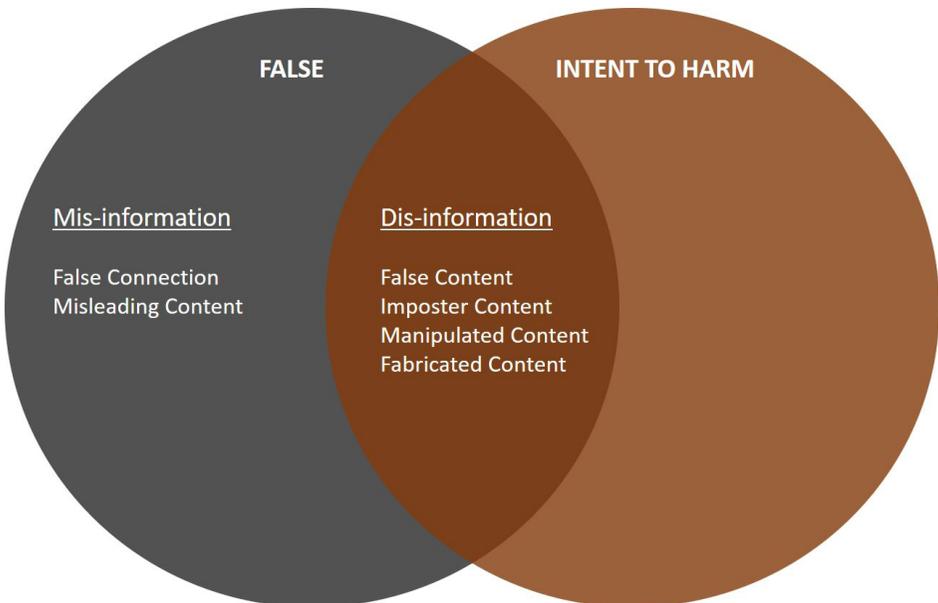

Figure 1. Constitution of information disorder. (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

The first type, misinformation, is used to designate false connections and misleading content that is not intentionally created or disseminated to cause harm. The second type, disinformation, refers to false information harbored and disseminated deliberately for personal benefit or to cause harm to another party. The third notion, mal-information, indicates content containing a connotation of facts but intentionally used to detrimentally target a person, an organization, or a

country.[4] Accordingly, a statement is assessed based on two factors – its falsity and the actual intention/motivation of the originator.

Fake news mostly falls into the conflation of the first and second notions. It is noticeable that the term fake news has been overused and misused in political debate. It is a term often repurposed by politicians and public figures to counter social criticism against them or to describe dissenting or unflattering reports that, indeed, might well be factually true and accurately represent reality (Gelfert, 2018; Klein & Wueller, 2017; MacKenzie & Bhatt, 2018). However, in the context of crisis and information asymmetries, while it is relatively easy to examine and check certain pieces of information through verifiable sources, it is often a considerable challenge to interrogate actual motives without access to concrete and open evidence and clarification.

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the WHO (2020a) launched the term *infodemic* as "an overabundance of information – some accurate and some not – that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it" (p. 2). Infodemic is a blend of the words info(rmation) and (epi)demic and is not a new term. It was coined in 2003 by David Rothkopf (2003) in the *Washington Post* amid the SARS outbreak:

> What exactly do I mean by the 'infodemic'? A few facts, mixed with fear, speculation and rumor, amplified and relayed swiftly worldwide by modern information technologies, have affected national and international economies, politics and even security in ways that are utterly disproportionate with the root realities.

Infodemic, in Rothkopf's definition, is a mixture of a few facts (accurate information) with uncertain or doubtful truth and sentiments that spread far and wide. Rothkopf also intended the word infodemic to have a broader application, not only occurring in responses to global health scares but also to terrorism and shark sightings (Rothkopf, 2003). Meanwhile, the WHO has brought out a more contemporary interpretation of the problem arising in the midst of the disease outbreak by emphasizing the massive amount of related information that is overwhelming and a mixture of both accurate and completely inaccurate. Public interest in the term has also risen tremendously. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, search traffic on the term shows it re-appeared regularly during the 2006 avian flu, 2009 swine flu, and 2014 Ebola outbreak.[5] It was also geographically concentrated in only some areas, such as the US, India, and the UK (see Figure 2). However, with the arrival of the current coronavirus pandemic, people's search for the term infodemic has peaked worldwide. This is not without the influence or impact of social media on online information traffic.

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4 Examples of mal-information are someone using a picture of a dead person (with no context) to flare up hatred against a specific ethnic community, or moving private information into the public sphere, such as secrets or private images.

5 Search traffic, presented by Google Trends Analytics, reflects what people are curious about or how frequently a given search term is entered into Google's search engine relative to the site's total search volume over a given period of time.
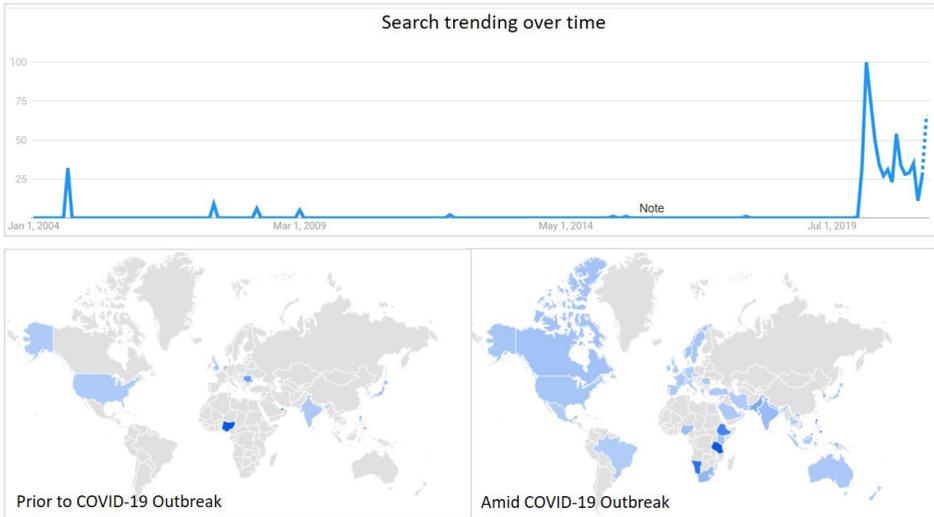
Figure 2. Global search trending of 'Infodemic' before and after the outbreak of COVID-19, as of 28 October 2020. (Google Trend Analytics).

Social media is a key pathway to news. They are seen as one of the cheapest and fastest ways to access news, regardless of format and types of content, or whether it is from individuals, organizations, or governments. Most of the online content consumed by Southeast Asian millennials is on social networking and video platforms[6], amounting to 80% and 76% respectively, followed by messaging platforms with 38%. Traditional information channels, such as news platforms, corporate websites, magazines, and podcasts, have lost popularity with under 20% each (ASEAN Post, 2019).

COUNTRY	SOCIAL MEDIA PENETRATION (%)	TIME PER DAY USING INTERNET (HOURS)	DAILY TIME USING SOCIAL MEDIA (HOURS)
Philippines	67	9.45	3.53
Thailand	75	9.01	3.55
Indonesia	59	7.59	3.26
Malaysia	81	7.57	2.45
World average	*49*	*6.43*	*2.24*
Vietnam	67	6.30	2.22
Singapore	79	6.48	2.08

Table 1. Social media penetration, time spent online, and social media in some ASEAN countries, as of January 2020. (We Are Social & Hootsuite, 2020a).

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6 Video platforms are exclusively for creating, streaming, sharing, and hosting videos – for example, YouTube. In contrast, social networking platforms refer in this article to social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, that focus on building community/contacts-based relationships, and disseminate various formats of information, such as texts or infographics.

According to We Are Social and Hootsuite (2020a), Southeast Asia, home of some 655 million people, boasts the highest social network usage worldwide and an internet penetration of 66% (more than 400 million), outnumbering the global average of 59% as of January 2020. About 63% of the Southeast Asian population use social media compared to 49% globally, with a year-over-year growth of 7.7%. Daily, they spend more time on the internet than the global average, and use around one-third of their time online accessing social media. In particular, Filipinos spend 9.45 hours online daily and 3.53 hours on social media – the highest number in the world. Regionally, Indonesians (7.59 and 3.26 hours) come close in second, followed by Thais (9.01 and 2.55 hours).

COUNTRY	Facebook	YouTube	Instagramm	WhatsApp	Facebook Massenger
Thailand	75	72	50	17	55
Singapore	70	71	44	73	42
Malaysia	70	69	49	68	47
Vietnam	61	59	32	-	47
Indonesia	41	43	38	40	24
Philippines	57	56	36	15	49

Table 2. Most active social media platforms (% of population) in some ASEAN countries. (We are Social & Hootsuite, 2018).[7]

Varied types of messenger apps, as well as social media platforms, have been used across Southeast Asia. Facebook is the most prevalent social media platform, with 360 million active social media users, followed by YouTube and Instagram. Accordingly, Facebook messenger and WhatsApp are the most popular messenger apps.
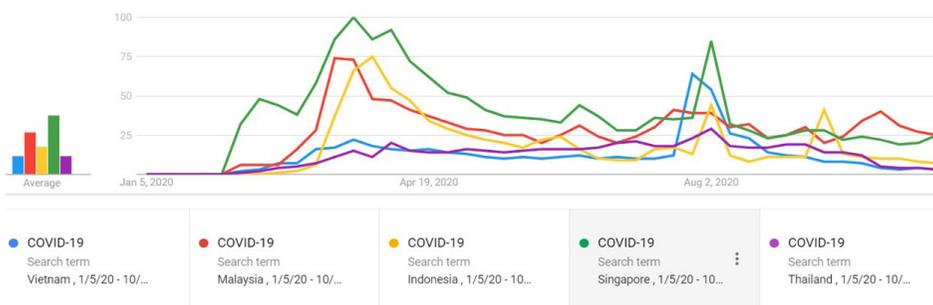

Figure 3. Search trending during coronavirus pandemic in Southeast Asia, as of 28 October 2020. (Google Trend Analytics).

Southeast Asians' concern with COVID-19 has become evident in their search trends. In some countries, Google searches relating to COVID-19 witnessed the first major rise relative to all search traffic towards the beginning of March 2020, when the number of COVID-19 positive cases in the region started to soar. COVID-19 saw

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7   In average, about 55% of Southeast Asia's total population (11 countries) are active Facebook users (~360 million).

its highest levels of search traffic from mid-March until the end of April 2020, especially in Singapore, which witnessed the largest numbers of COVID-19 cases in the region. Social distancing measures and governments' encouragement to stay at home disrupted many people's lifestyles. They relied on social media to share news, stay in touch with friends and family, as well as access entertainment. This triggered a sharp increase in the use of all social networking sites and their features, such as video calls and messaging. Online traffic directed to publishers of news relating to the coronavirus and the pandemic also reached record highs.

The Philippines and Singapore witnessed the largest surge with 64% and 39% of users spending more time on social media during the pandemic, according to a report by We Are Social and Hootsuite (2020b). The Philippines' number was the highest worldwide. Southeast Asia also experienced a 60% surge in mobile streaming through a wide variety of products. The curfew and closure of retail shops boosted Thai merchants' Facebook Live social sales by 216% from February 2020, something that is predicted to continue after the pandemic (Leesa-Nguansuk, 2020). Social media praised the joint attempts of scientists, doctors, celebrities, and media influencers, who raised public awareness as well as urging people to stay alert and follow regulations. The hand washing song known as *Ghen Co Vy*, performed by several Vietnamese artists, went viral and gained media attention worldwide. The song and its dance routine, which aimed to promote good hygiene practice and cleanliness, was supported by international and national organizations.

There are various motives behind the creation and dissemination of fabricated news on social media, from straightforward profit to a vast array of political interests from which advantage can be gained during the current pandemic. As COVID-19 became a trending topic, every item of news related to it had a greater opportunity to go viral, especially when information is scarce and opportunists, who are willing to trade on chaos and fear, exist in large numbers. Curtis (2020) showed that viral content can bring financial profit for fake news publishers through gaining additional traffic, growing an audience base, and/or generating 'clickbait' that translates into increasing financial value via their social media profiles. The higher the potential benefit generated from surging traffic on social media, the higher the temptation is for people to forward fake news, which requires little investment and carries a very low risk of attracting any penalty.

INFODEMIC IN SOUTHEAST ASIA AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

COVID-19 Infodemic: Observations From Southeast Asia

Since the beginning of the era of social media, Southeast Asia is said to be facing its first 'true' social media infodemic (cf. Hao & Basu, 2020). Before COVID-19 turned into a pandemic, fake news was already a significant concern for Southeast Asians. According to a survey of international communications consultants Ruder Finn in 2019, false information was the biggest concern of 60% of respondents across all social media and messaging channels (ASEAN Post, 2019). Meanwhile, about half of the respondents expressed their concern about dishonest content and 39% were worried about inappropriate or biased content.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, The Complex Multilayer Networks Lab (2020) developed the COVID-19 Infodemics Observatory to monitor the spread of fake news related to the pandemic based on Twitter data. Based on their infodemic risk index, Singapore is ranked first out of 83 countries for the most reliable and accurate information shared on Twitter. The risk indexes of Malaysia and the Philippines also remain relatively low for most of the observed periods. These three countries demonstrate the highest news reliability calculated with respect to messages in the country's native language. Meanwhile, the rest of the countries, especially Indonesia and Vietnam, face a much higher risk of unreliable and low-quality information, while demonstrating the lowest news reliability concerning messages written in local languages.

Mis- and disinformation about COVID-19 is usually replicated and mutated across multiple social media platforms and in multiple languages before being condemned. It varies in format, theme, scope, and reach. Key themes of online false information relating to the coronavirus and the pandemic in Southeast Asia are (1) origins; (2) symptoms, diagnosis, prevention, and treatment measures; (3) false and misleading statistics; (4) socio, environmental, economic, and health impacts; (5) governmental actions and regulation; (6) targeting political, religious/ethnic groups; (7) content driven by fraudulent financial gain designed to steal people's private data; and (8) targeting public figures/influencers. Disinformation about COVID-19 has harnessed three main formats, namely (1) emotive narrative constructs and memes; (2) images and videos created or modified fraudulently; (3) fake company or government websites with false sources and polluted datasets.

COUNTRY	NUMBER OF VERIFIED NEWS	MAIN SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS
Thailand	46	Facebook, Twitter, messaging app Line and YouTube
Indonesia	115	Facebook, Tiktok, YouTube and Instagram
Philippines	208	Facebook, YouTube and Instagram
Malaysia	9	Facebook, Twitter, YouTube
Myanmar	56	Facebook
Singapore	12	Facebook
Total	446	

Figure 3. Information disorder in Southeast Asia, as of 25 May 2020. (author's compilation; CoronaVirusFacts Alliance, 2020).

In Southeast Asia, false information related to symptoms, diagnosis, prevention, and treatment measures of COVID-19, and governments' responses to it, went viral on social media platforms, mainly on Facebook. They are followed by false and misleading reports and contents targeting political, religious, and ethnic groups.

Inaccurate advice on the prevention and treatment methods of the infection is considered the most harmful content. In the Philippines, a false health graphic found in hundreds of posts encouraged people to gargle salt with water to cure the disease. Videos of a Filipino netizen that accumulated 2.5 million views and more than 135,000 shares insisted on killing the virus by drinking warm salt water (VERA Files, 2020).

Table 4. Content classification of Information disorder in Southeast Asia, as of 25 May 2020. *The total can exceed 100 as some content can be categorized under more than one category*. (author's compilation; CoronaVirusFacts Alliance, 2020).[8]

Likewise, in Indonesia, ubiquitous posts on social media claimed that COVID-19 could be treated by an herbal combination of curcumin, ginger, and other ingredients, which, coincidently, are also the main ingredients of a *Jamu* drink (Wijaya, 2020).[9] Some Facebook posts found in Thailand and Indonesia claimed that smoking could protect people from the virus. Meanwhile, in the Philippines, a screenshot showing a photo of a cannabis plant with the headline "Breaking News: Weed Kills Coronavirus" circulated on Facebook with 12,500 shares, more than 3,700 reactions, and 723 comments, as of 18 February (CoronaVirusFacts Alliance, 2020).

Nutrition scammers or unscrupulous pharmaceutical companies cash in on such online promotions proclaiming the benefits of certain products in preventing or curing COVID-19. The stock of companies producing or trading in such products could rise accordingly in value. In the Philippines, an advertisement for a vitamin supplement named Honey-C was published on Facebook on 31 March 2020 and became widely shared. The supplement was advertised as an immunity-boosting

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8   Table 3 and 4 are aggregated from https://www.poynter.org/ifcn-covid-19-misinformation/. They do not reflect the amount of fake news in each country, but the amount of fake news that has been detected and checked by the CoronaVirusFacts Alliance.

9   This *Jamu* drink is a turmeric ginger refreshment drink promoted as a traditional immunity booster.

agent against COVID-19, complemented with an approval from the Philippine Food and Drug Administration. However, this product was later confirmed as unregistered and the accompanying ad deemed deceptive marketing related to COVID-19. The manufacturers of the product were requested by the regulatory agency to remove the misleading advertisements, on the penalty of sanctions (AFP Philippines, 2020).

A number of false information is linked to official authorities' actions against the diffusion of the disease. For example, while there was no law issued on mandatory facemask wearing in public in Thailand as of March 2020, a statement that said police in Thailand can charge anyone who does not follow the rule was repeatedly shared on Facebook, Twitter, and Line Messenger (CoronaVirusFacts Alliance, 2020). Another claim shared more than 10,000 times in various Facebook posts stated that Thailand ranked number one in the fight against COVID-19, based on an international health security index, and that the country had the lowest number of infected cases at that time. The reality, however, is that Thailand did not have the lowest number of positive cases, neither in Asia nor worldwide, and the index cited was in fact published months before the pandemic (AFP Thailand, 2020). Other pieces of information spread false statements and messages from politicians, public figures, and influencers. In early April 2020, multiple posts on Facebook shared a message from Myanmar's health minister that a vaccine had been discovered. It was later confirmed to be fabricated content with embedded sexual links (Fact Crescendo, 2020).

Fake news targeting specific political, religious, and ethnic groups was rampant. Especially in Indonesia, videos viewed several thousands of times on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube showed Chinese citizens converting to Islam as a result of the pandemic. Those videos displayed events that had taken place long before the pandemic (CoronaVirusFacts Alliance, 2020). Similarly, false statements that spread hatred towards Chinese people were found in the Philippines. In Malaysia, most of the racist comments detected between 27 February and 27 March 2020 aimed at Islam/Malay, Chinese, and Indians. Islamophobia also cropped up since March, when Tabligh groups were insulted by social media users after a mass gathering held by Tabligh missionary groups was said to have caused the biggest single-day jump of COVID-19 cases in Malaysia (Chin & Santa, 2020).

Research from *The New York Times* found that malicious websites with COVID-19 information were fabricated by hackers with digital traps set up to steal personal data or break into readers' devices (Frenkel et al., 2020). Social media is also an ideal place for organized criminal elements, from making threats, bullying, and harassing to fraud and selling counterfeit products, as well as conspiracy theorists and anarchist groups capitalizing on the proliferation of disinformation. The excessive demand for medical masks and equipment supplies triggered the emergence of fake social media accounts that claimed to offer these items. After transferring money to scammers, victims would either receive counterfeit products or nothing at all. In Malaysia, online scams involving facemask sales during the Movement Control Order were reported to cause a loss of about MYR 5.5 million (as of 4 June 2020) (Redzuan, 2020). Facemasks scams have also emerged in other countries, such as Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia (Chan et al., 2020; Trong Dat, 2020). The Anti-Fake News Centre of Thailand detected a series of fabricated and imposter domain names that

used the name of the government's Thai Chana platform[10] to phish for shoppers' personal information via the downloading of malware applications amid the COVID-19 crisis (Bangkok Post, 2020b).

Socio-Economic and Other Impacts of the Infodemic

In the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, while accurate and helpful information plays a significant role in improving public safety, an infodemic was found advance severe public health and socio-economic consequences as well as dampen attempts to protect public health and security.

Several studies have examined the mental and psychological health consequences of misinformation and disinformation amid the COVID-19 outbreak (Barua et al., 2020; Mukhtar, 2020; Shigemura et al., 2020; Tasnim et al., 2020; WHO, 2020b). Information quality and information sharing are among key factors driving human emotion, perception, and behavior, including individual decision making and problem solving when facing an infectious disease (Browne et al., 2017; Lee & Jung, 2019). A study by Islam et al. (2020) shows that about 800 people across 87 countries died and nearly 5,900 others were hospitalized after following fake cures of COVID-19 spread on social media between 21 January 2020 and 5 April 2020. Research also indicated that false information might cause unwanted effects on public behavioral patterns, which makes it harder to control the spread of the virus and exacerbates the negative effects of the pandemic on public health and security (Leitner, 2020; Tuccori et al., 2020). Claims that underestimate the potential damage of the virus and the pandemic could also increase the level of public complacency. Unproven statements related to the prevention and treatment of coronavirus, such as taking a vitamin supplement or an herbal drink, might not directly take away people's lives, but might result in a false sense of security and public ignorance when complying with health protocols (Purba, 2020).

In Indonesia, where the government has failed to deliver a consistent message about the coronavirus and the pandemic, social media influencers and self-styled experts spread false information with quack remedies. An online questionnaire implemented by Nasir et al. (2020) between 4 and 11 April 2020 in Indonesia shows that 13.2% of the respondents believed that Indonesia's warm climate can halt the spread of COVID-19 and 19.6% believed that the coronavirus can be killed by gargling with salt water or vinegar. When Indonesia had more than 108,000 cases with more than 5,130 deaths (end of July 2020), the majority of people still went out without masks, often ignored keeping a safe social distance, and crowded into shops, markets, or busy cafes and restaurants, even in the most affected provinces (Paddock, 2020; Purba, 2020). Conspiracy theories targeting China and local ethnic Chinese have amplified a wave of panic, provoking racism towards Indonesian Chinese communities and, thus, posing a risk of social unrest (Sibarani et al., 2020). Not only local Chinese Indonesians but also Indonesians returning from China were victims of misinformation during the COVID-19 outbreak. Many of the 238 Indonesians evacuated

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10   A tracking application developed to monitor the density of people on the premises and alert people if a Coronavirus patient is found in a place they visited.

from Wuhan, China were faced with suspicion by the locals (Savitri & Syakriah, 2020). Hate messages blaming people of a specific origin for diffusing COVID-19 exacerbate societal and racial discrimination, especially when the outbreak worsens, but little efforts are made on countering hate crime.

Information disorder related to governmental regulations, disease prevention, and treatment on social media triggers panic buying, unnecessary stockpiles, escalating prices, and opportunities for scams. An analysis of ISEAS teams in April 2020 showed that social media in several ASEAN countries witnessed a spike of the keyword 'panic buying' before critical events (Temby & Hu, 2020). A considerable number of tweets amplified a sense of goods scarcity, thus, multiplying commodity hoarding and panic purchasing. In Indonesia, people were feverishly searching for *Jamu*, which was rumored by social media users as a COVID-19 remedy after the announcement of the first COVID-19 cases in early March. This caused an escalation in the prices of *Jamu* ingredients. In Singapore, after the raising of the DORSCON (Disease Outbreak Response System Condition) level, posts with images of long queues and emptied shelves in stores and supermarkets became viral on social media channels (cf. Temby & Hu, 2020).

Similarly, when COVID-19 began to spread, growing anxiety and uncertainty about the infection caused a surge in the demand for facemasks. Social media posts about police punishment for not wearing facemasks in public places or about the shortage of medical facemasks worsened panic buying and caused an overprice of this item in physical stores and on e-commerce websites. When governments attempted to control facemask prices in these two retail channels, social media platforms, especially Facebook, became an extraordinarily lucrative marketplace for swindlers. Profiteering also occurred as sellers sought to exploit people's fears by raising prices exorbitantly, far beyond the government-enforced limit. The price of facemasks jumped by 1900% in Thailand and 827% in Indonesia (Hicks, 2020; Temby & Hu, 2020). The abundance of fake news poses a serious challenge to business, as it becomes increasingly difficult to effectively filter accurate and crucial information required to sustain business operations at a time when restrictive measures on economic activities are implemented across the world.

SOUTHEAST ASIAN GOVERNMENTS' CONTROVERSIAL LEGAL RESPONSES

Fake News in Southeast Asia's Legislations Prior to COVID-19

Recent years have witnessed the emergence of laws and government task forces against fake news across Southeast Asia. Countries like Singapore and Thailand have enacted fake-news laws that impose specific sanctions on the creation and dissemination of false information. To remove impugned content from the internet and social networking sites, government task forces (Indonesia, Thailand), directive teams (Cambodia), and site-tracking (Myanmar, Indonesia) were also established. In Malaysia, although the Anti-Fake News Act enacted in April 2018 under the *Barisan Nasional* regime was repealed by the new *Pakatan Harapan* regime in October 2019, fake news on social media is still addressed under existing laws, such as the penal code and the 1998 Communications and Multimedia Act. In Thailand, the 2017

Computer-Related Crime Act was adopted by the government to clamp down on any information that is deemed false.

Despite legal enactments and practices already in place, the term fake news still remains either absent of proper official definition in most of Southeast Asian countries, or vaguely defined and elaborated. In Singapore, a false statement is defined as "false or misleading, whether wholly or in part, and whether on its own or in the context in which it appears" under the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (2019, General interpretation, 2b). Within its scope, only false or misleading statements of fact are taken into account, whereas opinion, criticism, parodies, and satire are excluded. The Act, however, has been criticized for the lack of an explicit prescription for determining the falsity of a statement and for ambiguous definitions of public interest (Ives & Zhong, 2019). Furthermore, existing related legislation does not stipulate thresholds or criteria to determine what is deemed false or fake and provides no distinction between purposive disinformation and non-malicious and unintentional misinformation.

On the basis of this shortage of proper definitions and strong legal action in recent years, Southeast Asian governments are often criticized by human rights advocates for overusing and abusing wide-ranging powers. This is not surprising, since they are not only in charge of judicial interpretation, but also solely responsible for decisions on falsehood, what constitutes the public interest, and evaluating the impact of a false statement on the public interest, not to mention societal stability, and perhaps most crucially, national security.

Southeast Asian Governments' Responses to the Infodemic Amid the Outbreak

Various measures have been deployed by governments, organizations, and tech companies to crack down on inaccurate content circulating online during the pandemic. Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and Myanmar utilized previously established laws, such as criminal defamation laws, telecommunications laws, and the penal code, while Brunei and Laos pursued widespread self-censorship (Gomez & Ramcharan, 2020b). Aside from the increased use of previously established anti-fake news laws, there was a rise in emergency laws in the remaining countries with tougher legal action by governments. In the Philippines, the emergency law Bayanihan to Heal as One Act was enacted in March 2020, temporarily giving authorities special emergency powers to deal with the pandemic and the dissemination of fake news. Individuals or groups could be summoned if they were found to be "creating, perpetrating or spreading false information about COVID-19 crisis on social media and other platforms" (Philippines Department of Health, n.d., Section 6f, p.13). If found guilty, lawbreakers could be sentenced to jail for two months and/or charged up to USD 19,500. On 26 March 2020, the Thai government declared an emergency decree giving it powers to prevent the escalation of the pandemic, including prohibiting false and misleading media content. The violators would be issued warnings, and in cases of triggering severe impacts, they would face penalties of up to USD 1,200 or a maximum of two years in jail (Bangkok Post, 2020a). In April 2020, the Vietnamese government enforced the 15/2020/Decree, which replaces the 174/2013/Decree and specifically targets the proliferation of fake news. Accordingly, outlaws may be charged between USD 430

and USD 860, equivalent to around three to six months of basic salary in Vietnam (Tuoi Tre News, 2020). Similarly, Cambodia's parliament approved an emergency legislation on 10 April 2020 that allows the government to "control media and social media, prohibit or restrict distribution of information that could generate public fear or unrest, or that could damage national security" (Prak Chan Thul, 2020).

Southeast Asian governments' sanction measures towards the proliferation of fake news during the outbreak, especially in countries using criminal laws, such as Thailand, Indonesia, and Cambodia, have been widely condemned by human rights groups. They have raised alarm over the key articles targeting the dispersion of false and misleading information in issued emergency legislations. Suspicion stems from the vague or overly broad provisions made in these legislations, which could be exploited by the respective governments to bolster existing censorship beyond the pretext of COVID-19 and to quash dissents and choke off free speech deemed unfavorable to them (Amnesty International, 2020a; Bachelet, 2020; Glahan, 2020; Gomez & Ramcharan, 2020a; Human Rights Watch, 2020b; Lee 2020). In Vietnam, for example, the new 15/2020/Decree is put under critique as it extends far beyond tackling fake news on social media and cements government surveillance tools already heightened by the cybersecurity law enacted in 2019 (Nguyen & Pearson, 2020). Southeast Asian governments are also criticized for heavily sanctioning not only fake news but also hate speech and harassment (Sochua, 2020). In the Philippines, among the individuals suspected of spreading false information were also those "merely airing their grievances online" (Amnesty International, 2020b).

Censorship is another tool that has long been used by Southeast Asian governments to restrict online content. There are several criteria to evaluate the justification of censorship (Jansen, 1991; Sen, 2014). Transparency, for example, plays a crucial role, given that censorship is only regarded as justified "when its groundings are open to public scrutiny" (Jansen, 1991, pp. 24-25). Non-discriminatory is a further criterion emphasized by the United Nations (United Nations, 2020, p. 4). Except for the Philippines, Southeast Asian governments' restrictions on the internet and digital content are generally described as non-transparent and lacking judicial oversight and an independent appeal process, according to the evaluation of Freedom House (2020). Governments also periodically or routinely require websites and social media platforms to remove what they consider negative content. Practice during the pandemic shows that Southeast Asian anti-fake news laws do not require published evaluation on the impact of individual statements on the public interest. In Myanmar, 67 websites were blocked after deemed as spreading fake news. There was neither an explanation of what exactly constituted false news or information nor was the complete list of these websites made available for public access (IFJ Asia-Pacific, 2020; Kyaw et al., 2020). Although preventing the spread of fake news was claimed by the government to be the main reason for this censorship, ethnic media outlets are assumed to be amongst these censored sites.

Indonesia was criticized for problematic pandemic management, particularly the inability to deliver a consistent message and to provide data transparency and access to information to combat COVID-19 (Daraini, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2020a). The central government struggled with limited data and a significant data discrepancy between local administrations and the Health Ministry's statistics. Even though

an official website (www.covid19.go.id) was later launched to provide official information on COVID-19, a survey conducted by Pramiyanti et al. (2020) showed that only about one-fifth of all respondents used the website often, and most of them had never or rarely used it. Instead, more people relied on information obtained from news outlets and the mass media (Pramiyanti et al., 2020; Suherlina, 2020). Another survey conducted by LaporCOVID-19 (2020) revealed that government officials fell behind medical doctors/health experts and religious leaders in the ranking of the most trusted sources of COVID-19 information.

Despite criticisms by human rights advocates, allegations are mostly dismissed by the governments and media censorship measurements are likely to remain in place. In Thailand, legal enactments targeting social media posts have continued to be tightened in recent years and during the pandemic. This is reflected by the establishment of the Anti-Fake News Center in 2019 and the extension of emergency decrees amid the pandemic. This extension is viewed as having no legitimate basis, being arbitrary and disproportionate (Human Rights Watch, 2020b).

Beside governments' actions, major social networks and tech companies have cooperated to combat false and misleading information circulated online. Tech companies have also taken stricter rules for ads and limited monetization as almost all social networks have banned advertisements that mention the COVID-19 infection. Southeast Asian authorities, such as Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines, are provided ad credits to run COVID-19 education campaigns (O'Reilly, 2020). Twitter prioritized authoritative health information on their platform via expanding search prompt features for #coronavirus in many countries, including those in Southeast Asia, such as Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. There is also close cooperation between researchers and fact-checker teams to monitor the infodemic, track and verify false claims, and provide corrected information. Examples are the COVID-19 Infodemics Observatory developed by The Complex Multilayer Networks Lab, and the CoronaVirusFacts Alliance led by the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) at the Poynter Institute, which was also used for data collection in this article.

There are several factors catalyzing the ubiquitous proliferation of false information. Firstly, in a social media age, people are able to access information in near-real time. However, social media platforms, which are financially driven by clicks, promote a rapid proliferation of news far beyond the time required for adequate verification. Using the Zika virus as a case study, Sommariva et al. (2018) found that rumors on social networking sites gained three times more shares than verified information. Similarly, Vosoughi et al. (2018, p. 1146) concluded that "falsehood diffused farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information". Other factors include the initial scarcity of information about COVID-19, a low digital media literacy, the inadequacy of media gatekeepers, and legal loopholes in certain countries. In spite of an increasing number of online media outlets, Cambodia's current Press Law still excludes digital media. It is deemed not only outdated but also poorly and ambiguously drafted (IFJ Asia-Pacific, 2019). Yet, as shown above, even where legal measures and censorship are encouraged and well in place, their lack of adequacy and transparency additionally hamper trust in government measurements and decisions.

CONCLUSIONS

Southeast Asia features the highest social network usage and Internet penetration worldwide. It also witnessed an unprecedented rise in social media use during the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020. As the novel coronavirus experienced a dramatic rise worldwide and became a matter of great public concern both in online and offline social networks, many individuals tried to cash in on its popularity by creating and propagating disinformation on social media channels. Combined with misinformation, harassment, and hate-speech, the information disorder fuels an infodemic considered almost as dangerous as the virus itself.

While fake news on social media platforms in Southeast Asia can be broadly categorized into eight themes, the most common ones refer to disease symptoms, prevention, and treatment measures, as well as to governmental bodies' responses to the diffusion of the disease, including incorrect reporting of incidence and mortality rates. In several countries, fabricated and misleading contents targeting specific political, religious, and ethnic group are rampant. Social media have also proved an ideal place for organized scammers and hackers with malicious content set up to steal personal data. Among different categories of fake news, those related to prevention and treatment measures are considered particularly harmful since they might directly cause fatalities. Panic buying is also fueled by false and misleading information about prevention and treatment measures as well as governmental regulations. Meanwhile, hate crime, misleading content, and online hoaxes with conspiracy theories cause mistrust in the government, deepen social divides and heighten political, ethnic, and racial tensions.

In response to the infodemic, Southeast Asian authorities have pursued strong legal enactment and sanctions. Yet, their measures, especially censorship, are often criticized for being draconian and politically biased. The concern of human rights advocates is not unwarranted. It stems from the shortage of proper descriptions of fake news in legislations while governments' actions, in the name of tackling fake news, are still lacking transparency and independent appeal processes. Fact-checking coalitions have been helpful in monitoring the infodemic, while tech companies have taken restriction policies for ads relating to COVID-19 infection and limited monetization on communication platforms. Yet, any attempt to legislate against fake news falls short if not raising the general questions of how fake news is identified, who decides on its falsity, harmfulness, and the underlying intentions behind the creation and dissemination of it, and whether the legal actions against it are justified or not. Even if restriction measures are reasonable and justified, false and misleading information on messaging channels, such as WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger, is almost impossible to monitor while protecting privacy.

According to Donovan (2020), instead of being a source where fake news thrives, social media could play a significant role in ensuring global users receive timely, reliable, and accurate information. Government authorities can currently switch on emergency alert protocols across cellphones, TV channels, and radio to promptly reach out to the public, a feature that, however, is not available for social media. Social media companies could be included in these emergency systems to enable the timely transmission of reliable information. Their massive online advertising infrastructure

could be utilized for this purpose. Finally, it is important to acknowledge that no communication system is perfect and that, in the epic battle against COVID-19 falsehoods – as in the fight against the virus itself – responsibility rests not solely with governments, but also with the joint efforts of social actors, from civil organizations to businesses and citizens themselves.

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