

HIJACKING & WEAPONIZING THE NARRATIVE: DISINFORMATION AMID RISING REPRESSION IN EAST ASIA

Edited by Tess Bacalla, Philippines

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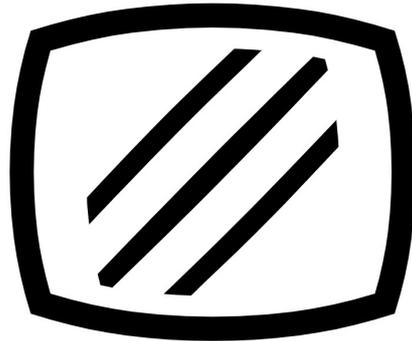
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FOREWORD

FIGHTING BACK AGAINST DISINFORMATION

By CIVICUS

CIVIL SOCIETY KNOWS only too well the power of disinformation. It is increasingly deployed as one of the tools to attack civil society. States, rogue politicians and anti-rights groups, often working in concert, deliberately sow disinformation to further their political agendas and tarnish those seen as standing in their way.

The COVID-19 pandemic offered further evidence of the ways in which disinformation can skew public discourse and directly cause harm to people's lives: in the pandemic, disinformation had the power to persuade people not to take potentially life-saving measures and endanger not only their own lives but those of others.

There is little that is accidental about disinformation. Powerful political forces use disinformation as a key instrument of repression, twisting and bending public narratives, and undermining and attacking opposing viewpoints. Disinformation often forms part of a suite of measures that seek to channel and control the power of the internet and social media, allied with censorship, shutdowns, online surveillance and the deployment of armies of paid trolls to propagate hate speech and attack people exercising their freedom of expression.

Civil society is targeted because it works to defend rights, advocate for social, political and economic change, and hold those in power to account.

Those who have the least power, members of excluded groups, are often the victims. Civil society is targeted because it works to defend rights, advocate for social, political, and economic change and hold those in power to account. Disinformation threatens to deny civil society its voice and misrepresent what civil society stands for.



STATE OFFENSIVE IN THE DIGITAL ERA

Across Asia, the focus of this research, governments and political and economic elites are using disinformation to their benefit.

Among many other examples in the Philippines, [cyber-troll armies](#) known as 'call centre hubs', linked to supporters of President Rodrigo Duterte, disseminate false and malicious content, including misleading memes, and conduct targeted harassment campaigns. Duterte supporters use call centre hubs to smear and boycott media networks that have been critical of the government's human rights violations.

In Vietnam, following a protest against land grabbing that turned violent, Vietnam's cyber-army, known as Force 47, was [deployed](#) to counter social media comments that criticised the way the authorities handled the situation. Force 47 responded by flooding social media with forced confessions in which people said they had made petrol bombs and other weapons in order to attack the police.

As part of China's repression of Hong Kong's democracy movement, pro-Beijing media outlets uncritically echo and boost state policies and dispense state propaganda while simultaneously denying any space for dissenting voices. Similarly, in West Papua, people's long struggle for independence from Indonesia is systematically thwarted not only through the state's use of brute force but also through the regime's unrelenting attempts to propagate a dominant narrative that serves its continuing rule. Online manipulation of opinion and targeted, well-funded cyber attacks against civil society and independent media are routinely deployed.

CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE CROSSHAIRS

Civil society is a target of disinformation, and civil society must be part of the solution. Clearly, in many countries ruling interests have no interest in tackling a problem that works in their favour. Civil society has long wrestled with the challenge of how to combat disinformation.

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As part of any response there is a need to rebut mistruth and check facts, and expose the machinery and economy of disinformation. There is also a need to promote counter-narratives that are grounded in truth and respect for rights. Counter-narratives need to give space for those attacked and excluded to tell their own stories and foster understanding of their realities. This calls for collaborative and inclusive approaches that bring together a range of different civic groups and voices.

None of this is easy, and there is an urgent need to share and learn from examples of what works. Case studies of innovative and successful stories of civil society initiatives to combat disinformation have the power to inspire us. We can learn from them and adapt them to our own circumstances.

LEARNING FROM ASIA

This new research seeks to encourage just that. The learning comes from Asia, but has lessons for civil society across the world. Case studies from Cambodia, Hong Kong, the Philippines and Indonesia, Mindanao and West Papua provide fresh insights into disinformation and strategies to counter it.

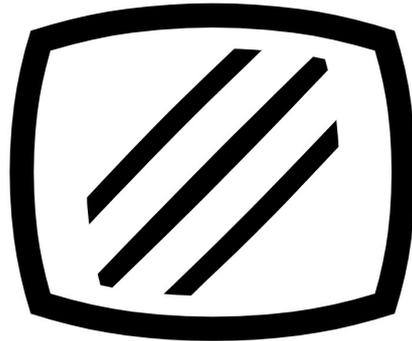
Alongside this, artists were tasked with responding to disinformation, and this research shows the fruits of their initiatives in engaging with the public in fresh and creative ways, highlighting the innovative strategies, new alliances, and out-of-the-box thinking required of civil society in fighting disinformation and promoting counter-narratives.

Research was conducted in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the lessons and insights it holds remain applicable today as societies still struggle with the pandemic and its impacts. The problems of disinformation and broader attacks on civic space only [intensified](#) during the pandemic. Any hopes of rebuilding our societies to be better following the pandemic must get to grips with this problem.

More research and more initiatives such as those captured in this report are needed if we are to win back control of our own narratives and rob disinformation of its power. These case studies offer a valuable jumping-off point for further action, reflection, and collaboration.



CIVICUS is a global alliance of civil society organisations and activists dedicated to strengthening citizen action and civil society throughout the world, with a membership alliance of more than 10,000 members in more than 175 countries.



HIJACKING & WEAPONIZING THE NARRATIVE DISINFORMATION AMID RISING REPRESSION IN EAST ASIA

By Tess Bacalla

AS THE WORLD grapples with the dreadful impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the disinformation menace continues to afflict nations, civil society groups, and individuals at pains to raise their voices against governments and rampant state violations of fundamental rights.

While the scourge of disinformation is not new, it has witnessed rapid spread aided by technology. For good or ill, social media is now a dominant force in public discourse –

and we humans, along with cultures and institutions, have been reduced to [information-processing mechanisms](#).

With digital technologies growing by leaps and bounds, an unprecedented wealth of information is just a mouse-click away. Yet, with supreme irony, many people remain in the dark or are being systematically misled about specific issues, notably the real state of affairs in their countries.

All too evident are the intensifying efforts of governments to suppress critical information and to manipulate public opinion using half-truths, propaganda, and outright lies within and beyond the digital sphere.

“70 countries now affected by organized social media manipulation, 150 percent more than 2017,” bannered an [article](#) highlighting the findings of the University of Oxford’s report, *The Global Disinformation Order: 2019 Global Inventory of Organised Social Media Manipulation*, released in September 2019. The study explored “the tools, capacities, strategies and resources employed by global ‘cyber troops’, typically government agencies and political parties, to influence public opinion” in those countries.

“Efforts to control or manipulate the public information space to influence people’s beliefs and opinions are certainly not new in Asia,” says Masato Kajimoto, Assistant Professor at Journalism and Media Studies Centre, the University of Hong Kong.

“Misleading rhetoric, cherry-picked factoids, gross exaggerations, made-up news and other fallacious messages have long been part of the communication tactics adopted by political leaders, hyper-partisan groups, some media outlets and religious extremists.”

But, what has changed in recent decades, and massively altered the contours of public conversations, is social media cooptation, or co-option, particularly by autocratic regimes.

An [insidious trend](#) observed five years ago by Seva Gunitsy, an associate professor of political science at the University of Toronto, noted “the shift from social media suppression to social media *co-option*.” He explained:

Over the past few years, elites in autocratic and hybrid regimes have increasingly begun to subvert social media for their own purposes and employing it as a tool of regime stability. As a result, social media is being transformed from an engine of protest to another potential mechanism of regime resilience, in part by shaping public discourse.

From “negative control” of the internet, in which regimes attempt “to block, censor, and suppress the flow of communication,” such regimes have moved “toward strategies of proactive co-optation in which social media serves certain regime functions.

“The opposite of internet freedom, therefore, is not necessarily internet censorship but a deceptive blend of control, co-option, and manipulation,” says Gunitsky.

As the University of Oxford report confirms, the use of social media to manipulate public opinion is now a global challenge. Cyber troops have been deployed, largely by government agencies and political parties, to influence public opinion.

We rue the massive flood of disinformation, a.k.a. ‘fake news’, being widely pushed on digital platforms by enablers of authoritarian and populist leaders, including institutions and individuals acting on the latter’s behest and other political actors with vast powers and resources to deploy. Creating and pushing narratives that distort otherwise meaningful public conversations is an integral, albeit destructive, component of the strategies that have been used by governments for ages. Today’s technologies have ramped up these efforts, ushering in a new world disorder that has governments hijacking and weaponizing narratives. Talk about the ‘new normal’ in the digital age.

States and members of the political elite are quick to control the flow of information and keep a tight lid on crucial narratives that are at the heart of issues confronting the public. This is a glaring reality in the four countries and regions covered by this series of reports.

Traditional or mainstream media have never seen more sinister and sophisticated attempts to curtail their right to report and help bring counter-narratives to the fore, while activists are constantly caught in the crosshairs of governments simply for speaking out.

All this happens amid an onslaught of disinformation campaigns targeting specific sectors, and weaponized narratives, unleashed to crush perceived enemies of the state, without necessarily resorting to conventional forms of repression.

Narrative, after all, is [power](#), especially when used – calibrated and weaponized – to manipulate people to advance specific agendas, especially of those in power. Governments know this too well.

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DISINFORMATION LANDSCAPE IN EAST ASIA: A BATTLE OF NARRATIVES

The world today is witness to a clash of narratives, the rules of which are heavily stacked against those that are on a truth-telling mission, such as independent media, notwithstanding the risks involved, particularly in today's political milieu. Some journalists who are simply doing their jobs despite today's COVID-19 pandemic have been charged with violations of laws proscribing 'fake news'. Such laws include emergency decrees purportedly enacted to help quell the pandemic.

This calls to mind the situation in much of East Asia today – disinformation is a salient feature of the information landscape (as it is in much of the world). A deeply worrisome disinformation disorder has fast emerged in a region where state leaders are increasingly doubling down on civil liberties, notably freedoms of speech and access to information.

These reports lift the veil on how repressive governments in the region are increasingly using disinformation to rein in dissent while perpetuating power. They cover Indonesia, Cambodia, the Philippines, and Hong Kong, with separate reports on the Philippine southern region of Mindanao and Indonesia's restive province of West Papua. These on the whole are reeling under the burden of aggressive campaigns against the dissemination of truthful accounts of public governance issues and events that impact people's lives while muting counter voices, often with the use of brute force, draconian legislation, and other forms of repression.

Concerned citizens, activists, media outfits, and opposition leaders are struggling to reclaim civic space even as they are faced with the huge challenge of shaping counternarratives that amplify voices and empower citizens.

In **Hong Kong** a flurry of disinformation had been circulating online targeting the pro-democracy protest movements in the beleaguered city, such as the Anti-ELAB (Extradition Law Amendment Bill) Movement and the 2014 Umbrella Movement that preceded it. This was largely blamed on China, widely perceived as scuttling efforts toward Hong Kong's political autonomy.

Linguistic differences between Hong Kong and China were key in signaling to the Hong Kong public that disinformation was originating from China, said a media expert.

The passage of the National Security Act on 30 June 2020 massively shifted the political landscape in Hong Kong, moving the struggle away from disinformation to outright repression of free speech and media freedom. The NSA's hasty implementation has a chilling effect on journalists, academics, and activists, who see the need to recalibrate their next steps. In the meantime, the political polarization stoked in part by massive disinformation in Hong Kong deepens.

In the **Philippines**, President Rodrigo Duterte, less than a month before taking his oath of office on 30 June 2016, warned: “I’m challenging you, guys. Kill journalism, stop journalism in the country. If you are worth your salt, you should accept the challenge.” Throughout his presidency he has consistently shown contempt for independent and critical media.

The true stakes of government-sponsored disinformation in the Philippines can be seen in the awful consequences of President Rodrigo Duterte’s centerpiece program, the so-called ‘war on drugs,’ which journalists worth their salt have bravely tried to cover, alongside other sensitive issues – with grave consequences. For instance, the fiercely independent Rappler online news site and its founder Maria Ressa have been slapped with multiple charges. The country’s biggest broadcast network, ABS-CBN, has been forcibly shut down when its broadcast franchise expired in May 2020.

“Mainstream media bias” is one of the overarching themes that codify the messaging from the Duterte government and its allies.

The spread of ‘hoaxes’, or disinformation’, in **Indonesia** – which spiked in the lead-up to the 2019 elections – is not a modern-day blight on the country’s political landscape, going decades back. The 1965-66 massacre under the Suharto regime was justified as a purge of communist enemies – a state narrative that has become deeply entrenched in the Indonesian psyche.

In the post-New Order era, hoaxes have taken on new dimensions. Media conglomerates have played a vital role in perpetuating the government’s narratives, often relying on official spokespersons and declining to tap independent or grassroots sources, especially during conflicts or mass unrest, not wanting to ruffle government feathers. Hoaxes have exploited intensifying Islamic identity politics in Indonesia, which has the largest Muslim population in the world.

Former Jakarta governor Basuki ‘Ahok’ Tjahaja Purnama was considered the first victim of “buzzer teams” – fake social media accounts that generate a buzz to make certain topics trend. Vilified on social media, Ahok, an ethnic Chinese Christian, was the target of racist and hardline Islamic online content that turned Muslim voters against him as an incumbent, who took over the governorship of Indonesia’s capital, Jakarta, when Joko ‘Jokowi’ Widodo ran for president in 2014.

In the Indonesian province of **West Papua**, half a century’s struggle for independence provides ample opportunity to tell the region’s stories – which its occupier is clamping down hard on. Today the eastern region is rife with conflict, human rights abuses, and repression.

Side by side with Indonesia’s deployment of heavily armed troops to the former Dutch colony, which it officially annexed in 1969 in a rigged referendum, is the use of information control as a powerful tool in the former’s repressive arsenal of security measures.

Controlling the flow of information, particularly on sensitive issues, is carried out under the guise of national security and protecting West Papuans. Complementing this strategy is collusion between the Ministry of Information and the Cenderawasih XVII Military Regional Command in Papua in the dissemination of information, and a labyrinthine accreditation process for foreign journalists, which gives the lie to President Joko Widodo's pledge to open the region to the media.

Internet shutdowns and internet censorship have been enforced as well, particularly in times of violence and mass protests against the government. This has made it even more difficult for West Papuans to get their stories out as they fight for independence.

In **Cambodia**, the administration of Prime Minister Hun Sen, the country's longest-serving head of state, wields a multi-pronged strategy to silence critics, in keeping with the regime's oppressive bent. The shutdown of independent newspapers, including *Cambodia Daily*, and other media outlets based on imagined offenses or trumped-up charges is just one of a slew of tactics employed by the government.

The government's calibrated disinformation campaign at times paints a glowing, albeit misleading, picture of the real situation in the country he has ruled for more than three decades.

In the face of today's rampaging global health scourge, Hun Sen downplayed the coronavirus, claiming Cambodia had the capacity to control its spread. Less than flattering accounts of what is happening in the country and the people's sentiments, including fears of the outbreak, are cause for police apprehension. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, netizens have been arrested on charges of spreading 'fake news'.

The government that is aggressively curbing 'fake news' is in itself a purveyor of disinformation, when doing so suits its purposes or political agenda.

Using disinformation, it retaliates against critics, including foreign countries critical of the state. Even political allies are targeted in the face of perceived defiance of Hun Sen's authority. The administration is quick to defend itself against criticism, utilizing state-owned and -controlled media, and cunning means such as publishing 'fake letters to the editor' and press releases to shape public perceptions.

The same tack has been used to sow division within opposition ranks. Call it a classic divide-and-conquer strategy deployed by the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP), with the defunct Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) as its prime target.

In November 2017 the Supreme Court dissolved the CNRP after opposition leader Kem Sokha was charged with conspiring with the United States to overthrow the CPP – an accusation straight out of the state's conspiracy playbook.

STATE-SANCTIONED 'TRUTH'

Whether in the Philippines, Indonesia, Cambodia, or Hong Kong – and elsewhere in the Asian region, and across the globe – states leery of losing control of power think nothing of quashing dissent and counter-narratives. Their version of realities, as expressed in official pronouncements and hollow assurances, is often diametrically opposed to the people's perceptions of their collective struggles.

In the Philippines, for example, President Rodrigo Duterte's administration consistently denies allegations of human rights violations while claiming it is in fact "enabling" rights protection. He boldly declared that the 31-month martial law in the conflict-ridden region of Mindanao ended on 31 December 2019 "without abuses by the civilian sector, by the police, by the military" – an outright fabrication to anyone all too familiar with the human rights record of his administration.

In much of the East Asian region, widespread human rights violations are not breaches of civil liberties but earnest state efforts to protect the public interest and maintain national security. So states like their constituents to think. This is their version of truth being bandied about. These same governments run roughshod over anyone who stands in their way while in pursuit of their 'truth'.

Newspaper columnist John Nery quotes political philosopher Hannah Arendt in his report on the Philippines for this series: "Secrecy... and deception, the deliberate falsehood and the outright lie used as legitimate means to achieve political ends, have been with us since the beginning of recorded history. Truthfulness has never been counted among the political virtues, and lies have always been regarded as justifiable tools in political dealings."

"Truthfulness has never been counted among the political virtues, and lies have always been regarded as justifiable tools in political dealings."

– HANNAH ARENDT

In the so-called post-truth, 'fake news', era, the only 'truth' acceptable to governments is what they make it out to be. Anyone who says otherwise or pushes counter-narratives risks being called a liar, being vilified on social media – or suffering a worse fate. Ask journalists and human rights defenders and activists, or just about anyone who sees, sans rose-colored glasses, the deplorable realities of state governance on this side of the globe and the abuses committed in the name of power.

A TROIKA OF TACTICS: UNRELENTING REPRESSION AMID THE RISE IN DISINFORMATION

Silencing their critics, oftentimes through repressive means, goes hand in hand with a rapid deterioration of fundamental freedoms in the region, and elsewhere in Asia, including freedom of speech and of the press.

“Press freedom in the Asia-Pacific region has steeply declined in the past decade, according to [Reporters Without Borders](#) when it released the 2020 World Press Freedom Index.

The intensifying suppression of fundamental rights and silencing of dissenting voices are two elements in a triad of tactics used by authoritarian regimes to drown out critical voices. The third, an aggressive push to discredit critics, including political opponents, and float polarizing discourses that challenge the [authority of truth and facts](#), uses organized, sophisticated, and coordinated propaganda campaigns such as in countries or cities like Hong Kong, Indonesia, and the Philippines. China, a major player in global disinformation, has gone into overdrive using social media platforms to manipulate information in Hong Kong, where the struggle for democracy has never been so fraught with challenges and risks. An army of buzzers for political propaganda was uncovered in Indonesia as early as 2014, during the presidential election campaign, in support of specific candidates.

There is no gainsaying the complex threats that this regional pattern ultimately poses to the democratic process, rule of law, and civil liberties in these parts of the region. This, while regime legitimacy is bolstered and [anti-regime sentiment is sidelined or discredited](#) through the state’s systematic use of social networks and computational propaganda to stir public discourse in its favor.

DEVELOPING AND MAINSTREAMING COUNTER-NARRATIVES: WAY FORWARD?

As regimes step up efforts to hijack and weaponize critical and opposing narratives often drowned out by state-led and -sanctioned propaganda and well-oiled disinformation infrastructure rendered more powerful by the advent of digital media, developing counter messaging seems a vital way forward, alongside other strategies.

Earnestly moving in this direction will mean exploring a range of counter-narrative efforts – among a spectrum of actors, including civil society, media, local communities, and even ordinary folk who are caught up in the maelstrom of disinformation – that will seek not only to combat disinformation but also provide alternative and hitherto untold content that brings to the fore diverse stories and voices in an open and safe environment, virtual or otherwise.

Counter messaging initiatives will also mean engaging and empowering populations – including the states’ usual targets in their so-called anti-terrorist campaigns demonizing activists and independent media – in meaningful dialogue using social media and traditional platforms.

These will also mean mainstreaming historical narratives to help write finis to the marginalization of sectors and communities long stereotyped in national discourse.

This has been the lot of the Bangsamoro people in Mindanao, grossly misrepresented in media, textbooks, and prevailing narratives, no thanks to political administrations, past and present, whose exclusionary and exploitative policies have stoked decades-old injustices heaped on them. Flawed discourses about the war-weary region have been indelibly imprinted on the national psyche – with little sign of reversal.

Admittedly, generating alternative narratives is a formidable challenge.

West Papua has been struggling for decades to disseminate its counter-narratives – highlighting its aspirations for independence amid systemic oppression. But, not only are its determined efforts severely undermined by conventional tools of repression, local media’s cooptation by and collusion with state forces, among other inhibiting factors, is also reinforcing today’s dominant narrative – that of a regime hell-bent on keeping an otherwise sovereign people in its clutches.

Across East Asia, a myriad of voices struggle to rise above the din of state propaganda, social media manipulation, and computationally driven campaigns.

In the face of the damage wrought by populist and authoritarian regimes and untruthful and polarizing narratives foisted on target groups or audiences, and nations as a whole, generating other narratives to challenge the dominant ones that trample on democratic values and perpetuate oppressive systems within and beyond the realm of public governance, some fundamental questions require thoughtful reflections:

★ How can we create counter-narratives that bring about a sense of shared community and push back against oppressive regimes?

★ How can we create alternative narrative strategies that can subdue lies, propaganda, and so-called ‘fake news’?

★ How can we build the capacity of specific sectors, including civil society, citizens, and other targets of disinformation, to generate counter-narratives?

★ How can we make it safer for marginalized groups, which are the subject of disinformation campaigns, to tell their side of the story?

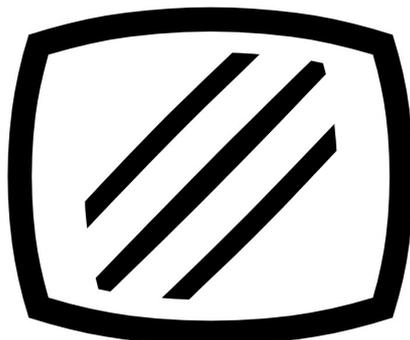
★ How can we make room for meaningful and sustainable collaboration across sectors, including states, in the generation of counter-narratives?

★ How can we mainstream counter-narratives, lived realities, and equal platforms for marginalized voices within the national and regional discourse?

Tackling these questions may not readily yield the desired results, but it is a step in the right direction in a region under siege from state-sponsored disinformation.



Tess Bacalla is an award-winning independent journalist, editor, and media trainer. She is the Project Lead and editor-in-chief of the Asia Democracy Chronicles. Tess formerly served as the executive director of the Southeast Asian Press Alliance (SEAPA) and media training director of the Philippine Press Institute.



DISINFORMATION IN CAMBODIA OBLITERATING CRITICS & OPPOSITION

By Nop Vy

WHEN COVID-19 hit Cambodia in the first quarter of 2020, Prime Minister Hun Sen proved true to form by downplaying the risks posed by the pandemic.

In a graduation ceremony held on 18 February 2020, where he handed out certificates to students of a university in Phnom Penh, Hun Sen declared there was no confirmed case yet of coronavirus in the Southeast Asian country. He further claimed that Cambodia had the capacity to control its spread, and oddly enough, asserted that no Cambodian would be infected with the virus. He made the bold — and false — assertion less than a month after the first case of the deadly disease surfaced on January 27th. Why, traffic accidents were scarier, killing an average of five to six Cambodians every day, he said.

By mid-April, there were already 120 confirmed cases of the health scourge in Cambodia, flatly giving the lie to Hun Sen's contentions.

The Prime Minister’s unwarranted indifference to the newly emergent pandemic was in stark contrast to the concerns voiced online by Cambodians – a fact that did not sit well with the government. Between January and March, a total of 17 netizens were arrested on charges including spreading of ‘fake news.’ Among the five who were apprehended and jailed were “members or supporters of the outlawed opposition CNRP [Cambodia National Rescue Party],” VOD English [reported](#).



SYSTEMIC PROPAGANDA

The state’s response to the pandemic and the ensuing arrests of critics of the government for raising issues that have a chilling effect on a nation run by an authoritarian regime is nothing new in Cambodia. If anything, COVID-19, besides wreaking havoc on the human body, has made glaring the incumbent leadership’s determined effort to crack down on all manner of dissent, or anyone who questions the administration, its policies, and how these are enforced.

In April last year, amid the global health crisis, Parliament passed a proposed law on state emergency that would grant enormous powers to the government to monitor and control the spread of information and impose undue restrictions on the exercise of civil liberties. It took only a week, from late March when Hun Sen broached the drafting and passage of such a law, for the rubber-stamp legislature to enact this piece of legislation.

The newly minted law’s main targets are the state’s usual suspects: traditional and social media, civil society actors advocating human rights, and the opposition.

“The law is intended to protect public order, security, people’s interests, lives, health, property and the environment,” [declared](#) Ministry of Justice spokesperson Chin Malin.

In an ironic stroke, what the Hun Sen government purports to protect the nation against is precisely what it dishes out: disinformation.

“The law is intended to protect public order, security, people’s interests, lives, health, property and the environment,” declared Ministry of Justice spokesperson Chin Malin.

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STATE AS PURVEYOR OF DISINFORMATION

In Cambodia, the state clamps down hard on the media to control the narrative that flows out of sources other than government mouthpieces. And the media is just one of the tools in its arsenal to achieve this goal.

Since the media crackdown in 2017, the administration has exercised tight control of the legacy press, including state-owned and private broadcasting outfits and digital platforms.

According to the Ministry of Information, around 200 radio stations, more than 20 TV stations, 22 news agencies, more than 200 cable television channels, and around 400 online news sites were registered by the end of 2019. A string of these media outlets is run or controlled by the government, public officials' kin, and other individuals affiliated with the ruling Cambodian People's Party.

Hun Sen's daughter, Hun Mana, owns at least [14 companies](#), including two TV stations, one radio station, one print publication, and its online counterpart, among others. The Chief of Cambodia's Chamber of Commerce owns three TV stations and one radio station, while the Secretary of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs owns one TV station and one radio station. There are more media platforms owned by officials working for the Ministry of Information and other government ministries. These platforms are used to attack democratic countries and foreign critics supporting the Cambodian opposition or criticizing Hun Sen's friendship with China.

Pro-government online media are actively engaged in promoting state news and serving its propaganda needs. These are, in no particular order, [Fresh News](#), [DAP-News](#), [Swift News Daily](#), and [Cambodia Express News](#).

Fresh News was launched in 2012, initially as a Facebook page. Then it became a full-fledged website and later established TV Fresh News, which promoted itself as the only digital media outlet that the government uses to issue statements and announcements.

In 2020, Fresh News was [described](#) as having "a privileged perch in the information ecosystem of the Cambodian People's Party." It is the only media outlet permitted to interview Hun Sen, and often "policy orders flow downstream straight from Hun Sen through the Council of Ministers," [says](#) Sebastian Strangio, author of *Hun Sen's Cambodia*. Eventually, such policy orders become Fresh News Content.

At the head of Fresh News is Lim Cheavuha, the company's founder and CEO. He had worked as a journalist with DAP-News and then left to establish Fresh News in 2012. In Cambodia, the media company is perceived as providing fast news updates and document releases from the government. But according to the Cambodian Center for Independent Media 2017 [report](#), Fresh News is ranked as pro-government media. The

report also states that Alexa, Amazon’s virtual assistant AI technology, lists Fresh News as Cambodia’s third most-visited site.

Currently, Fresh News publishes in three languages: Khmer, English, and Chinese. Aside from Cheavutha, Fresh News also has an editor-in-chief and two deputy editors-in-chief. Under a section called “Office News” are three employees named as translators for the Khmer and English versions. Only one spot reporter is listed.

As a recognized government mouthpiece, Fresh News also ventures into publishing. The outlet recently published a [700-page collection](#) of open letters, commentaries, and political analyses. Called *Political Analysis Articles*, it spins Cambodia’s recent political crackdown on the opposition as a successful prevention of a “color revolution”.

The collection is sold at US\$2 and covers the political situation in Cambodia beginning with Sam Rainsy’s resignation from the Cambodia National Rescue Party in February 2017 until the Supreme Court ruled to dissolve the party in November that year. This move effectively removed the only existing electoral threat to Hun Sen’s political control – which the Fresh News collection attempts to spin as events in the country’s best interests. Moreover, the book’s first page also features a shot of Hun Sen surrounded by supporters, cheering for him and waving Cambodian flags. One audience member is also shown lifting a portrait of the premier.

Created as a response to the Internet’s rapid rise in Cambodia, Fresh News is also a major presence in the realm of digital news. During the last general election, the opposition conducted an active online campaign.



DISINFORMATION: PURPOSES AND BENEFITS

The government’s actions over the past two decades show that it employs disinformation for several purposes, all of which ensure the perpetuation of its power and the weakening of any opposition, whether from rival parties or from within the ruling party.

Cambodia has come under criticism for how it deals with the opposition and for the government’s long friendship with China. To deflect the issue, the government taps into media companies owned by officials or government allies to attack their critics, and numerous media outlets are practically controlled by the government.

[Outlets](#) like Fresh News, DAP-news, and CEN have been growing rapidly to attract digital audiences, after the closure of *Cambodia Daily*, the discontinuation of Radio Free Asia and Voice of America, and the sale of *The Phnom Penh Post*. As mentioned earlier, Fresh News and DAP-News have been granted exclusive coverage of the

government's announcements and activities, practically acting as mouthpieces. Often they release announcements before other local media become aware of them.

Another Fresh News tactic is to publish opinions or letters to the editor from anonymous readers, expressing strong views critical of the opposition or of alleged foreign conspiracies aimed at overthrowing the government. Such comments usually precede announcements from Hun Sen or other members of his party.

USING THE MEDIA TO ATTACK CRITICS

Given the government's control over various outlets, any of these platforms can be used to attack its critics. For example, in October 2017, an anonymous troll commenting on Fresh News offered condolences to the victims of [the Las Vegas shooting](#). Three days later, Hun Sen used the same words in a speech.

Social media users and activists often criticize the Cambodian government's inability to control safety and security in the country, citing the best practices in other countries. The government and pro-government media like Fresh News respond to criticism by citing incidents like the Las Vegas shooting as a counterargument.

A few days after Hun Sen offered his condolences over the mass shooting, he gave another speech suggesting that the incident was "a kind of [cosmic rebuke](#) following American warnings to its citizens about safety in [Cambodia]." He said, "When the US ambassador called for Americans to be careful in Cambodia, [the shooting] did not happen in Cambodia but on US soil. Yet the US is the one who made the appeal. This is the mocking of fate."

This was a reference to the US embassy's security warning on 13 September 2017 about increasing anti-American rhetoric in light of opposition leader Kem Sokha's arrest and the expulsion of the National Democratic Institute, a US-based non-government organization.

CNC and BTV, two of Cambodia's larger TV stations, which are owned by the president of the Cambodia Chamber of Commerce and Hun Sen's daughter, have programs of around an hour daily that promote the government's vested interests. Commentators on these shows attack the European Union and the US and promote Cambodia's growing partnership with China. Before national elections, these shows are also used to attack opposition candidates and pro-democracy countries.

The formula rarely varies: point out other countries' problems to discredit them and attack any opposition as dangers to Cambodia's stability. All this is distributed through state-owned and pro-government traditional and social media outlets. Another strategy

is to accuse the US of masterminding “color revolutions” and encouraging the overthrow of the government.

Such accusations were leveled against the recently shut down National Democratic Institute or dissolved opposition party Cambodia National Rescue Party. CNRP’s former president, Kem Sokha was [accused](#) of plotting with the US government to incite a revolution in Cambodia. When the US invited Sokha to learn how to build democratic institutions and processes, the Cambodian government compared this move with the Arab Spring and the revolutions in Tunisia and in Egypt, all of which were hot topics during the Cambodian national elections in 2013.



BREAKING THE SOLIDARITY OF THE OPPOSITION

In July 2012, Sam Rainsy and Kem Sokha, representing the Sam Rainsy Party and the Human Rights Party, met in Manila, Philippines to seal the deal of their parties' merger. This coming together resulted in the creation of the CNRP, with the two leaders of the opposition agreeing to join forces to bring democracy to Cambodia. CNRP had enjoyed a large support base from the urban and youth demographics in the 2013 national elections. The party also enjoyed around 50% of the votes in the 2017 commune elections – a huge challenge to the ruling Cambodian People’s Party.

At the time, this was considered a huge electoral gain for the CNRP; in 2012, the Sam Rainsy Party and the Human Rights Party had only won 40 communes between them. Kem Sokha expected this victory to be the foundation for more gains in the 2018 general elections. The increase of over 440 communes may have signified a threat to Hun Sen’s Cambodian People’s Party, which explains the disinformation campaign it launched to divide the alliance between Sokha and Rainsy even after the CNRP’s dissolution in November 2017.

One such move was done through the *Cambodian Express News* (CEN), an online outlet associated with the newspaper *Raksmei Kampuchea Daily*, which has a long history of supporting the CPP. On 30 October 2019, CEN claimed that CNRP deputy Mu Sochua had released a statement: “Mu Sochua accepts the truth that Sam Rainsy supporters are cheaters.” The purported proof offered were messages posted on the Facebook account of one Muth Chantha, a CNRP officer closest to Sokha. A similar story was also published on DAP-News, which is owned by Soy Sopheap, a high-profile journalist and political commentator allied with the CPP.

Ruling party officers have also disseminated fake letters and press releases, claiming that they were issued by supporters of Kem Sokha or of Sam Rainsy. A press release, supposedly from CNRP, was published on 20 January 2020, saying that the party would call 2020 the year of change in Cambodia. The statement also called Hun Sen the

national betrayer and called on Cambodians to overthrow the ruling party's regime. CNRP rejected the statement, calling it fake on its Facebook page.

On the other hand, there is also content that seems to attack Hun Sen and the ruling party, which tends to be popular and widely shared by opposition supporters. For example, Rainsy's Facebook page published a press release on 7 February 2019, using CPP's logo and stamp, and expressing serious concern over Hun Sen's actions. It was purportedly written by CPP members. Thousands shared, liked, and commented on this post.

Some of Rainsy's Facebook statuses have also shared fake claims, which seem intended to create a split between Hun Sen and his officers and allies like the interior minister, the defense minister, and others.

Sometimes the posts come from other accounts. One Facebook account named Seng Ratana claimed in July 2019 that Hing Bun Heang, deputy commander of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces and commander of Hun Sen's bodyguard unit, had gone to Thailand to accompany and protect Rainsy on his return to Cambodia. Hing Bun Heang [denied](#) this, saying he was ready to arrest Rainsy. It is worth noting that the commander is [suspected](#) in a number of political killings dating as far back as 1997, so statements like his threat to arrest Rainsy are a matter of concern.

Meanwhile, CPP supporters have also accused Rainsy and company of spreading false news. Hun Sen's line regarding this claim is familiar: fake news is used by foreign-backed [opportunists](#) to stir unrest in Cambodia and to encourage overthrowing the government.

Rainsy has also accused Hun Sen of spreading rumors that CNRP has split its followers between him and Sokha and said as much in the party's international conference in Atlanta, Georgia in the United States. Rainsy [said](#), "Kem Sokha is detained and he can do nothing as he has no freedom. They used Kem Sokha's name and it is Hun Sen's trick, and we need to understand this clearly. Maintain the stance – Kem Sokha and Sam Rainsy are one person [with] one heart [and] one purpose, which is to rescue our country."

He [added](#), "Be careful—do not fall for the tricks and propaganda of Hun Sen saying that the CNRP is split. It is not true. We understand clearly that [if] we unite and agree with each other, we can ensure the CNRP's victory, which is the victory of all Cambodians."

But by then the damage had been done. Sokha's daughters attacked Rainsy, whom they accused of engaging in a "smear campaign" against their father and sully his integrity. Disinformation also targets Sokha, from the media to the courts. [Earlier in 2020](#), he was tried for treason over allegations of conspiring with foreign states or agents to help them invade Cambodia. The evidence the state prosecutors offered was a highly edited video of a public speech Sokha had given in Australia in 2013. Sokha categorically denied this allegation, but the rumors still hound him. Human Rights

Watch released a [statement](#) calling it a bogus prosecution and reiterated a call to drop the charges against Sokha.

Hun Sen's family also gets targeted for disinformation, although of the less damaging kind. The prime minister's son, Hun Manet, was [rumored](#) to be the son of a Vietnamese leader, according to some Facebook posts in 2016. Hun Sen denied it and accused the CNRP of spreading the rumor. CNRP denied this. The rumor did little to damage Hun Manet's standing in Cambodian politics. Today, he is viewed as his father's [successor](#) in government, and there are speculations that he will strengthen the country's ties with China.



CREATING FEAR WITHIN THE RULING PARTY

Hun Sen has been known to keep CPP members in line using the powers available to him and has made what may be false claims to the media to cover it up.

One case involves former CPP president and Cambodian senate president Chea Sim, who enjoyed the support of a faction within CPP. In 2004, he was acting head of state when Norodom Sihanouk was abroad, and during this time, he refused to sign a bill into a law that would ease ratification of key executive and legislative positions for the ruling party.

In consequence, then-national police chief Hok Lundy and his forces surrounded Chea Sim's house, forcing negotiations and resulting in [Chea Sim leaving the country](#). Hok Lundy denied this, claiming that Chea Sim had gone abroad to seek medical treatment.

Disinformation also surrounds Hun Sen's dealings with private enterprise. Businessman Kith Meng, the owner of the Royal Group, a conglomerate which includes three TV stations and one radio station, was rumored to have been [arrested](#) after making Hun Sen angry. The news was shared by a community-based news outlet called CBN Khmer, which published it on its Facebook page. One of Meng's media companies, Cambodia Broadcasting Service, denounced the rumor.

All this happened after Hun Sen came under fire after a video leaked by Radio Free Asia showed him ordering Meng to fire Ouk Vora, CEO of CNC TV, another one of Meng's companies. Meng had not completely agreed to firing Vora, and the speculation goes that Hun Sen wished to force the issue. This [report](#) from 2019 also speculates that the spat reflects some fracturing within the CPP power structure.



SHRINKING SPACE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

In a previous report, Asia Democracy Network [noted](#) the sudden silencing of the Fourth Estate in recent years, following the closure of *The Cambodia Daily*, the sale of *The Phnom Penh Post* to a consortium with links to the government, and the removal of Radio Free Asia and Voice of America. Human Rights Watch expressed similar concerns in its [statement](#) calling for the release of people voicing their concerns over the government’s pandemic response in March.

This also affects the status of civil society organizations in Cambodia. The government constantly accuses such organizations of having ties with foreign governments that are trying to incite “color revolutions” against the Cambodian government. According to the Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index Report for 2019, Cambodia’s scores continued on its downward trend, with an overall CSO sustainability index of 4.6. Broken down, this means lower scores in legal environment, organizational capacity, financial viability, advocacy, and public image. Cambodia did increase its scores in service provision and sectoral infrastructure, however. (A PDF of the report is available for download [here](#).)



LEGISLATION AGAINST DISINFORMATION

In May 2018, the government [established](#) a working group to address the issue of ‘fake news’. This involved three ministries – Information, Interior, and Posts and Telecommunications – to investigate online media platforms suspected of spreading disinformation. This was [criticized](#) by local rights organizations as contradictory to the right to free expression, and there are concerns over its transparency. The working group is composed of government officers, and one of their stated goals is to look out for statements inciting people to undertake “color revolutions” against the government.

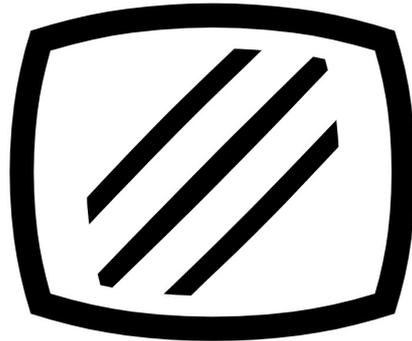
However, some non-government organizations have taken steps towards addressing this. In February 2020, the Women’s Media Centre of Cambodia (WMC) [launched](#) its own information verification website called Crosscheck WMC, the first information authentication site in Cambodia. The website can be accessed [here](#).

As early as 2017, however, the idea of a law against disinformation was a matter of [concern](#) for many journalists. At the time, reporters with Voice of America and Radio Free Asia were losing their jobs and several Khmer radio stations were being silenced. The following year, the recently passed law was used to [silence](#) criticism of Hun Sen’s regime, and in 2020, Human Rights Watch reported 30 arbitrary arrests from January to April. Given the government’s stranglehold on many media companies and their

aggressive actions against critics while being at the forefront of disinformation in the country, the landscape of free expression in Cambodia looks fairly bleak.



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DISINFORMATION ON HONG KONG DEMONIZING THE PRO-DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT

By Brian Hioe

UNTIL THE CONTROVERSIAL National Security Law reared its ugly head, protests had rocked Hong Kong since March 2019, with demonstrations having drawn close to two million of the city's total population of 7.45 million onto the streets in their early weeks. Protests originally broke out against an extradition bill that would have allowed targeted individuals in Hong Kong to be extradited to China to face charges.

The protests were collectively dubbed the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (ELAB) Movement. Yet, the movement later expanded to encompass more general calls for political autonomy – a long drawn-out battle that turned more grueling by the day in today's political dispensation in Asia's financial hub.

Given how widespread the protests in Hong Kong had been, it was not surprising that social divisions ran deep in the city. The political environment in Hong Kong had become highly polarized, a situation that soon contributed to the difficulty of verifying information, including reports circulating on social media.

Alleged [attacks](#) on demonstrators by members of the Hong Kong Police Force (HKPF) at the Prince Edward MTR station on 31 August 2019 point to many of the challenges around disinformation in Hong Kong today.

Video circulated widely online of police attacking individuals in MTR cars even if many individuals may not have been protesters. The HKPF refused to release video footage of the police clearance operation despite demands from pro-democracy lawmakers that such footage be released.

As a result, allegations had dogged the HKPF that deaths occurred in the MTR station, but that these were covered up. Memorials for alleged victims set up outside of the Prince Edward MTR station were sometimes torn down by the HKPF.

A survey conducted by the Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute showed that 52% of those surveyed believed that deaths had occurred in the course of the clearance operation. Likewise, [a survey conducted](#) by the Chinese University of Hong Kong's Centre for Communication and Public Opinion Survey showed 48% of those surveyed believed that deaths had occurred. Both polls were conducted in October 2019.

Yet, police and government spokespersons said police actions were justified and proportional, claiming during press conferences that police were attacking "violent demonstrators" who had changed clothes in order to blend in with the crowd.

As the media environment in Hong Kong is divided between pro-Beijing media outlets and media outlets favoring the pro-democracy camp, reflecting the broader political divisions in Hong Kong, pro-Beijing media outlets had also made similar reports and these were echoed in the views voiced online by pro-Beijing groups. Disinformation gave the lie to what actually occurred on 31 August 2019.



CHINA'S HAND

Disinformation efforts in Hong Kong commonly originate from the Chinese government or from its proxy, the Hong Kong government. After all, the Chinese government has a vested interest in circulating disinformation targeting pro-democracy protest movements in Hong Kong, such as the Anti-ELAB movement and the 2014 Umbrella Movement before it, and was concerned with similar issues regarding Hong Kong's political autonomy. This has been a large focus of disinformation efforts in the past few years.

The Chinese government has a specific goal in circulating such disinformation. That is to shape the international perception of protest movements in Hong Kong, thus

minimizing global support for pro-democracy activists while downplaying the size and intensity of the protests.

The Chinese government has a specific goal in circulating such disinformation. That is to shape the international perception of protest movements in Hong Kong, thus minimizing global support for pro-democracy activists while downplaying the size and intensity of the protests.

Such disinformation efforts necessarily use English, the language of the international community, and operate on English-language social media networks used internationally even when those networks may be blocked in China.

The Chinese government is aware that much of international media covering the greater China region is based in Hong Kong. This is partly because of Hong Kong's centrality as an economic and financial hub for the region. Likewise, some journalists have been forced to relocate to Hong Kong after their expulsion from China. Among them is New York Times reporter Austin Ramzy, who moved to Hong Kong after being forced out of China in 2014. As a result, the Umbrella Movement in 2014 saw heavy coverage of the protests in English-language media covering China.

It may not be surprising, then, that there was a discernible uptick in the spread of disinformation between the 2014 Umbrella Movement and the 2019 Anti-ELAB Movement. Heavy coverage of the Umbrella Movement may have prompted China to place greater priority on how international perceptions of the mainland stood to be affected by protest movements in Hong Kong.

As such, while disinformation may have intensified around the Anti-ELAB Movement compared to the Umbrella Movement five years prior, there were indications that significant elements of China's response to the outbreak of Anti-ELAB Movement were ad hoc in nature.



MAINLAND GOALS

Disinformation efforts attributed to the Chinese government, such as using fake accounts and botnets on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, were believed to make it appear as though protests were universally opposed within Hong Kong. In August 2019, this led Twitter to [suspend](#) at least 900 accounts involved in efforts to spread disinformation about the protests. These were part of a larger network of 200,000

illegitimate accounts. Google [disabled](#) 210 YouTube accounts, and Facebook [suspended](#) seven pages, three groups, and five accounts.

Disinformation by the Chinese government has a domestic audience, as observed in efforts by the state media to shape the narrative around the protests. The Chinese government wanted to prevent Chinese from becoming sympathetic to the protests. This was seen in sharp measures taken against Chinese nationals who visited the protests with the stated aim of determining for themselves the truth behind the protests. Among them were lawyer [Chen Qiushi](#) and journalist [Sophie Xueqin Huang](#).

Disinformation efforts operate in tandem with news blackouts, arrests, and censorship in order to control the information about the protests that mainland Chinese can access.

The Chinese government also wanted to generate the perception that the Hong Kong protests were illegitimate; that they were the handiwork of infiltrators from Western countries seeking to undermine China rather than naturally developing expressions of outrage by Hong Kong people.

Such disinformation efforts directed at domestic Chinese audiences must be in Chinese and operate on domestic social media networks such as WeChat and the popular micro-blogging platform Weibo. Such efforts benefit from the fact that Chinese surveillance technologies are built into such apps, facilitating monitoring of the dissemination of certain ideas and the automatic removal through filtering algorithms of any information that runs counter to the Chinese government's official narrative.

While there were no visible mass expressions of support from mainland Chinese for the Umbrella Movement or the Anti-ELAB Movement apart from isolated cases, the Chinese government wanted to avoid any sympathy or solidarity between Chinese and Hong Kong citizens. But more significantly, Beijing wanted to keep the Chinese people from being encouraged to protest and make demands of the government if Hong Kong protesters were successful in achieving any of their demands.

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In past years, the Chinese government had attributed the rising trend in political demonstrations in Guangdong province to Hong Kong's influence. Such demonstrations included the 2018 labor unrest in the city of Shenzhen in Guangdong, which involved the employees of a welding company, Jasic; and the [2016 grassroots uprising](#) in Wukan village in Guangdong.

Disinformation efforts also take place within Hong Kong. The Chinese and Hong Kong governments both wanted to engender the perception that protest actors were violent and irrational, that claims to be peaceful and rational by protesters simply served to conceal an extremist ideology. This can be observed in reports that circulated about alleged acts of violence by protesters. A notable example was the report that a police officer had his finger cut off by protesters with pliers during a protest in the Shatin district in July 2019. This was later proven to be false.

Chinese disinformation efforts within Hong Kong can be state-sponsored, though some are also thought to be produced by Chinese netizens acting on nationalistic convictions. Similar to Taiwan, Chinese disinformation takes place through social media but is amplified by pro-Beijing news outlets.

Eric Wishart, former editor-in-chief of Agence France-Presse, a global news agency, and lecturer at the Journalism and Media Studies Center of the University of Hong Kong, observed an "explosion" of disinformation and misinformation "almost instantly with the protests." He also noted an immediate increase in the amount of Twitter bots circulating disinformation about the unrest.

Before the protests, issues regarding disinformation had not been centered in the same way in Hong Kong. Masato Kajimoto, assistant professor of journalism at the Journalism and Media Studies Centre at the University of Hong Kong, said before the protests, "false information stayed within the community." But after the protests broke out, false information flowing out of Hong Kong became evident.

There was an obvious spike in the circulation of disinformation around major protest events, such as the abortive attempt to occupy the Hong Kong Legislative Council on 1 July 2019, attacks on demonstrators by triad members from 21 to 22 July 2019, the police clearance operations at the Prince Edward MTR station on 31 August 2019, and protests during Chinese National Day on 1 October of the same year.

Many members of the public suspected that China's disinformation campaign was intended not only to shape the political narrative about Hong Kong but also to cover up the truth about the protests.

Many also believed that the deaths that occurred at the hands of the HKPF had been covered up or that mysterious suicides that had taken place since protests began were actually murders committed by the HKPF. An [online database](#) was thus created by netizens to document the reported suicides. There was also [a full-page ad](#) in the *Apple*

Daily, a tabloid-style newspaper owned by pro-democracy activist Jimmy Lai, listing the names of 118 purported suicide victims on 12 October 2019.

More credibly, as documented by human rights organizations such as Amnesty International, the HKPF was accused of sexually assaulting both male and female protesters.

Such actions were denied by the HKPF and the Hong Kong government. But with attacks on freedom of information in Hong Kong, government spokespersons were frequently accused of lying to the media and the public.

Lies range from Chief Executive Carrie Lam denying that police spokespersons had carried out violence altogether, to police spokespersons belying incidents targeting journalists. The latter resulted in a great deal of distrust from the media, forcing journalists to walk out of press conferences.

DISINFORMATION INSIDE THE PRO-DEMOCRACY CAMP

Disinformation efforts also reportedly took place within the pro-democracy camp, though these were not sponsored by any state actor. These consisted of individuals downplaying events that reflect negatively on the activists, such as acts of violence, or exaggerating actions by the Hong Kong government and HKPF against protesters to draw greater international attention to Hong Kong.

Following the outbreak of the protests, it appeared that Hong Kong people made deliberate efforts to engage with the international world. As Isabella Steger wrote in *Quartz* in September 2019, there was a concerted effort by Hong Kong citizens to “lear[n] how to use Twitter” in the course of “a discernible increase in Hong Kong users signing up for Twitter accounts.” This led to a wave of Hong Kong people joining Twitter, using hashtags like “#FollowBackHongKong,” or “#SOSHongKong” to raise global awareness of the protests, to provide information to international media outlets, or to positively influence coverage of these political events.

Such attempts sometimes verged into the circulation of disinformation. As pointed out by Wishart, purported disappearances had not been demonstrably connected back to the actions of the Hong Kong police, but many nonetheless stoked this narrative.

“As the situation continues to develop, from the middle of the movement to the end of last year, disinformation in Hong Kong does not come from only one camp,” said a representative of FactWire News Agency, a dual-language news fact-checking operation in Hong Kong, in an interview conducted for this research. “This includes organized production of fake news, as distributed to supporters or as a means of attracting new supporters.”

To this extent, the intensification of efforts by the Chinese government to spread disinformation in English or the use of Chinese-language accounts targeting overseas Chinese populations had been partly a response to Hong Kongers' efforts to engage with the English-speaking world through Twitter and other digital platforms.

According to a [report](#) from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), Chinese-language disinformation efforts to build networks targeting the English-speaking world or overseas Chinese groups had struggled to counter efforts from pro-democracy people in the city with sufficient speed. This led the Chinese government to take shortcuts and to acquire existing networks rather than to slowly build up networks that would appear organic.

Elise Thomas, a researcher working with the International Cyber Policy Centre at ASPI who helped draft the report, said "China was forced to respond very quickly. That's why it was such a messy operation."

Further development beyond this situation had included attempts by Chinese state-run disinformation efforts to link with fringe media outlets from the far-left or far-right, with a focus on conspiratorial claims about the protests. The claim that the US's Central Intelligence Agency was backing the protests or had trained key protest leaders in tactics regarding the construction of barricades, Molotov cocktails, or protest tactics was particularly effective.

As Thomas commented, "While that dynamic has existed between Russian-linked actors and fringe Western media for quite a long time, this is a newer development with Chinese media." Chinese-language disinformation efforts may have also targeted overseas diasporic Chinese, including second- and third-generation immigrants.

The spread of disinformation has also been noted amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Efforts are made to make it appear as though the Chinese government has ably handled the pandemic in contrast to the actions taken by Western governments to quell the spread of the coronavirus.

Disinformation related to COVID-19 may not be directly tied to state actors. Some disinformation efforts may be oriented toward spreading panic about shortages of consumer goods such as toilet paper, hand sanitizer, and medical masks, and in the process boosting their sales.

Observers note that the Chinese government does not have any interest in circulating pandemic-related disinformation in Hong Kong, since it already controls the city government. Contrast this with Taiwan, in which the Chinese government has depicted the Taiwanese government as having mismanaged its response to COVID-19.



PLATFORMS FOR DISINFORMATION

Facebook is a major social media outlet used in Hong Kong, with a primarily Chinese-language readership. It is blocked in China, although some Chinese use VPN and other methods to circumvent the so-called “Great Firewall of China.” As such, disinformation that spreads on Facebook primarily targets the local populace and involves doctored images or false text. Livestreaming using outlets like Stand News or Mad Dog News has come to play a key role in the protests. Twitter is used less often by the local netizens, but serves as a vehicle by which much English-language discussion of international events takes place. Consequently, disinformation efforts by the Chinese government on Twitter seem to be primarily directed at the international community to shape the latter’s perceptions of the protests in Hong Kong. Hence, many Hong Kongers were prompted to move to Twitter and post in English in an effort to combat China’s disinformation efforts, resulting in the spread of hashtags such as “#FollowBackHongKong.”

Some believe that the increasing use of Twitter by Hong Kongers, particularly in English, has led to concerted attempts by the Chinese government to step up its disinformation campaign on Twitter. In Taiwan, there were similar waves of Taiwanese joining Twitter, but this was due to fears that Facebook would begin censoring itself or leak the private information of Taiwanese users for the sake of entering the Chinese market.

By contrast, LIHKG is an Internet forum used in Hong Kong, sometimes compared to Reddit. A Hong Kong ISP or a Hong Kong institution of higher education e-mail address is required to register an account with LIHKG.

LIHKG has become a major nerve center of protests, since it serves as a platform for tactical discussions, planning actions, disseminating information about planned actions, or voting on strategic and ideological stances for the benefit of the protest movement.

But much information – such as individuals claiming to be injured protesters – circulating on LIHKG is often unverified. This has led to the dissemination of disinformation on this platform, particularly information intended to influence the tactical choices of the protest movement as a whole. LIHKG has seen attempts at Chinese incursion two years ago, though these are sometimes quickly detected due to linguistic shibboleths (particular phrases or words, or variations thereof, that distinguish one group from another). The LIHKG registration process has made interference from Chinese actors more difficult.

Among Hong Kong families with private WhatsApp groups, disinformation circulates, particularly among older folk, in the guise of news produced by websites that in reality

are Chinese content farms, or unverified images paired with text. This is not dissimilar to the use of Line in Taiwan.

On the other hand, the anonymity and security of Telegram groups, as well as the fact that such groups can include thousands of members all at once, allows them to share information rapidly about protest developments or to plan protest actions. Thus, these groups have been targeted by disinformation efforts with the manifest aim of sowing confusion within the protest movement, and creating splits.

According to Kajimoto of the University of Hong Kong, the distinctions among social media platforms used in Hong Kong may be minimized by the intensifying spread of false information in the city. Disinformation that circulates often consists of a mashup of disinformation across the different platforms, which makes it increasingly difficult to distinguish reality from fact.

Yet, efforts to combat the spread of disinformation in Hong Kong face many challenges. As the Hong Kong government is controlled by the Chinese government, it can itself be a channel of disinformation and cannot be expected to fight disinformation pushing state narratives.

Policy solutions to quell disinformation may not be coming anytime soon from the Hong Kong government, since it is in itself a major source of disinformation, and its political stances are aligned with the major sources of false information in the city. Yet, the Hong Kong government is likely to justify restrictive measures against press freedom in the name of fighting disinformation, similar to actions taken by other governments in the Asia-Pacific region.

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FACT-CHECKING EFFORTS

Fact-checking practices are carried out in Hong Kong by civil society groups, such as the FactWire News Agency and Kauyim Media, educational institutions such as Annie Lab at the University of Hong Kong, and media organizations such as AFP.

Civil society groups face particular pressure in relation to attempts to maintain neutrality, with partisan pressure from both pro-Beijing and pro-democracy groups to ascertain the veracity of claims by either camp. On the other hand, fact-checking centers run by educational institutions are sometimes more focused on developing the fact-checking skills of aspiring journalists.

AFP and other media organizations have adopted a strategy of working together to pool resources and bolster each other's credibility, or working with social media companies such as Facebook.

Amid these efforts, some experts believe that disinformation efforts from China in Hong Kong are not incredibly effective at present. Kajimoto pointed out, for example, that Annie Lab, which he helps run, had not seen sophisticated disinformation campaigns coming from China during the 2019 protests. Linguistic differences between Hong Kong and China were a key indicator in this regard. "Language was one of the biggest sorts of protection for the public in Hong Kong, even if they're trying hard to reach the Hong Kong public and trying to influence public opinions," he said.

Yet, attempts to expose disinformation still face certain challenges. The debunking of a piece of disinformation is less likely to gain traction compared to the spread of the original bit of disinformation being exposed as a lie. Moreover, it is also difficult to have any smoking gun that links a piece of false news back to state actors.

It remains to be seen, however, whether disinformation efforts from state actors in Hong Kong will become more sophisticated as time goes on. Yet, civil society groups and educational institutions engaged in fact-checking initiatives may become targeted by the Hong Kong government in line with the broader crackdown on civil society or educational institutions trying to assert their autonomy.

As things stand, media organizations have been targeted by the Hong Kong government and Beijing. Financial Times Asia editor Victor Mallet was denied entry to the territory in November 2018, just a few months after hosting a talk with pro-independence activist Andy Chan at the Hong Kong Foreign Correspondents' Club, of which he was the vice-president. Journalists from the New York Times, Washington Post, and Wall Street Journal were expelled from the Chinese mainland, Hong Kong, and Macau. Such assaults against media institutions are likely to continue – a scenario that could create more space for the spread of disinformation in Hong Kong.

POSTSCRIPT: THE NATIONAL SECURITY LAW — FROM DISINFORMATION TO REPRESSION

The passage of the National Security Act (NSA) changed things drastically for Hong Kong, moving the struggle away from disinformation to outright repression of free speech. Up until the law came into effect in late June 2020, no one in [Hong Kong](#) had read its provisions, and even after its full text was released, many expressed concern with the law's vagueness. Even more concerning was the possibility that mainland security agents would be allowed to operate openly without any check to their power. The Hong Kong Free Press published an [article](#) on the NSA's early applications here.

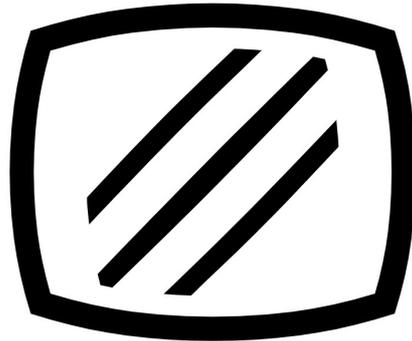
The NSA's passage and quick implementation has resulted in a chilling effect, causing journalists, academics, and activists to pause and reconsider their next steps. These included permanent residents thinking of leaving Hong Kong; academics limiting their research and staying away from topics deemed politically sensitive; or non-tenured academics engaging in self-censorship to stay on the safe side.

So far, it seems that disinformation and its relatively sophisticated methods have given way to the more crude tactics of outright suppression. As a result, protests became more creative, dialing back to assisting businesses that were supportive of the pro-democracy movement.

But as with any country or territory dealing with dictatorial governments during this time, the situation in Hong Kong seems very much the same, with elements of democracy and free expression still waiting for their time to return to the frontlines.



Brian Hioe is one of the founding editors of New Bloom, an online magazine covering youth, culture, and politics in Taiwan.



DISINFORMATION IN INDONESIA WEAPONS AGAINST 'ENEMIES OF THE STATE'

By Adi Renaldi

WHEN JAKARTA GOVERNOR Basuki Tjahaja Purnama – better known as Ahok – ran for another term in 2017, he was vilified on social media and became the object of the hate campaign waged by Islamist fundamentalists. A Chinese Christian, the incumbent Ahok was accused of blasphemy by the Muslim Cyber Army (MCA), lost the gubernatorial election, and is now considered to be the first victim of these online tactics involving “buzzer teams” – fake social media accounts that generate a buzz over certain topics to make them trend.

Ahok's team also employed its [own buzzer teams](#), though it seems to not have been enough to counter the MCA's racist and hardline Islamic content that turned Muslim voters against the incumbent, who, being then vice-governor, took over the governorship of Indonesia's capital, Jakarta, when then governor Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo ran for president in 2014.

The spread of 'hoaxes' – which is how the scourge of 'fake news', or more appropriately, disinformation, is commonly called in Southeast Asia's largest economy – is not a modern-day blight on the country's political landscape.

It goes decades back.

In September 1965, a failed coup and murder of six army generals in Indonesia were blamed on communists. This hoax was used to justify the murder of up to one million Indonesians, which until today has never been investigated.

Before the mass killings, the communists were united with the Islamic League, otherwise known as Sarekat Islam, dubbed the [first large nationalist organization](#) in Indonesia. Decades before, in 1921, the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI) had succeeded in getting Sarekat Islam to adopt its programs. This was a realization of President Sukarno's dream of bringing three political powers – the army, Islamic groups, and communists – under the concept of Nationalism, Religion, Communism (Nasakom).

During the Dutch occupation, the communist party had struggled to support Pan-Islamism. Thus, they cooperated with Islamists, particularly Sarekat Islam, Indonesia's first true mass organization before it evolved into a political party in 1930.

But the honeymoon between communists and Islamists was short-lived. One of many reasons was the communist party's campaign for land reform, which forced wealthy ulama and landowners to dispose of their lands. In 1964, clashes between communists and Islamists occasionally occurred in several places across the island of Java, where Jakarta is located.

On 30 September 1965, members of a militant group murdered six army generals as part of an attempted coup. After suppressing the coup, the top army leaders, Suharto and then defense minister Abdul Haris Nasution, were quick to point out that the communist party was responsible for the mayhem, which the communist party denied.

Though bereft of truth, the army [exploited](#) this narrative.

The accusations spread like wildfire and were soon followed by a bloody purge that executed between 500,000 to one million Indonesians suspected of being communist party members or supporters, with the main Muslim organizations calling for the 'annihilation of the PKI.' The Muhammadiyah issued a *fatwa* [declaring](#) that 'the extermination of communists is an obligatory religious act of holy war.' Muslims

believe that communists are atheists or *kafir* – infidels. But the [victims](#) also included “ethnic Chinese, trade unionists, teachers, activists, and artists.”

When Suharto’s New Order regime came to power in 1966, a systematic propaganda campaign was waged against communists, depicting them as enemies of the state. The military-dominated regime was known for its strong anti-communist policy.

PROPAGANDA AS REGIME FOUNDATION

Ignatius Haryanto, historian and lecturer with Universitas Multimedia Nusantara, argued that [hoaxes](#) became the foundation of the New Order regime of Suharto, who took power in 1966 and ruled as an authoritarian until 1998, when he fell from power.

During the September ‘65 massacre, the government began spreading lies that military generals were being assassinated by the communists. Later it was revealed, based on the autopsies, that those generals were shot dead before they were buried in East Jakarta.

The Army then banned newspapers from covering those events. Only two state-controlled newspapers were allowed to capture the event: *Angkatan Bersenjata* and *Berita Yudha*. Both newspapers monopolized the publicity of the killings of the generals.

“The newspapers were the source of propaganda against the communists,” says Ignatius. “Hoaxes during the New Order were produced in order to support the regime. Hoax is a tool to legitimize Suharto’s power in the early days of the New Order.”

Ariel Heryanto, professor at Australian National University, [argues](#) that “it is difficult to find a more powerful or destructive hoax than the story of the 30 September Movement (G30S/PKI). The story of G30S/PKI was devastating in the extent of lies told, and the number of victims it affected. This was a hoax that was produced and disseminated by the state on a massive scale for more than three generations, since 1966.”

For Ariel, disinformation on communism cannot be resolved or debunked simply by providing accurate information as an alternative, especially when the government is reluctant to provide the facts. “After being reproduced for more than a generation, the [September 30 movement] hoax has become established, and has entered the national imagination and everyday language. ... The [September 30 movement] hoax is now accepted as fact.”

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— ARIEL HERYANTO, 2018

Fast forward to the post-New Order era.

Today, the government has banned the PKI party along with all sorts of communist-related ideology – including symbols, books, and songs. The Indonesian red scare, begun in mid-2015, has resulted in police, soldiers, and vigilantes breaking up dozens of events, from film screenings to meetings of survivors, which have been labeled “communist,” and the burning of books deemed to contain communist propaganda. Meanwhile, Islamists and nationalist groups have held rallies of thousands of people vowing to crush communism in cities and towns.



MEDIA CONGLOMERATES AS MEGAPHONE FOR THE RULING POWER

The disinformation during the New Order regime became possible largely because the government controlled the media tightly, allowing the government’s narrative to flow smoothly without challenge from the opposition. The Ministry of Information exercised control of the domestic media and restricted the foreign press.

What has changed in the media landscape since the end of Suharto’s New Regime in 1998 and since Indonesia began its transition to democracy?

There were only 289 media outlets during the New Order era. Since the regime’s fall, new media companies have flourished more than ever. As of 2018, Indonesia has around [47,000 news outlets](#) according to the Press Council, making it the country with the highest number of media companies in the world.

However, some of the media outfits could hardly maintain their independence. A number of the biggest media establishments in Indonesia are now owned by government-leaning entities and political patrons, such as the multinational conglomerate MNC Group, which is owned by Perindo Party Chairman Hary Tanoesoedibjo; the Metro Group of NasDem Party Chairman Surya Paloh; the Jawa Pos News Network owned by former State-Owned Enterprises Minister Dahlan Iskan;

Republika and tvOne owned by Erick Thohir, Joko Widodo's close ally and the current Minister of State Owned Enterprises, and Golkar Party leader Aburizal Bakrie.

Due to conglomeration, it is difficult for the media to avoid being influenced by the potential interests of their owners. In [every election season](#), for example, campaigns tended to endorse a certain presidential ticket because of a candidate's close political ties to the media proprietors.

Moreover, media conglomerates have played a vital role in maintaining the government's narratives, often quoting only from the government's official spokespersons and refusing to investigate further or tap grassroots sources, especially during conflicts. This practice runs counter to the principles of independent and accountable journalism.

Ross Tapsell, in his [book](#) *Media Power in Indonesia: Oligarchs, Citizens, and the Digital Revolution*, stated that to survive, media companies relied heavily on commercial projects. He found that local media and national media companies relied on the regional and central government's advertising budget.

"In some media," Tapsell wrote, "the dependence on government's advertising accounted for more than 75 percent. So if the government stops their budget, they would most likely collapse."

Tapsell argued that media networks like Jawa Pos National Network — owned by Dahlan Iskan, former minister of State-Owned Enterprises — relied heavily on regional government advertising. Meanwhile, Kompas, one of the country's oldest national media outfits, secured its operational funds mostly from central government's advertising.

A 2013 [research study](#) titled *Mapping the Landscape of the Media Industry in Contemporary Indonesia* argues that, "as a tool for power, the media suffers an inevitable bias due to the deliberate interventions of media owners, which include favoring government and corporate policies when creating content (particularly news) and distributing it to the audience."

Further, the study found that as a result, citizens are exposed to a more limited range of information, as most important social, economic, political, and cultural issues are selectively presented in the media.

According to Haryanto, when the media broadcast about Papua, hobbled by a long-simmering conflict amid the region's struggle for independence, or other sensitive issues, they tend to see it from the same perspective. As such, it is impossible to have "a deeper understanding" of issues, as "we only focus on what we see on the surface," he says.

Despite constitutional guarantees of freedom of speech and President Widodo's campaign promise to respect press freedom, the culture of impunity, the influence of media conglomerates, and limited access to reports in areas like West Papua have hampered journalism's role as a watchdog. It is not surprising that Indonesia ranks 124th in the 2020 Press Freedom Index compiled by Reporters Without Borders (RSF).

"His presidency has been marked by drastic restrictions on media access to West Papua (the Indonesian half of the island of New Guinea), where violence against local journalists continues to grow," said RSF in its latest report on Indonesia.

Take, for example, the bloody incident that took place in Wamena, West Papua in September 2019. Dozens of people died when security forces hurled racial slurs at Papuan students, provoking riots. The national government attempted to conceal the facts, and the established pro-government media failed to question the authorities. Amid an internet blackout, the government announced 33 people were killed in the riots, eight of whom were native Papuans. An armed rebel group – referred to as an "armed criminal group" (KKB) by the police – was reportedly behind the atrocity. Thousands of people, both native Papuans and non-native residents, fled the town following the riot.

The police said the non-native Papuans had died in fire, while some had sustained injuries from sharp weapons. The official statement said nothing about what had caused the death of the native Papuans. [Investigations](#) by the *Jakarta Post* and *Tabloid Jubi* journalists and activists found that more than eight native Papuans died that day, and that they died of gunshot wounds allegedly inflicted by what locals called "security apparatus," a joint force of military and National Police personnel.

The Jakarta Post published [a follow-up article a year after the riots](#), tracing the systemic and institutionalized roots of racial discrimination in the region back to the 1960s.

Journalist and documentary filmmaker Dandhy Dwi Laksono, who was [arrested and accused](#) of spreading hate speech in September 2019 in relation to his opposition to the government's oppression in Papua and West Papua, wrote in an [essay](#) that most media outlets choose the easiest way to gather information: quoting officials without fact-checking. This practice would eventually lead to bias as news outlets become the amplifiers of government's propaganda.

A simple Google search about Papua would yield many articles from established media referring to the pro-Papua independence groups as armed criminal groups. This eventually shapes public consciousness that the root of the problems in Papua lies in separatism, not socio-economic and political problems.

When the media echoed the government in referring to Free West Papua National Organization (TPN OPM) as Armed Criminal Group, wrote Dandhy, "don't expect them to be fair and accurate in reporting other issues. That's propaganda."



INTERNET BLACKOUTS: PREVENTING HOAX OR CONCEALING THE TRUTH?

Yet another powerful tool in the government’s disinformation arsenal is internet shutdown.

Internet censorship and blackouts were imposed in Indonesia when [large protests and riots](#) broke out in May 2019 against the outcome of the presidential election that handed Jokowi a second term. Six people ended up dead and around 200 others were left injured during the violent incidents. Coordinating Minister of Security, Law, and Politics Wiranto told the media that censorship was being carried out to “prevent hoax that could negatively impact the public.” The public could not access or post on social media and messaging apps during the blackout period.

An internet blackout is a common strategy among authoritarian regimes, usually combined with internet censorship. Indonesia is certainly no exception. Deliberate internet shutdowns by governments have been widely used after Egypt's week-long government-imposed blackout during its 2011 uprising. In countries where traditional media is tightly controlled, the free flow of information online can be seen as a threat to authorities.

Limiting or completely blocking access is one tool they can use to control both citizens and the state-eschewed narrative around an event. Authorities cite national security and public interest concerns to justify internet shutdowns, which often occur in times of violence and mass protests. “These justifications can sometimes mask more sinister aims,” says Alp Toker, executive director of NetBlocks, a non-governmental organization monitoring internet censorship, in an interview with [Al Jazeera](#).

“We've seen that shutdowns are used to cover up incidents that are embarrassing. [They] are used to cover up violations of human rights, including alleged reports of killings,” he said.

Activists and critics of internet censorship also note that blackouts following anti-government protests were imposed “to silence dissent and make it difficult for citizens to organize large protests.”

Damar Juniarto, executive director of SafeNet – an internet freedom organization – said that [internet censorship and blackouts](#) are signs that Indonesia has yet to impose good governance on internet freedom, while noting that the decision to impose internet shutdown lacked independent evaluation outside of government and clear procedure. “This is unfortunate because it causes democratic conditions in Indonesia to sink further,” he says.

Within the last week of May 2019, police [arrested](#) 10 people for allegedly spreading hoaxes and hate content. The police arrested one man for allegedly spreading negative content indicating police personnel had brutally beaten demonstrators in front of a mosque in Central Jakarta.

Internet blackouts were similarly enforced in West Papua in August last year during a time of civil unrest. Then Minister of Information and Communications Rudiantara [justified](#) the internet blockade during the 2019 West Papua protest by saying it was imposed to “to filter information and prevent the spread of rumours during the protests.”

Social media expert Kun Arief Cahyantoro told [CNN Indonesia](#) that internet blackouts have done little in preventing the flow of information, as people would always seek information. He said, “In my opinion, it is ineffective and tends to have negative effects because it is human nature to be thirsty for information. People will strive harder to access information, even if the information that may be obtained is informal or textual [SMS] and not based on factual data.”

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— KUN ARIEF CAHYANTORO, 2019

Internet blackouts are, therefore, counterproductive as people would get access to hoaxes circulating via instant messages such as SMS.

As internet blackout has become a common strategy, censorship such as [banning counter-narratives](#) on social media has also been carried out. There was also evidence of coordinated disinformation campaigns conducted by anonymous accounts, bots, or trolls. Investigation by [Facebook](#) found inauthentic coordinated behavior, prompting the social media platform to remove 69 accounts and 42 pages. Moreover, it found that InsightID, a Jakarta-based PR Agency, spent US\$300,000 in paid ads targeting European audiences. They used fake accounts to manage the pages. [InsightID denied such findings](#), saying that the agency was not involved in such a campaign.

The goal of the campaign was to influence international opinion about the increasingly violent situation in West Papua, as Indonesian security forces crack down on the local pro-independence movement, [writes Benjamin Strick](#), an independent open-source

intelligence analyst. The campaigns promote pro-Indonesian sentiment while condemning pro-independence forces, in particular the United Liberation Movement for West Papua (ULMWP) and its leader, Benny Wenda.

According to Strick, “an automated bot network is being used on Twitter and utilises other major social media platforms to disseminate propaganda about the Indonesian Government’s involvement in West Papua, and that it is doing so by using hashtags on genocide and the West Papua freedom movement to drown out any anti-Indonesian government narrative.”

The InsightID campaign also appears to have included targeted harassment and trolling of prominent pro-independence advocates such as human rights lawyer Veronica Koman and Vanuatuan politician Ralph Regenvanu, as well as journalists in Australia and New Zealand who have written about West Papua.

Pro-government cyber troops have engaged in negative interactions, like commenting on social media posts that include verbal abuse, harassment, and trolling against social media users and political dissidents who express criticism of the government. Pro-government bot accounts were also attacking individuals and media companies that attempted to show support or tried to bring about the facts.

One pro-government buzzer on Twitter attacked Tempo Magazine for running a cover story depicting President Joko Widodo as Pinocchio to illustrate his having breached his own promise to strengthen the anti-corruption body KPK. The [tweet](#) garnered more than 700 retweets and 2,500 likes. One example of how a bot account harassing a human rights activist can be seen [here](#). The account [@WestPapuaRus](#) only tweeted pro-government [narrative](#).

The practice of using fake accounts and bots, known as astroturfing, is intended to mimic human users, using foreigner profile pictures. They retweet each other even if they do not belong to a more organic cluster. The bots post narratives supporting the government, distorting facts about an ongoing gross human rights abuse in Papua. They post content that labels independence groups as ‘extremist’ and claims ‘foreign intervention’ is behind the conflict.

The Information Ministry was also believed to be involved in disinformation campaigns in Papua. When a native Papuan named Hendrik Lokbere was shot dead by security forces, the Information Ministry in its post stated that the incident was a [hoax](#) despite countless witness’ and local officials’ accounts attesting to the contrary.

Trolls also conduct individual targeting. In the case of the Papua conflict, human rights activist and lawyer Veronica Koman and journalist Dandhy Dwi Laksono have been constantly flooded with harassment and abusive comments. Koman and Dandhy have since been named objects of hate speech by the Indonesian police.

PRO-GOVERNMENT'S BUZZERS

German philosopher Hannah Arendt coined the term 'defactualization' in her 1972 essay "Lying in Politics", which serves as the fundamental basis to describe what is now being referred to as post-truth, a modern-day phenomenon that downgrades truth, as many understand it, to irrelevance. In this case, defactualization is more or less the precise word to describe the situation where it would be difficult for the public to discern fact from fiction.

When there is potential instability, violence, or mass protests, the government deploys cyber troops known as buzzers to manipulate public opinion and to drive the government's narratives.

The trend of using an army of buzzers for political purposes first emerged in Indonesia during the 2014 presidential election, according to one cyber troops coordinator Ibang Tokek in a [2018 interview](#) with this writer. In an article for Vice.com, I wrote, "The goal is simple: use social media to frame public opinion and amplify political issues during a candidate's campaign. On the surface, it's similar to what commercial brands do to push their advertisements into your feed."

However, during the 2014 election campaign, there was no coordinated social media campaign. Each buzzer operated independently. Ibang said that since there was no central command, disinformation was spreading easily like wildfire because each buzzer posted whatever they wanted.

Based on Ibang's account, former president Soesilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who took office from 2004 to 2014, was the first to employ 'cyber advisors' to study what the public was talking about on social media. He wanted to better understand the situation at the grassroots level, and thus formulate better policy. Ibang was one of the advisors. "At that time we analyzed the buzz going on in social media, and present [*sic*] them to [Yudhoyono]," said Ibang in an interview conducted for this report. "He then would advise his subordinates to address the matter."

However, the potential of deploying cyber troops to influence public opinion was soon discovered as the 2019 election approached. Ibang said he was asked by political party members to help the party "boost the image of their candidate through social media." Ibang agreed to take on the job and soon began recruiting members, who each would operate dozens of fake accounts.

"One buzzer could handle dozens of social media accounts. Each of them will post contents with certain themes that we have discussed first. Maybe today we could post about the candidate's program. Tomorrow we could attack the opponent," said Ibang. "I paid around Rp3 million [US\$205] per month for them just to publish contents."

[According to research](#) conducted by the Centre for Innovation Policy and Governance (CIPG), it is typically unclear in these kinds of political candidate-buzzer relationships who is responsible for the orders and where the money comes from.

“Our informants and sources usually called the money to hire buzzers ‘ghost money,’” Rinaldi Camil, researcher at CIPG, said, [explaining](#) that “political buzzers rarely even meet face-to-face with their employers, since secrecy is a must to protect their identities.”

A 2019 [article](#) by Reuters describes how cyber troops and teams of buzzers operate. In the run-up to Indonesia’s national elections, the campaign teams denied employing buzzers in their strategy, although the buzzers themselves freely admitted they created hundreds of fake social media accounts with little regard for the accuracy of the content they shared.

According to a [Tempo](#) magazine article titled “Ghost Protocol” published in October 2018, cyber troops were formed by former military generals and ministers to shape candidates’ images and to attack political opponents.

Tempo cited five cyber troops groups called Bravo 5, Cakra 19, Alpha, Awan, and Ma’rufnomics backing Joko Widodo. Each group was led by ministers, party leaders, and government officials such as Luhut Binsar Panjaitan (then Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs); Andi Widjajanto, former Cabinet Secretary; and Deddy Mizwar, former West Java Deputy Governor. Same goes with candidates Prabowo Subianto and Sandiaga Uno, who were backed by four groups of cyber troops, mostly led by party leaders and social media experts.

The success of waging a war on social media, that experts globally believe could [influence the decision of voters](#), has made the deployment of cyber troops a common strategy on daily issues beyond election campaigns.

The success of waging a war on social media, that experts globally believe could influence the decision of voters, has made the deployment of cyber troops a common strategy on daily issues beyond election campaigns.

Last year, a [widely circulated photo](#) of a group of cyber troops on pro-government user-generated content (UGC) platform Seword.com triggered debates whether the State Palace was indeed employing buzzers to amplify the government’s narrative. The photo caption indicated that such cyber troops existed and that only President Joko Widodo and ‘Kakak Pembina’ (patron) knew who they were.

“This team is invisible,” the post said. “Other than Kakak Pembina and the President, no one knows the composition of this team.”

Presidential chief of staff Moeldoko at that time denied that the State Palace funded and employed such cyber troops, stating that buzzers were operating independently and on their own.

“They are not under one command, not under one control. They all have their own initiatives,” Moeldoko [said in October](#) last year.

A [study](#) by the Oxford Internet Institute titled, *The Global Disinformation Order 2019: Global Inventory of Organised Social Media Manipulation*, found evidence of cyber troops being hired by the government, political party, and private companies with fees ranging from Rp1 million (US\$68) to Rp50 million (US\$3,418) for each project. Indonesia was categorized as *low cyber troop capacity* with the existence of small teams being activated ahead of big issues.

Philip N. Howard, director of the Oxford Internet Institute and one of the authors of the report, said that such online disinformation campaigns can no longer be understood to be the work of “[lone hackers](#), or individual activists, or teenagers in the basement doing things for clickbait.” There is a new professionalism to the activity, with formal organizations that use hiring plans, performance bonuses, and receptionists, he said.

On Indonesia’s status as having low cyber troop capacity, the study offered a few more details on the social media strategies employed in the country. In terms of employers, buzzer teams and cyber troops are employed by political parties and private companies; so far, none are engaged by government agencies, civil society organizations, citizens, and influencers. Indonesian fake accounts, like in most countries, were composed of human account holders or bots, though others also employed stolen or hacked accounts, or cyborg accounts – bots with the occasional human curation.

In terms of messaging, Indonesian cyber troops were directed to show support for their clients, attack the opposition, and to drive division and polarization. Other strategies not known to be employed in Indonesia are distraction and outright suppression. As for communication strategies, disinformation and amplification were the most used in Indonesia – so far, there is no known use of mass reporting, data-driven strategies, and trolls.

Given the range of possibilities included in the study, Indonesia’s low cyber troop capacity was fairly clear at the time of the 2019 election. However, cyber troops have since been engaged outside of elections.

Based on the study, the government, through the Information Ministry hired hundreds of buzzers to campaign against the European ban on palm oil with the hashtag #SawitluBaik (Palm Oil Is Good). In September last year, the Information Ministry held

a [meeting](#) with buzzers to start disseminating positive campaigns about the role of the palm oil industry in Indonesia's economy.

On [Twitter](#), for example, the government denied that the industry was one of the major causes of deforestation and forest fires, despite the fact that scientists and environmentalists had repeatedly provided statistics and findings showing this otherwise major source of government revenue has destroyed millions of hectares of land. On the other hand, campaigns conducted by the government and cyber troops have [reached schools](#), where visiting government officials start a campaign conveying the message that palm trees do not destroy the environment.

Without a doubt, media conglomerates, deployment of cyber troops, and deliberate internet shutdown have created a complex disinformation ecosystem. National security and stability could be maintained as long as the media allows itself to be used in the spread of the government's narrative, while cyber troops are being deployed to attack the opposition or those critical of the government.

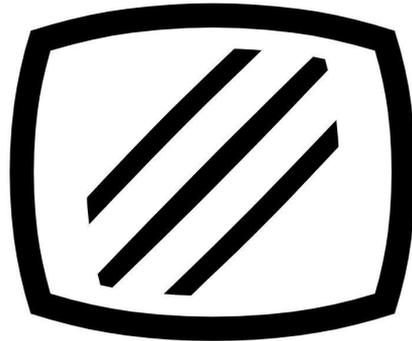
While the fight against hoaxes has been fierce, with the Ministry of Information and Communications having identified almost 500 hoaxes in 2019, little has been done to regulate the practice of deploying cyber troops for propaganda.

Ismail Fahmi, founder of social network analysis system Drone Emprit, said pro-government cyber troops could be [dangerous](#) as they diminish the press, as well as the public at large, to provide checks and balances against the abuse of power.

When this happens, "democracy is at stake," he said.



Adi Renaldi is a Jakarta-based freelance journalist. He was a staff writer at VICE Indonesia for four years, where he produced long-form journalism on topics including culture, the environment, and religious extremism. His byline has also appeared in New Naratif, Mongabay, and Coconuts.



DISINFORMATION ON WEST PAPUA SUPPRESSING STRUGGLES FOR SELF-DETERMINATION

By Dominggus Mampioper & Adi Renaldi

MORE THAN 50 YEARS since its annexation by Indonesia in 1969, West Papua remains a region mired in civil unrest.

Half a century's struggle for independence provides plenty of opportunity to tell the region's stories – which its occupier is clamping down hard on. Today, the eastern region is rife with conflict, human rights abuses, and repression.

The Indonesian military has been engaged in armed conflicts with the pro-independence Free Papua Movement since the 1960s. At least [100,000](#) West Papuans have been killed since Indonesia took control of West Papua. Consider

numerous other acts of brutality allegedly committed by the Indonesian regime against the West Papuans.

Benny Wenda, the West Papuan independence leader currently living in exile in the UK, told [the Guardian](#) that the human rights abuses and civil repressions taking place in the province are a “cancer inside the heart of the people of the Pacific.” Meanwhile, the major powers in the region seemed to be ignoring these abuses for geo-strategic and economic reasons.

CONTROL OF INFORMATION FLOW

Aside from Indonesia’s deployment of heavily armed troops to the region, information control has been a powerful tool in the former’s repressive arsenal of security measures.

This is on the pretext of protecting the restive region’s national security and the welfare of West Papuans. There is a form of cooperation between the government, particularly the Ministry of Information, and the Cenderawasih XVII Military Regional Command in Papua in controlling information. Through the government’s spokespersons, the national media are being spoon-fed with pro-government narratives.

“In my opinion this kind of collaboration is legitimate. The only problem is when this kind of cooperation would cover up the facts in Papua,” said Arnold Belau, editor-in-chief of independent local media [Suara Papua](#), in an interview for this report.

Suara Papua, in reporting about the region, aspires to give voice to the victims of armed conflicts. For example, there are conflicts that sacrifice civilians, especially children, parents, and women. There is little chance that the victims of this conflict are accorded the same space as military institutions in West Papuan news media.

“The task of the media is to provide sufficient space for this group. This is where Suara Papua, in accordance with its motto ‘Voice of the Noiseless People’, plays a role,” said Arnold.

In delivering the news, they make every effort to validate the facts with the authorities on the field and at the policymaking unit of the Cenderawasih Military Regional Command (Kodam) and the Papua Regional Police (Polda). “This is to ensure that both sides are covered [in pursuit of balanced coverage],” said Arnold.

But, often reports by Suara Papua are different from those of the local media, which reports statements or pronouncements from the military and police officials more regularly. “For me, something like this is not good,” said Arnold.

In November 2016, the Indonesian government [blocked Suara Papua](#), along with 11 other news sites, as a result of its reports. In response, Arnold asked for legal assistance and gave a power of attorney to the Press Legal Aid Institute (LBH) in Jakarta. The Bantuan Press Law Institute also sent a letter to the Indonesian Ministry of Communication and Information (KOMINFO) in Jakarta asking for clarification on the banning or blocking of the Suara Papua site.

KOMINFO replied to the letter on 21 November 2016, but the letter was only received on 25 November 2016. The letter's remarks state that Suara Papua was blocked by the relevant Ministry and signed by Samuel A Pangerapan, Director General of Applications and Information, on 21 November 2016 with letter number B-97 / KOMINFO / DJAI / HK.02.01 / 11/2016.

LBH sent KOMINFO a [letter](#) inquiring about the reason behind the blocking. The answer given was that several ministries had requested it, citing Information Regulation Number 19 of 2014, concerning the handling of negatively loaded internet sites.

On 29 November 2016, a legal advisor from Suara Papua submitted a letter to the Directorate General of the Informational Application (Ditjen Aptika) and asked for clearer information about which Suara Papua content or news was considered to have violated the laws and regulations. The letter also requested that KOMINFO normalize the Suara Papua website and unblock it as suggested in the response letter.

"The letter has never been answered by the Ministry of Information and Communication to date," said Arnold. By 21 December 2016, Suara Papua was online again.

The Suara Papua site has since been hacked, blocked, and attacked by bots in large numbers on a number of occasions, such as between January 2017 and August 2019, and then again from September to October 2019.



INTERNET SHUTDOWN: CONCEALING FACTS OR PREVENTING HOAX?

From August until September 2019, Papua and some major cities across Indonesia were rocked by anti-racism protests that turned violent following the [arrests of 43 Papuan students](#) in Surabaya, East Java accused of disrespecting the Indonesian flag – an accusation that later turned out to be unfounded. More than [30 persons died](#) during those protests.

The government started imposing internet restrictions in Papua and West Papua on 21 August 2019, shortly after protests escalated into riots across the two provinces, reportedly leading to the deaths of dozens. This was done under the pretext of state

security and of prevention of the spread of hoaxes. The restrictions lasted until September.

The internet shutdown sparked outrage among residents and activists, as it restricted access to information about conditions in the restive region, which saw thousands of additional security personnel deployed as the riots developed. The shutdown also severely crippled news reporting in the region.

Internet restrictions were first introduced as part of the government’s security measures during post-election riots in Jakarta in May 2019 that saw eight people dead, which occurred only days after President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo was officially announced the winner in the 2019 presidential election.

The government had blocked social media and instant messaging in the capital, arguing that it was an effort to block fake news, videos, and pictures relating to the riots.

Wahyudi Djafar, an Institute for Policy Research and Advocacy (ELSAM) researcher, told [the Jakarta Post](#) that the internet is important in the flow of information. He said, “Considering the importance of the internet today, a blanket internet block is not tolerable even in a state of emergency. An internet blackout will only have implications for other human rights violations.”

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— WAHYUDI DJAFAR, 2020



LABYRINTHINE ACCESS FOR FOREIGN REPORTING

Amid efforts to control the flow of information through government’s spokespersons and internet shutdown, independent reporting in West Papua is even more difficult for foreign journalists.

Since the dawn of the New Order regime, foreign journalists had been barred from entering the region. Activists and journalists alike became optimistic shortly after Jokowi was elected president, as he promised to open access to Papua for journalists, both local and foreign. While visiting Papua at the big harvest in Wapeko Village in the

Merauke Regency on 10 May 2015, Jokowi promised foreign journalists were free to cover all of West Papua.

“Starting from today, foreign journalists are allowed to and can visit Papua as freely as they can any other part of Indonesia,” [Jokowi said](#) at the time.

Yet, it was just another empty promise. According to former Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI) chairperson Iman D Nugroho, the coverage of foreign journalists to Papua has to go through clearinghouse institutions involving [12 ministries or state institutions](#), including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Police, State Intelligence Agency, and the Coordinating Ministry for Political, Legal, and Security Affairs.

This mechanism is a tool for the government to limit journalists who want to report on Papua freely. The clearinghouse mechanism is not transparent because it does not have a clear legal basis. Iman said that the first step to open as wide access as possible for foreign journalists is to dissolve this clearinghouse institution.

“Foreign journalists are naturally free to cover in Papua,” Iman said. “Like they cover other regions in Indonesia. At the local level, the implementation of freedom of the press is that foreign journalists should not be intimidated by the security forces, such as being spied on, followed by, [and] being terrorized that hinders journalistic activities.”

AJI Chairman of Jayapura City Lucky Ireew said during our interview that the presence of foreign journalists in Papua is very important since they are expected to cover the region in a more balanced way than the national media, for which considerations come into play when reporting on West Papua.

“The perspective [of national media] is very Jakarta-centric, such that problems in Papua are not open and transparent, due to excuses of national interest and being framed as sensitive issues, as well as political interests and so on,” Lucky Ireew said.

Lucky Ireew said the government should not be too worried about the presence of foreign journalists while they have the capacity to solve problems in Papua through their articles in covering Papua. He said the problems confronting Papua would not be resolved if these are covered up, and the people in Papua will remain victims of injustice.

In Papua and West Papua Province up to now, there are several online media sites that always cover issues as well as development and conflict between communities and the military and police. These sites are [Tabloid Jubi](#), [Suara Papua](#), [Pasificpos](#), [Kabar Papua](#), [Papua Kini](#), [Salam Papua](#), [Wartaplus](#), [Metro Merauke](#), [Cepos Online](#), [Lintas Papua](#), [Papua Satu](#), [Papua Today](#), [Arfak News](#), [Oridek News](#), [Radar Sorong](#), [Timika Express](#), [Bintang Papua](#), [Kadate Bintuni](#), [Kabar Mapegaa](#), [Papua Bangkit](#), [Papua Baratoke](#), [TV Papua](#), [Media Papua](#), [Radar Timika](#), [Papua Terkini](#), [Antara Papua](#), and

[Reportase News](#). Of these websites, [Voice of Papua](#) and Tabloid Jubi are often accused of spreading hoaxes and have been attacked by hackers several times.

Arnold Belau said the challenge in media reporting on Papua was that geographically, the area to cover is too wide, and transportation is difficult to arrange. There are few roads or modes of transport connecting cities to each other. Indeed, there is already a trans-Papua road, but it has not answered the need for smooth transportation because of the expensive costs and long travel times. This causes almost all travel in West Papua to use air transportation and expensive costs, so air and sea transportation are still the mainstays.

These conditions make it difficult for journalists to do independent coverage and the truth of the facts, even if reported, tends to be contrary to what the authorities claim, so that they are easily labeled as hoaxes, although true and indisputable.

Apart from that, said Arnold Belau, the internet and telecommunications networks in West Papua are not evenly distributed; the networks are only good in the centers of provincial capitals, districts, and cities. "Only a few large cities, especially the regency capital [in Papua land], can be reached with good telecommunications and internet access. This is a big problem of bad and uneven internet networks."

Tabloid Jubi's experience in covering the famine and drought in the central mountains of Yahukimo Regency requires large funds for transportation and no internet network except using a satellite telephone. "At that time, it almost required a transportation fee of IDR30 million or US\$3,000 when covering there," said Victor Mambor, former editor-in-chief.

Independent reporting is also difficult in Papua and West Papua due to the collaboration of the Papua Regional Police with local media in Papua. For the Papua police, this is not a form of cooperation, but guidance for local media in Papua, even though Indonesia supervises the media through independent institutions such as the Press Council and the Independent Information Commission.



PROPAGANDA THROUGH CYBER TROOPS

In late 2019, Facebook released a statement saying that it had identified and removed 69 Facebook accounts, 42 pages, and 34 Instagram accounts suspected of coordinated inauthentic behavior in Indonesia, primarily sharing content about West Papua, with some in support of and others in opposition to the independence movement.

The statement said that people behind the networks used fake accounts to manage pages, disseminate their content, and drive people to off-platform sites. It said they attempted to conceal their identities.

According to Facebook's investigation, it had found links to a local media firm called InsightID in South Jakarta that managed the campaign ads. The company was reported to have spent about US\$300,000 on Facebook ads paid for primarily in Indonesian rupiah, the statement said.

The online information war was not just happening on Facebook, but Twitter too. A [social network analysis](#) in October 2019 done by an independent open-source investigator for the BBC, Benjamin Strick, yielded a well-funded and coordinated deployment of Twitter bots that promoted pro-government propaganda and disinformation, and attacked dissenting opinions.

The analysis found dozens of websites and bot accounts that appear to be targeting international audiences, with the goal of promoting a pro-Indonesian narrative while condemning pro-independence forces. Bots have also repeatedly harassed journalists and human rights activists who call for justice for Papua.

According to Strick, "In a context like this in which independent media is restricted and verified information is scarce, the potential for an organized disinformation campaign such as the one we have uncovered has the potential to have a substantial impact on how the situation is perceived by the international community. This in turn could have implications for policies and decisions made by other governments, and in international forums such as the UN."



One example is the Twitter account that promotes the website [PapuaWest.com](#). In the website's 'About' section, it claims: "PapuaWest.com is an online media which provides updated information related to business in the West Papua region." It also has a Facebook Page with over 50,000 followers and a YouTube channel, with the same video content. In a video that has been

[removed](#), PapuaWest.com lauds the Indonesian Army for purportedly developing the West Papua region.

Twitter later said it had removed more than 700 fake accounts promoting the Indonesian government and targeting the West Papuan independence movement.

STEALTH MEDIA SITES

In early 2020, Reuters found that the Indonesian army has also been involved in setting up propaganda websites that mimicked independent media. These sites were funded and coordinated by an Indonesian army corporal named Yunanto Nugroho.

Furthermore, materials from these websites are then distributed through social media networks on Twitter and Facebook accounts.

There are even some of these accounts using profile photos or cartoons that make it look like these are the work of a resident of Papua or activist "Free Papua." Yet, these accounts actually promote material that compliments the army and criticizes supporters of Papuan self-determination. The contents of these accounts look different and are inversely proportional to the activities of Free Papua activists.

In addition to being fake, Reuters said the accounts were very pro-Indonesian and spread propaganda about Papua. These accounts are believed to be related to the Indonesian military.

Deputy Head of Information of the Kodam (Wakapendam) XVII Cenderawasih Dax Sianturi claimed the existence of these accounts is a form of love for the homeland of Indonesian netizens to fight the campaign to release Papua from the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI), which is very massive and structured.

The problem is that the presence of these stealth media continues to fill the information distribution in Papua. The news is also read, trusted, and distributed. People who do not really understand how media works will naturally think of their presence as real media, even though there is no clear editorial office, including journalists covering the field. It is even suspected of presenting fictitious resource persons.

Stealth media also affects website ranking data. For example, kabarpapua.net is a hitched name for legitimate media site kabarpapua.co. As of 4 December 2018, kabarpapua.net recorded the highest ranking in Indonesia, according to Alexa, at 30,947. By comparison, kabarpapua.co's ranking is only 13,592. The second-highest ranking stealth media is papuanews.id, ranked at 31,592. Alexa's ranking of these two stealth media sites is still higher than that of ceposonline.com, ranked at 50,368 in Indonesia.

The existence of this rating is clearly dangerous for readers to find it difficult to distinguish between verifiable and accurate news and so-called news that does not meet journalistic ethics, especially when the stealth media rating is higher than the mainstream media.

The complexity of the problems in Papua has gone beyond the context of local conflict as it also reflects how the powerful maintain narratives through large-scale social media campaigns that hinder democracy and equitable development.

A report by Oxford Internet Institute (OII) director Philip Howard and researcher Samantha Bradshaw entitled "[The Global Disinformation Order](#): 2019 Global Inventory of Organised Social Media Manipulation" has listed Indonesia among the 70 countries it found to have organized social media manipulation for shaping public opinions, deeming it a threat to democracy.

In Indonesia, the report said, the existence of cyber troops and computational propaganda was aimed at spreading pro-government propaganda, attacking the opposition, or mounting smear campaigns, as well as driving division and polarization among West Papuans.

According to Bradshaw, "The affordances of social networking technologies – algorithms, automation and big data – vastly change the scale, scope, and precision of how information is transmitted in the digital age. Although social media was once heralded as a force for freedom and democracy, it has increasingly come under scrutiny for its role in amplifying disinformation, inciting violence and lowering trust in the media and democratic institutions."

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– SAMANTHA BRADSHAW, 2019

Investigating the actors behind a string of disinformation is difficult, but not impossible. Ismail Fahmi from social network monitoring company Drone Emprit said it would need further investigation and willingness from the government's side to be honest and open.

"Such activity [deploying cyber troops] makes it hard for the public to find the right information because they're bombarded with information that's been modified in certain ways. Our opinions and thoughts are formed by the hashtags and memes that

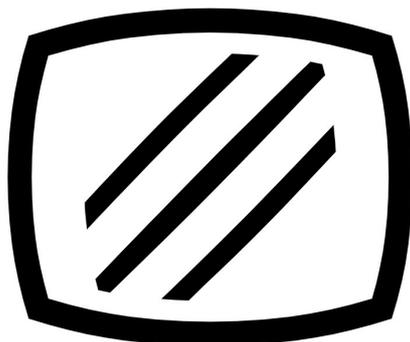
we see, diverting us from the issues that matter. As a result, the facts are concealed and problems aren't resolved," Ismail said in an interview.

The actors behind cyber troops – called buzzers in Indonesia – had concealed their activities under the pretext of freedom of expression. However, Ismail argued that such activity had suppressed the public's genuine criticisms that were an important part of democracy.

"When an issue is concealed, then it would be as if there were no problems, then there would be no public pressure for the authorities to take action," Ismail said.



Dominggus Mampiooper is a journalist based in West Papua, while Adi Renaldi is a freelance journalist based in Jakarta, Indonesia.



DISINFORMATION IN THE PHILIPPINES

ALL THE PRESIDENT'S LIES

By John Nery

ALL governments lie.

Writing on the import of the Pentagon Papers, the political philosopher Hannah Arendt wondered at “how little attention has been paid” to the significance of lying in politics and our “active, aggressive capability” to deny the truth.

“Secrecy... and deception, the deliberate falsehood and the outright lie used as legitimate means to achieve political ends, have been with us since the beginning of recorded history. Truthfulness has never been counted among the political virtues, and lies have always been regarded as justifiable tools in political dealings,” she wrote.

But at a time of rampant disinformation, in the Philippines and elsewhere, expert and citizen alike are finally paying more attention to the role governments play in what Arendt, in a related context, calls “organized lying.”

The “[disinformation primer](#)” the media studies scholar Cherian George prepared begins in part with that crucial assumption:

“Governments are major perpetrators of disinformation

Disinformation is a common strategy of populist demagogues who try to subvert people’s trust in verifiable facts and cultivate cynicism (including by demonizing professional media as “fake news”) so that policy debates and electoral contests are not based on reasoned debate but on personal charisma and tribal loyalties.”

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– CHERIAN GEORGE



PHILIPPINES AS ‘PATIENT ZERO’

The Philippine government under President Rodrigo Duterte has been the frequent subject of research or reporting on the use of disinformation in governance or in election campaigning.

Famously, in a [2018 speech](#), Katie Harbath, the Facebook executive in charge of “global elections” described the Philippines during the 2016 presidential election as “patient zero” in election-related disinformation. “That was the beginning because a month later it was Brexit and then Trump got the nomination and then you had the US election.” Harbath was speaking in the context of Facebook’s programs to protect “the integrity of elections on our platform¹.”

¹ But see also Lauren Etter, who wrote: “As the campaign for the 2016 Philippine presidential election got under way, Facebook began receiving inquiries from candidates on how they could best use the platform. In January the company flew in three employees who spent a week holding training sessions with candidates. When it was Duterte’s turn, the Facebook team gathered with the campaign inside the Peninsula Manila Hotel. The campaign staff was trained in everything from the basics of setting up a campaign page and getting it authenticated with the trademark blue check mark to how to use content to attract followers. As an example of the use of unscripted video, the Duterte campaign was shown a live Facebook video of Barack Obama preparing for his State of the Union speech in 2016. The clip garnered more views than a video of the actual address to Congress.” From “What happens when government uses Facebook as a weapon?” Bloomberg Businessweek, 7 December 2017.

But it is a serious mistake to attribute the invention of organized disinformation in the Philippines, as we understand the term, to the Duterte government or to Duterte's presidential campaign.²

Ed Lingao, a journalist for over three decades, offers a historical perspective: "It's not the first time any administration made use of its popularity to push wrong or misleading information. Everybody does it. This one has been pretty blatant about it. And that's also because it can afford to be."

It is an equally serious mistake, however, to deem the Duterte government's deployment of organized disinformation campaigns as merely business as usual.

Manuel Mogato, a reporter who has been covering the news even longer than Lingao, does not mince words. "There is only one goal. The government wants to hijack the media narrative and promote propaganda, which it is fast learning from China. It wants to silence critical media by trying to discredit news organizations which are critical, by labeling them as corrupt, biased, pro-opposition (Yellows) or sympathetic to the communists," he says.

"That has been going on since Day 1 and they want the people to believe the independent media is anti-Duterte out to tarnish his image. At the same time, it floods social media with propaganda and disinformation through paid keyboard warriors. It is polarizing the society, creating deep divisions."

Two scholars approaching the subject from different angles complete the picture.

A media studies professor, who requested anonymity because of the possibility of reprisal, describes the Duterte government's embrace of disinformation: "The administration's reliance on disinformation is quite deep. It is used to seed false information, to silence dissenting voices, creates the appearance of unwavering public support for the administration and its policies, and then turns around and attempts to create an illusion of being under attack from the opposition (playing victim)."

Rechelle Ann Barraquias, a professor of development communication at Xavier University-Ateneo de Cagayan, the first university in the southern island region of Mindanao, where President Duterte is from, explains how disinformation intersects with geography.

"Regardless of whether you are from Luzon, Visayas, or Mindanao, the government's use of disinformation is really meant to push people, whose opinion does not go with the status quo, further into the spiral of silence, while giving a sense of 'validation' to rabid supporters. It has made pointing fact from opinion even harder, if not more

² I presented an example of a pre-Duterte disinformation campaign, in the form of [an address](#) to the Philippine Association of Communication Educators, in April 2015, well before Duterte took his oath as president.

challenging, for these people. Many of the people in Mindanao, for instance, see Duterte as a messiah, which already clouds their judgment when it comes to filtering information.”

Some of the best scholarships on disinformation in the Duterte era reject what scholars describe as moral panic. But, soul-searching over a murderous government policy, or raising the alarm on government propaganda favoring another country, or hand-wringing about failures in public health strategy — all driven by an awareness of the role that disinformation campaigns play in government policy, propaganda, and strategy — are what today’s historical conditions demand. The soul-searching, alarm-raising, and hand-wringing should not be understood as forms of moral panic, but rather as necessary responses to extraordinary circumstances.

‘WAR ON DRUGS’

The true stakes of government disinformation in the Philippines can be seen in the awful consequences of the Duterte government’s centerpiece program, the so-called war on drugs.

A [chilling study](#), “Examining the effects of drug-related killings on Philippine Conditional Cash Transfer beneficiaries in Metro Manila 2016-2017,” found that “at least 333 victims out of 1,827 identifiable DRK [drug-related killing] cases in Metro Manila from June 2016 to December 2017 were CCT [conditional cash transfer] beneficiaries.”

The CCT is a monthly cash disbursement program for poor households; by definition, the beneficiaries live below the poverty threshold. The program was started by the Arroyo administration (2001-2010), expanded in the Aquino administration (2010-2016), and is maintained by the Duterte administration. The study notes that the beneficiaries “are the most ‘legible’ to policy interventions given that their identities and [those] of their families are encoded in the National Household Targeting System for Poverty Reduction (NHTS-PR) and CCT databases.”

News stories and opinion columns have depicted the war on drugs as characterized by inflated statistics, unverified “narco-lists,” and dubious claims of alleged drug users fighting back against the police — by disinformation, in short. But, it is still a shock to learn that the government uses an actual, vetted government registry to look for drug suspects, many of whom are then killed in disputed circumstances afterwards.

In the context of the Philippine Drug War, the data from the CCT-DRK validation shows that the CCT-DRK were killed in the first six (6) months of the anti-illegal drug campaign (July to December 2016). While institutional structures to operationalize the Philippine Drug War are being developed, there is a strong indication that available lists of CCT

beneficiaries are being used as a source of information in identifying the location of suspected drug users and dealers in urban poor communities in Metro Manila. Their legibility to the state is another negative effect of DRKs on CCT beneficiaries because it increases their risk of being targets in anti-illegal drug operations.

Disinformation under Duterte is definitely not business as usual.



DISINFORMATION IN THE PHILIPPINES

The literature on disinformation in the Philippines, including both academic studies by specialists and investigative reports by journalists, is robust and growing. This overview relies particularly on the following key findings or central concepts emerging from the literature.

A pioneering 2018 [study](#) by Jonathan Ong and Jason Cabañes describes the architecture of networked disinformation in the country; it is a vivid picture of and a useful template for understanding disinformation operations.

“Architects of Networked Disinformation” paints a detailed portrait of the “loosely interconnected but hierarchized groups of digital political operators with diverse social backgrounds and work responsibilities ... [who] collaboratively design highly spreadable political content that weaponizes popular vernaculars and maximizes the deceptive affordances of digital platforms in order to mobilize populist public sentiments.” In a word, the authors render visible what they call the “invisible machine” of the digital underground.

The blueprint shows a three-tier structure: political clients hire (1) high-level strategists, usually from advertising or public relations, to serve as the architects of their digital disinformation campaigns; (2) the strategists sub-contract digital influencers (classified in the study as those with 50,000 to 2 million followers) to communicate the messaging; and (3) the influencers’ work is echoed by community-level fake account operators hired by the strategists.

A comprehensive [report](#) by Davey Alba in BuzzFeed³, published also in 2018, captures a particular Philippine reality: Facebook is the digital public square that dominates the public sphere in the country by hosting “a never-ending meme-driven propaganda campaign that’s easier to share and harder to police.” Facebook has since become more responsive to complaints about the proliferation of accounts that display what it classifies as coordinated inauthentic behavior. But “How Duterte used Facebook to

³ The BuzzFeed story is a deeply reported piece, but crucial passages, such as this one, may create the impression that the Philippines is an outlier, inadvertently “Othering” Filipinos. In fact, the Philippines does not have anything like the Fox alternative news universe, just to give one example from the United States, which reports stories as though “the truth no longer matters” and “propaganda is ubiquitous.”

fuel the Philippine drug war” explains how the Philippines, and Facebook, reached the crisis point:

If you want to know what happens to a country that has opened itself entirely to Facebook, look to the Philippines. What happened there — what continues to happen there — is both an origin story for the weaponization of social media and a peek at its dystopian future. It’s a society where, increasingly, the truth no longer matters, propaganda is ubiquitous, and lives are wrecked and people die as a result — half a world away from the Silicon Valley engineers who’d promised to connect their world.

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— DAVEY ALBA, 2018

An important [study](#) by Ong, Ross Tapsell, and Nicole Curato follows the evolution of disinformation in the social media space in the Philippines and highlights four dominant disinformation narratives. It is also valuable for putting the spotlight on YouTube as an “alternative influence network.” The authors write: “We find it important to highlight the role of YouTube in the disinformation landscape in the Philippines, where the debate has almost exclusively centered on Facebook.”

A [brief](#) I wrote in February 2019 sought to correct the Western bias of much of the literature then available by recognizing Asian perspectives on disinformation and its accelerating effect on democratic decay.

An Asian perspective on democratic erosion and digital disinformation can be useful in several ways: It can highlight the aggressive use of disinformation in the region’s history of colonialism, and indeed prove that disinformation was a preferred weapon of colonizing forces; it can help correct the America-centric focus of much of the existing literature, by demonstrating a greater variety in the scale and impact of

disinformation in different media ecosystems; it can help focus attention on the fatal consequences of “fake news.”

Above all, an Asian perspective can help underline the role digital disinformation plays in hastening democratic decay.

A [multi-country research project](#) into “Information Disorder in Asia and the Pacific,” first published in 2018, updated in March 2019, and edited by Masato Kajimoto and Samantha Stanley, provides a valuable comparative perspective. The report on the Philippines, written by Yvonne Chua and Ma. Diosa Labiste, crystallizes expert opinion that President Rodrigo Duterte is “the nation’s chief purveyor of fake news.”

President Rodrigo Duterte has emerged as a, if not *the*, major source or creator of state-level misinformation, disinformation and mal-information delivered in conventional platforms such as press conferences, interviews and speeches, including the State of the Nation Address. He consistently plays loose with facts, especially in defense of his brutal war on drugs – the centerpiece of his domestic policy.

Borrowing from the [work](#) of Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan, but adapting it to our purposes, this overview maps government disinformation in the Philippines according to a two-fold schema: messages and messengers.



MESSAGES

There are various ways to track the primary messages circulating in the Duterte communication ecosystem. Analyzing the content of The Mocha Uson Blog, the central social media nub of the system, is particularly useful; it allows an unvarnished, up-to-date look at the issues vexing the Duterte government and its allies and supporters.

Between 11 and 15 May 2020 – the week after ABS-CBN, the country’s largest TV and radio network, was forced to shut down – the blog ran 116 posts. A few were isolated entries that defended China, highlighted the role of presidential confidant Sen. Bong Go, or “debunked” the history of the 1986 People Power, or EDSA Revolution, in the Philippines. About a tenth were critical of Duterte’s own allies or officials such as former Speaker Alan Peter Cayetano, who filed a bill providing a temporary license to ABS-CBN. About a fourth were links to government press conferences conducted by different officials, starting from the President. And about a third – a clear plurality – were attacks on the ABS-CBN network or on the network’s celebrities critical of the shutdown.

Running through many of the posts were perennial themes: that “Tatay Digong” (Duterte as father figure) works hard and knows best, that his supporters are “ordinary

citizens,” that overseas Filipino workers (or OFWs) form a special part of that base, and that the base of supporters needs to be on guard against “scammers, lawbreakers, oppressors of ordinary Filipinos, abusers, [and this is the relatively new part] deceitful communists” – in other words, the Duterte supporter as victim.

To be sure, not everything posted in the blog was disinformation. For instance, the links to the various government pressers, supplemented by the occasional explainer, should be understood as dutiful attempts to be useful.

A year before, Ong et al identified four “dominant disinformation narratives” that campaigns in the 2019 mid-term elections used: 1) the “angry populism” against the establishment that marked Duterte’s 2016 presidential run; 2) the continuing project to revise the dictator Ferdinand Marcos’ place in history; 3) mistrust of mainstream media; and, from the side of the political opposition, 4) extreme anti-China speech⁴.

But the first three narratives “mobilized” by pro-government campaigns were not in fact specific to the elections; they have long been part of the Duterte disinformation strategy, going back to his days as mayor of Davao City. Duterte muted his criticism of the media while campaigning for president, but during his long tenure as mayor he had choice words for journalists. And immediately after his election, he reverted to norm.

Today, it is possible to identify at least four overarching themes that codify the messaging from the Duterte government and its allies.

Disinformation Theme 1: “The media is biased.”

On 2 June 2016, about a month before taking his oath of office, President-elect Duterte put the news media on notice⁵. “You know, guys, you think too much of yourself ... You know what? You want your cake and eat it too [sic]. That’s the problem with some journalists in this country. If worse comes to worst ... we’ll just have to expose each other. Do not try me because a president is vulnerable to attacks. Not me. Not me.” He then issued a strange, chilling challenge to journalists: “In journalism, you speak the truth, firmly, then you invite danger. I’m challenging you, guys. Kill journalism, stop journalism in this country.”

The very existence of [The Mocha Uson Blog](#) is proof that the claim of a biased mainstream media is one of the primary disinformation themes in the Duterte ecosystem. In its ‘About’ page, the blog identifies the “Mocha Uson” persona as “NOT a journalist just an ORDINARY FILIPINO.” But the work of the blog amplifying pro-Duterte voices or (less frequently) communicating its own pro-Duterte positions has often

⁴ I have my reservations about whether the fourth narrative is in fact disinformation, properly speaking.

⁵ See “Buhay ka pa ba?” [Are you still alive?], a [VERA Files documentary](#) launched in February 2018 that collated and classified the President’s lies.

meant attacking journalists and purveying disinformation. The continuing attacks on ABS-CBN are only the latest evidence.

Disinformation Theme 2: “Alliances are temporary; Duterte is the only constant.”

As the attacks on some of the President’s own allies proved, his most dedicated (or most rabid) supporters can turn on fellow supporters in an instant – without losing sight of the need to protect Duterte at all times and at all costs. A good example: The blog amplified an attack on the 13 senators who filed a bill providing for ABS-CBN’s franchise renewal, rendering disinformation in colorful language: “The thirteen apostles of St. Cory trying to save the hand that feeds them.” This was in reference to the late President Corazon Aquino, who restored the network to the Lopez family after Marcos’ ouster. But the list of senators included some of Duterte’s closest allies, the boxer Manny Pacquiao among them.

The blog amplified the supporters’ hostility against Cayetano, Duterte’s own vice presidential running mate, when the former Speaker of the House of Representatives filed a bill providing for a temporary license for ABS-CBN. The attacks – quite literally, they included the message to “hit Cayetano” – only began to subside when Cayetano’s own social media campaign highlighted his comments against the network, including especially ABS-CBN’s very famous celebrities. This is only the latest example of another overarching disinformation theme: alliances shift all the time; only Duterte is constant.

Disinformation Theme 3: “The rules do not apply.”

Before the coronavirus pandemic, the primary disinformation narrative in favor of the government was the continuing campaign to justify the murderous war on drugs. This narrative was absent from the Mocha Uson Blog the week after the ABS-CBN shutdown. But, the real message behind the rationalizations of the disinformation campaign – that there is no cure for drug addiction, that there are no innocents in the war on drugs, that the victims of drug-related killings deserved to be killed – is even more sinister: The rules do not apply to Duterte and the police.

On 19 May 2020, in another late-night presentation on the government response to the pandemic, President Duterte reiterated the old legal maxim. “The law is the law. A rule is a rule is a rule.” It was a warning against those breaking quarantine-related laws. Then several minutes later, in the same speech, he defended the [police general](#) who was treated to a birthday party in contravention of the rules and declared that he would not fire him. “You said, [the law is the law](#). Well, that’s my lookout. It’s my responsibility.” (Note the deflection in “You said,” which he said in Filipino; he was distancing himself from his own restatement of the legal maxim only minutes before.) It was a new example of another overarching disinformation theme: The law is flexible.

Disinformation Theme 4: “EDSA was a failure.”

Despite being left out of the current news cycle, anti-EDSA or People Power Revolution, pro-Marcos posts continued to pop up in the blog’s timeline. This testifies to the patient and long-term strategy of the Marcoses to seed social media with favorable information.

Among other posts, a “payback Wednesday” entry looked back at “Otso Diretso” (the Straight Eight opposition candidates for the Senate in 2019, all of whom lost). The caption gleefully noted that in the last election, “the people decided to LIBERATE themselves from the Liberal Party.” This attack on the previous administration and its ties to the democratic restoration after Marcos’ ouster in 1986, together with the appeal to review that post-Marcos history, forms part of another primary disinformation theme: the discrediting of the Aquino years.

Recent research studies by Cheryl Ruth Soriano of De La Salle University deepen our understanding of how these overarching disinformation themes come to be. “What appears to be the convergence point in both researches is how disinformation anchors on political and national aspirations of Filipinos – which disinformation brokers capitalize on – appropriating a blending of fact and fiction in their discursive styles,” says Soriano.

She lists some of these aspirations⁶: “The aspirational tropes that emerge from our study bring in narratives of ‘what was’ and ‘what could be’ – a sense of national pride (‘we were once a great nation’), regional competitiveness and independence from previous ‘colonial controls’ (‘we can be an independent nation, free from bullying American influence), ‘true and working democracy’ (‘Aquino’s brand of democracy did not work, we need a democracy that will work for people and pave the way for social justice even when it might stifle political liberties’). You would notice that these tropes work at the level of ideology and at a practical level of experience.”

What makes these disinformation narratives stick?

“The more common strategy is the blending of fact and fiction. This is done through the use of some historical and current facts and blending these with the commentator’s interpretation, now carefully twisting the facts toward what for an ordinary person might appear compelling. The YouTube videos we saw would run for 3 to 10 minutes, giving the broker ample time to expound on arguments and pepper these with video footages (probably from archives) and real images of events or people and rousing music that create a sense of believability,” says Soriano.

⁶ Personal communication, May 2020, but based on Soriano, C.R. & Cabalquinto, E.C. (forthcoming). *YouTube and Social Transactions in the Philippines* (Chapter 6 on YouTube, Politically). Amsterdam University Press.

“Sure, there are memes or short posts that appear as plain distortion but we need to see these posts and memes alongside the broader narratives of disinformation – in short, the memes and short tweets just reinforce the more developed narratives that are already being circulated elsewhere. I think disinformation producers know that people would not be convinced with single posts – they need stories of despair, frustration, hope, and aspiration that would trigger affective response.”



MESSENGERS

These overarching disinformation themes – stories based on fact-and-fiction blends of larger, popular aspirations – circulate in the body politic through three main means. There is the government bureaucracy, now largely under the control of Duterte’s appointees and supporters four years into his six-year term; there is the invisible machine of networked disinformation that Ong and Cabañes identified; and then there is the charismatic, voluble President himself, whom Chua and Labiste, among others, locate at the center of the web of disinformation.

How these three channels disseminate disinformation has become even clearer during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Government bureaucracy

Consider, as a first example, the Department of Information and Communications Technology. It is collaborating with the Philippine National Police to stop coronavirus-related disinformation; that is the promise in the very name of their joint program: “Task Force COVID Kontra Peke” (Anti-Fake News Task Force). But, in fact, the program is characterized as a campaign against any “fake news” that seeks to take advantage of the pandemic. In other words, the false information does not need to be about COVID-19 per se. Assistant Secretary Emmanuel Rey Caintic described the campaign as a public safety initiative.

“The DICT is ready and willing to lend our expertise to our law enforcement agencies to help in the fight against the spread of the virus, and the spread of disinformation. We cannot take fake news lightly, as it threatens peace and order as well as [the] safety of our society, especially during this time of national emergency,” says Caintic.

But, a closer look at a “Facebook event” the DICT conducted on 30 April 2020 – called “#FAKE News: How to Identify Fake News and Misinformation” – raises serious questions about the real objectives of the campaign. Two glaring instances seem to bear this out: The “webinar” dwelt on “sloppy journalism” as a cause of fake news but did not even touch on propaganda, and it showed – without explanation – a screenshot of a Rappler fact-check as an example of “misleading headings.” In fact, the Rappler fact-check was straightforward: “FALSE: 5G networks are connected to coronavirus outbreak.” But the DICT presentation accompanied the screenshot with the

following text: “Stories that are not completely false can be distorted using misleading or sensationalist headlines.”

Does the DICT think 5G networks are in fact connected to the pandemic?

If this is any indication of the content and direction of the DICT’s anti-fake news campaign, then the department seems intent on at least two objectives: claiming a stake in the fact-checking space (where news organizations are prominent), and degrading the value of journalism and of particular news organizations.

This kind of disinformation-related mission creep can be seen in other government departments. In particular, the security services – the Armed Forces of the Philippines and the Philippine National Police – have come under repeated criticism for their frequent and dangerous use of the old tactic called red-tagging^{7,8} – smearing organizations and individuals as communist sympathizers or, to borrow the phrase used in The Mocha Uson Blog in May, “deceitful communists.”

The practice has led not only to harassment or tedious and expensive court cases, but also, in August 2019, to the ambush and near-death of a [reporter](#) from Northern Dispatch Weekly. Even during the pandemic, however, the [insidious practice continues](#).

The main government agency tasked with communication and information objectives is the Presidential Communication Operations Office (PCOO), a sprawling department with multiple units under the management of a Cabinet-level official. It is self-described in its vision-mission statement as “the lead communications arm of the Government and a vehicle of understanding for a well-informed and enlightened citizenry, proud of its heritage and attuned to global realities.”

The PCOO has several “attached agencies,” including the state broadcasting system People’s Television Network (PTV-4), over a thousand employees, and a 2020 budget of almost PhP1.7 billion (US\$33 million).

Under Secretary Martin Andanar, the PCOO has taken a high-profile role in fighting disinformation, launching, among other initiatives, a continuing program called “Dismiss Disinformation.” In the middle of the coronavirus pandemic, Andanar has continued to call on the nation’s youth to serve as “[internet warriors](#)” to fight fake news. “They are more knowledgeable about it since they were born in the digital era. The youth can really help us in combating fake news or misleading information circulating in different social media platforms,” he says.

⁷ Wikipedia has a well-researched and nuanced page on [red-tagging](#) in the Philippines.

⁸ See this for a recent (and unfortunately recurring) [example](#).

But the PCOO itself has been repeatedly and vigorously criticized over the four years of the Duterte presidency for spreading disinformation or for acts of negligence or incompetence that ended up favoring disinformation.

In April 2020, for instance, PTV News ran a story alleging that “Communist NPA Terrorists swooped down” on a town in Eastern Samar in the Eastern Visayas region to steal relief goods intended for the people. But, in fact, there was no such raid, [town officials said](#). The relief goods were successfully distributed.

The following month, the PCOO shared on social media alarmist and inaccurate posts by the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict on the sudden shutdown of ABS-CBN. After an immediate public outcry, the posts were taken down, but all Andanar said, by way of explanation, was that the sharing on social media was “done without the usual vetting process.”

Much more can be said about PCOO’s own role in spreading disinformation or at least facilitating its spread. But, its reputation was seriously damaged when it served as a government sinecure for Uson, the President’s leading social media champion. As an Assistant Secretary from May 2017 to October 2018, she cut a highly visible, highly controversial profile, with a [track record](#) for spreading disinformation. In one Senate hearing, an administration-aligned senator even asked Andanar, Uson’s superior: “How can you fight fake news when there are instances when the fake news comes from an Assistant Secretary herself?” Several weeks after officials from the PCOO called on her to [resign](#), Uson left the PCOO. (She has since been appointed to another government position.)

Disinformation network

It is interesting to note that, fresh from the elections in 2016, even the finance secretary-designate at that time, Carlos Dominguez, waxed enthusiastic about the role Duterte’s social media operations played in the winning presidential campaign, and soon after taking office created an [“anti-red tape” team](#) in the Department of Finance that included an explicit instruction to “explore the use of modern communication technologies, including social media, to expedite transactions, improve efficiency in the delivery of services and receive customer feedback.” But, when – in an extraordinary political drama – Dominguez testified at the Commission of Appointments against Duterte’s own nominee for environment secretary, Gina Lopez, in 2017, he found some parts of the social media army led by the influential Uson very publicly siding with Lopez.

Such is life in government service in the age of social media. Disinformation Theme 2, which holds that Duterte is the only constant, has frequently turned around and hurt the President’s closest allies. (Dominguez, who was one of those who convinced Duterte to run for president, has been friends with him since they were young children in Davao City.)

In the first half of Duterte's term, the most powerful influencers were Uson, the blogger RJ Nieto who uses the name Thinking Pinoy ("Pinoy" being an endearing diminutive for "Pilipino"), and the transgender rights activist Sass Sasot. There has since been a falling out, but for a time, the three functioned as a truly formidable bloc. As Buzzfeed News [reported](#) in 2018: "The three pro-Duterte influencers with massive followings often coordinate with each other. 'TP [Thinking Pinoy], Mocha, and I have a chat group,' [Sasot] said. 'We talk about, for example, if there's an issue that we would like people to pay attention to.'"

There are many other social media influencers who proudly identify as DDS (or Duterte Diehard Supporter, an acronym that is a play on Duterte's notorious Davao Death Squad, a vigilante group in Davao City). And there is a considerable overlap between influencers who support Duterte and those who support other politicians, especially Cayetano, once Duterte's running mate and former Speaker of the House of Representatives, and Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. New ones are emerging too, for instance, in the circles frequented by the controversial lawyer Ferdinand Topacio. But through her blog, Mocha Uson continues to be the leading influencer, able to focus attention on issues and to direct attacks against targets like no one else in the invisible machine.

All the President's lies

An entire book can be written about President Duterte's lies: what he said, when he said them, and why he said them in the first place. The list itemizing the lies can fill up a lengthy chapter; in it we would find the whole gamut of lying, from gentle fibs to violent fantasies.

Some of the President's lies have been damaging to particular individuals: For instance, his repeated insistence that he saw his political archenemy, now-detained Sen. Leila de Lima, in a sex video that does not in fact exist. (If it did, copies would proliferate.) Or his insinuation that Caloocan City Bishop Pablo David, who ministers to the victims and the surviving kin of alleged drug suspects killed by the police, was somehow involved in the drug trade. (The smear was so ridiculous it did not gain any traction at all.) Or that journalist Ellen Tordesillas, president of online news outfit VERA Files, was soliciting money from sources to pay for her cancer treatment. (In fact, she has been cancer-free for years and her treatment was shouldered by her former publisher.)

Other lies have hurt not only individuals but the institutions they represent.

Duterte confronted Rappler reporter Pia Ranada on live TV. "Don't abuse [press freedom] too much. It's a privilege in a democratic state. You have overused and abused that privilege in the guise of press freedom." But, press freedom is not a mere "privilege"; it is a right guaranteed by the Constitution. The President's hostility to independent or critical media, however, was the real message, and it was heard.

He called on Congress to “fast-track” the impeachment of Supreme Court Chief Justice Maria Lourdes Sereno, put her on “notice” that he was her “enemy,” called her “stupid” – but, when Sereno was removed from office he said he had nothing to do with it. His attacks, and the chief justice’s eventual ouster, undermined the already shaky foundations of the country’s judiciary.

But, it is his persistent spreading of disinformation about his government’s main program, the war on drugs, that many will remember him for: inflating the number of drug users in the country (and firing the head of the Dangerous Drugs Board for insisting on real numbers), making blanket accusations through his narco-lists, and hyping the number of policemen killed in the anti-drugs campaign. These have led directly to the lethal legibility of the registered poor.



STRATEGY OR CULTURE?

It should be clear, then, that under Duterte, and starting with him, the Philippine state uses, supports, or even subsidizes disinformation work. But is the support or subsidy a matter of strategy or a matter of habit?

Antonio La Viña, a professor of law, philosophy, and government, sees disinformation as part of the political culture Duterte cultivates:

The Duterte government uses disinformation mainly to confuse and divide people and that way it gains political advantage. This is not so much an explicit strategy as a political culture, a mindset that Duterte had personally honed and practiced from his early years as mayor. I actually do not think it is organized or centralized with one mastermind commanding or supervising everyone. I think it is more spontaneous and decentralized than what we suspect, but it is still effective because the culture of disinformation has penetrated all levels of government and the many Duterte factions.

To be sure, “strategy or culture” may be a distinction without a real difference.

“Sometimes it is systematic, in the case of troll farms sowing disinformation,” Lingao says. “Sometimes it seems spontaneous, like in the way the President drops bombshells during his ramblings that do not stand up at all on their own legs. Sometimes, these bombshells are dismissed by his spokesmen as jokes, or as literary overkill; most of the time, they are just easily but dangerously dismissed by those who are already inured to his factual lapses. Whichever the case, his words are absorbed by his supporters and taken to battle on a spear point, because to them this is now gospel truth.”

It is instructive to study how disinformation and rambling bombshells become gospel truth. Soriano's research suggests that you begin by changing the priests who preach that gospel⁹.

How the ordinary Juan/Juana attains the right to speak and gain credibility as a political interlocutor is a function of participatory and microcelebrity culture brought about by new technological/political developments. In the past 10 years, we have seen this participatory culture engendered by Web 3.0 to encourage D-I-Y culture: "We can find out for ourselves." "Traditional institutions of knowledge can no longer be trusted." "We need to celebrate ordinary people's political views." "By creating our own media we can collectively challenge traditional institutions."

Disinformation brokers would articulate that the books are biased, the media are biased, even universities are biased, and, therefore, people should listen to ordinary people "reconstruct history," to tell them the "real story."

This works well against the broader narrative of the President and his men of casting doubt on the credibility of media and traditional expertise. When the same narratives are reinforced by brokers and this becomes consistent, persistent, and corroborated across platforms, audiences may begin to alter their notions of trust. The use of ordinary people makes narratives more believable, and frees it from a feel of propaganda. The youth would also question their parents' traditional ways and sources of knowledge, believing that "in this age, we know media literacy better."

But the rise of that participatory culture that creates new influencers is mirrored in the rise of a silent public sphere. Hostility, hate, and vitriol generated by organized disinformation campaigns have the effect of muting the influenced.

The media studies professor who requested anonymity worries about this phenomenon:

Where I think the most worrisome impact is for the long-term health of a functioning democracy is its success in silencing the voices of ordinary citizens. The environment is so toxic, abusive, and violent out there on Facebook that ordinary citizens are no longer willing to participate in regular discourse because there is no civility left or no safe spaces for people.

Democracy doesn't work if people don't feel safe to say what they think.

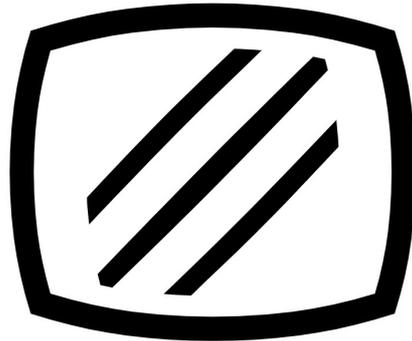
⁹ Personal communication, May 2020. But also: Soriano, C.R. & Tandoc, E. (forthcoming, untitled).

It doesn't matter what is in the Constitution or what the courts will protect. They are not being censored in a classical sense; citizens are being bullied into silence and they just learn to tune out and not participate in conversations. This is bad and it needs to be reversed. We need to learn again how to listen to each other, and engage in civilized discourse about politics and policies.

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BANGSAMORO IN MINDANAO

THE ELUSIVE WAY FORWARD THAT RESPECTS HISTORICAL NARRATIVES

By Carolyn O. Arguillas

IN HIS FIFTH State of the Nation Address on 27 July 2020, President Rodrigo Duterte declared in no uncertain terms that the 31-month martial law in the southern island region of Mindanao ended on 31 December 2019 “without abuses by the civilian sector, by the police, by the military.”

Displaced residents of the southern city of Marawi and human rights groups quickly dismissed his claim.

“Fake news,” Drieza Lininding, convenor of the Marawi City-based Moro Consensus Group, lashed out at the declaration of Duterte, the 16th President of the Philippines, the first from Mindanao, and the first to claim to have Moro (Filipino Muslim) blood.

Lininding said the fact that 27,000 families at ‘Ground Zero’ have not been able to return home after three years is proof enough of violation of their rights. Elsewhere in Mindanao, human rights groups such as Karapatan Southern Mindanao and Barug Katungod Mindanao reported thousands of human rights violations, debunking Duterte’s bold pronouncement, according to [fact-checking](#) by VERA Files.

Marawi’s ‘Ground Zero,’ composed of 24 barangays (the smallest political unit in the country) out of the city’s total of 96, was the main battle area between government forces and the Islamic State-linked Maute Group and Abu Sayyaf during the five-month bloody siege that broke out in May 2017.

Lininding could not have stressed enough that in the course of what came to be known as the Battle of Marawi, there were “thousands (of human rights violations) like lootings, disappearances and torture.”

In March 2019, the Integrated Bar of the Philippines’ Lanao del Sur – Marawi City Chapter presented documents in a congressional hearing, pertaining to the claims of 15,102 residents displaced from ‘Ground Zero’, amounting to PhP91.6 billion (US\$1.9 billion) in damages.

Various human rights groups, such as [Amnesty International](#), have filed reports on human rights violations in Marawi. So have Karapatan and Barug Katungod Mindanao on human rights violations in other parts of Mindanao during martial law.

Citing rebellion by the “Maute terrorist group,” Duterte issued [Proclamation 216](#) placing Mindanao under martial law and suspending the writ of habeas corpus on 23 May 2017, barely eight hours after the Maute Group and Abu Sayyaf laid siege on the country’s lone Islamic city.

Military officials would later claim the siege was supposed to unfold on May 26, the first day of Ramadan, but was carried out instead on May 23 after a failed military operation to serve a warrant of arrest on Isnilon Hapilon, Abu Sayyaf leader and the alleged Emir of the IS in East Asia, at his apartment near a mosque in Basak Malutlut, about half a kilometer away from the main gate of the Mindanao State University in Marawi.

He and Maute Group leader Omar Maute were killed by the military five months later, on October 16. The next day, Duterte declared Marawi “liberated from the terrorist influence.” Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana terminated all combat operations a week later, or exactly five months to the day the grueling battle started.



MARTIAL LAW: FROM 60 TO 952 DAYS

Even with the terrorist threat supposedly eliminated, Duterte did not lift martial law. In December 2017, citing an unspecified “rebellion” in Mindanao, he sought and was

granted approval by Congress to extend martial law until 31 December 2018. Another extension – until the end of 2019 – was granted to him upon his request.

On 21 July 2017, a day before Congress allowed the first extension of martial law until year-end 2017, Duterte justified the move. “If there is no more ISIS doing his thing, there is no more rebellion. What am I supposed to do with martial law? I get my salary with or without a martial law. I can operate with or without martial law,” he told Davao City reporters. Lorenzana gave no reply when asked by MindaNews, a local news outlet, via text message about the [factual basis](#) for the extension, “given that the rebellion in Marawi – the reason why martial law was declared in the first place – had been addressed and Marawi had been declared by President Duterte on October 17 as having been ‘liberated from the terrorist influence.’”

Lininding said Duterte was smart for having martial law extended thrice – from 60 to 952 days. He said the extensions were meant to instill fear in the people and deter them from filing cases or seeking investigation into what really happened in Marawi and if the situation indeed warranted the declaration of martial law.

Three years after Marawi’s “liberation,” displaced residents of ‘Ground Zero’ have yet to return home, a situation that has bred resentment and, in the long history of struggles in the Bangsamoro (Moro nation), could lure victims into joining groups that the five-month long armed conflict in 2017 sought to end.

“Even the security sector knows that Marawi is becoming a recruitment slogan for extremism, selling it as a continuing injustice,” Acram Latiph, executive director of the Marawi-based Mindanao State University’s Institute of Peace and Development, said in September 2020.



MINDANAO NARRATIVE

In the run-up to the May 2016 Presidential elections, Duterte vowed that if he were elected president, he would put an end to illegal drugs and corruption in six months, transform the country into a federal Philippines by the time he ends his term on 30 June 2022, pursue the peace processes between government and the Moro liberation fronts, and between government and the communists.

Duterte also promised to address the historical injustices committed against the Moro people in Mindanao. Mindanao, the second largest among three major island groups in the country, is home to a people of mixed identities – the Moro whose religion is Islam, the *lumad* (Indigenous peoples), and the predominantly Christian settlers.

Mindanao is composed of 27 provinces and 33 cities out of the country’s 81 provinces and 145 cities. It has a population of 24 million or 24% of the nation’s, based on the

latest (2015) census, and accounts for 14.4 million or 23.3% of the country's 61.8 million registered voters as of 2019.

Historical injustices have hounded conflict-ridden Mindanao whose decades-long aspiration for peace and self-determination has struggled to rise above the din of exclusionary, exploitative, and discriminatory state policies, and deep-rooted negative perceptions of Muslims in the country.

Historical injustices have hounded conflict-ridden Mindanao whose decades-long aspiration for peace and self-determination has struggled to rise above the din of exclusionary, exploitative, and discriminatory state policies, and deep-rooted negative perceptions of Muslims in the country.

Several factors contributed to this conundrum: the biases and prejudices passed on from generation to generation, non-Mindanawons' ignorance of the historical narratives of dispossession, marginalization, and minoritization of the Moro and the *lumad*; a highly centralized governance system that imposes Manila-centric policies that, instead of addressing the issues, have perpetuated the injustices against the Bangsamoro; and a Manila-based national media reporting on issues without a clear understanding of the historical and present-day realities in Mindanao.

For decades, the national media in Manila has been deciding what is and what is not news for the rest of the country, including how events in faraway Mindanao should be interpreted. Textbooks written by Manila-based authors have also painted and imposed their own image and interpretations of Mindanao.

Taken together, these factors have stoked a dismal lack of understanding of Mindanao, particularly the Bangsamoro areas, pushing to the sidelines their collective stories of struggle and aspirations for peace and genuine development.

Consider the state policy in the early 1900s of sending thousands of people from the island regions of Luzon and Visayas to settle in Mindanao while promising them lands if they settled in the region. This resulted in the massive dispossession of the Moro and the *lumad*, Mindanao's original occupants, of their ancestral landholdings. Yet, the Moro people's struggle for peace and the intermittent armed conflict born out of long drawn-out social and political injustices that largely remain unredressed continue to be deeply misunderstood by the non-Moro population in the Philippines.

Today, mention the word 'Mindanao' and it still conjures images of wars, kidnappings, bombings, massacres, disasters, and other forms of physical and structural violence.

To many, Mindanao remains the Philippines's 'bad news' capital. This throws the irony of Mindanao's image as the "Land of Promise" into stark relief.

But the image of a heavily militarized Mindanao has to do with the fact that it is home to more than half of the country's armed forces; to majority of the New People's Army (NPA), the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines; the Moro liberation fronts – although both the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) have signed peace agreements with the government; and to violent extremists such as the Islamic State-linked Abu Sayyaf, Maute Group, and the breakaway Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters. For a time, it was also home to military rebels.

Poverty has often been cited as among the reasons behind the little and big wars that have ripped Mindanao apart. It goes alongside a slew of other factors. Think systemic neglect. Corruption. The endless striving for self-determination and appeals to address injustices – whether historical, transitional, or recent.

On the flip side, think of Mindanao's abundant natural resources, including rich fishing grounds and lush agricultural lands, as well as vast deposits of metallic minerals like gold, silver, copper, and nickel. There are also huge reservoirs of natural gas and, according to reports, even deuterium and uranium.

Truly it is the "Land of Promise." But promise for whom? And development for whom?

The late Senator Aquilino Pimentel, a native of Mindanao, in a privilege speech in the late 1980s, referred to Mindanao as "the country's cash cow that gets only dog food."



DEMONIZED

If Mindanao is the most misunderstood among the three major island groups in the Philippines, especially from the perspective of Metro Manila, the country's seat of power – Bangsamoro is the most misunderstood within the region.

But while Bangsamoro is one of the richest regions in the country in terms of natural resources, it also has among the poorest provinces in the Philippines. Lanao del Sur, where Marawi is situated, is the country's poorest province. Yet through the years, nay, centuries, the Bangsamoro people, whose religion and cultural practices differ from the rest of Mindanao and the Philippine majority, have been demonized in the national imagination.

Of 27 provinces and 33 cities in Mindanao, the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), a region born out of the 2014 peace agreement between the Philippine government and the MILF, the largest Moro revolutionary, has five predominantly Muslim provinces and three cities, one of which is Marawi.

BARMM's predecessor—the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) — had a population of 3.8 million based on the August 2015 census.

While the rest of the country celebrates Philippine Independence Day on June 12, reckoning it to the declaration of the country's liberation from Spain on that day in 1898, Mindanao's predominantly Moro communities consider December 1898 as the "annexation" of their sovereign states into what, by then, had been named Philippine Islands.

Before the [forcible annexation](#) of Bangsamoro to the Philippines under the Treaty of Paris, the Moro had their own governments and laws.

On 10 December 1898, Spain, through the Treaty of Paris, sold the Philippines to the United States, including areas in Mindanao that it failed to conquer due to the resistance of its people. After 300 years of Spanish rule and – in the case of the Moro areas in Mindanao – after attempts to conquer them, Spain left and the US took over and imposed policies that would eventually marginalize and minoritize the Moro people and the *lumad* even more.

For both the Moro and *lumad*, land was communal but the US colonial government introduced the Torrens title and other land policies that eventually allowed wave after wave of migrants from Luzon and the Visayas to migrate to Mindanao.

Soon, businesspeople from the national capital and multinational corporations rushed to Mindanao to log its unexplored forests, convert its valleys and plains into plantations for export crops, extract its gold and other precious minerals, and harvest seafoods from its fishing grounds.

Inevitably, little and big wars exploded in Mindanao.



THE BANGSAMORO STRUGGLE

In 1968, a massacre of Moro youth in Corregidor Island in Luzon – dubbed the Jabidah Massacre – triggered the establishment of the MNLF under a young professor from the University of the Philippines, Nur Misuari from the Sulu province in Mindanao.

The MNLF, together with the New People's Army, was among the reasons cited by then President Ferdinand Marcos when he declared martial law in the entire country on 21 September 1972.

A peace negotiation brokered by Libya led to the signing of the Tripoli Agreement on 23 December 1976. But its impact was short-lived as both sides accused each other of violating the peace agreement.

Soon after, the MNLF splintered into three factions – the MNLF under Misuari, the MILF under Salamat Hashim (the Vice Chair of the MILF) of Maguindanao province, and the MNLF Reformist Group under Dimas Pundato of Lanao del Sur. The leaders went on exile while Marcos entrenched his dictatorship. Mindanao suffered [the most number](#) of human rights violations under Marcos – that is, 46.6% of human rights victims in the Philippines, or 4,227 victims, during that period were from Mindanao.

When the dictator Marcos was ousted and Corazon Aquino, the widow of Marcos’s political nemesis, Benigno ‘Ninoy’ Aquino Jr., took over as president on 26 February 1986, she opened peace negotiations with the National Democratic Front, resumed peace talks with the MNLF, and sent feelers to the MILF. But no peace agreement was forged with these groups.

The government and MNLF resumed peace negotiations in 1992 under the Ramos administration and signed the “Final Peace Agreement” in September 1996. But while it was implementing the peace agreement with the MNLF, the government resumed talks with the MILF.

The Estrada administration that succeeded Ramos in 1998 waged an “all-out war” against the MILF in 2000 and in the same year launched a war against the Abu Sayyaf in Sulu.

The Arroyo administration that followed (2001-2010) vowed an “all-out peace” but ended up launching yet another war against the MILF in 2003. Its peace negotiators were about to sign the already-initialed Memorandum of Agreement on 5 August 2008 in Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia brokered the talks starting in 2001) when the Supreme Court issued a temporary restraining order on August 4 that effectively stopped the signing. Armed clashes broke out three days later.

Although the government continued the peace negotiations with the NDF, no agreement was reached.

PEACE AGREEMENTS

The Philippine government had previously signed four peace agreements with the MNLF and MILF – the Tripoli Agreement of 1976 and Final Peace Agreement of 1996 with the MNLF and the Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro in 2012, and the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro in 2014.

In the past, passing the enabling laws for the peace agreements with the MNLF and MILF proved to be difficult as the rebel leaders had to move to another arena for negotiation: Congress, whose interests in Mindanao, abetted by biases and prejudices, led to the passage of Bangsamoro laws that instead of heeding the peace agreement

became “watered-down” versions of the agreement reached at the peace-negotiating tables.

In July 2018 the proposed Organic Law for the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao – or the Bangsamoro Basic Law – was passed, and it was ratified in January 2019, paving the establishment of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), which is currently governed by the Bangsamoro Transition Authority.

But while the law was credited to Duterte’s political leadership, it was, as expected, also a “watered-down” version of the original agreement during the peace talks.

At the inauguration of the BARMM on 29 March 2019, President Duterte said: “Today, we proudly open a new chapter in our history as we inaugurate the ... new autonomous entity that we had envisioned to address the injustices of the past and plot the new course towards a more promising future for Mindanao and the rest of the country.”

Today, the Bangsamoro region is under transition until 30 June 2022, when Duterte’s term ends and that of the first set of officials elected in the BARMM begins.

The year-old BARMM administration has to set up the bureaucracy of what would be a distinct kind of governance from the rest of the country, as it is running an autonomous region that follows a parliamentary system within the highly-centralized presidential system of government.



ANTIDOTE TO TERRORISM OR RELIVING HISTORICAL INJUSTICES?

The BARMM leadership, the majority of them from the MILF, is transitioning from a government composed of rebels trained to fight the government to one whose mission is to address what they had long fought for – autonomy.

Against the backdrop of this political breakthrough came Duterte’s move certifying as urgent the new anti-terrorism bill in early June 2020, triggering protests from Bangsamoro, alongside other sectors of Philippine society.

Moro leaders spoke against the proposed law in an online forum titled “[The Usual Suspects: Counter-Terrorism in Moro communities](#),” where they shared experiences from which they hoped the rest of the country could draw lessons.

“For many of our speakers here today, and for many of the Muslim communities watching this forum, we will have to revisit painful memories. We will have to relive injustices,” lawyer Anna Tarhata Basman, a Member of Parliament of the BARMM and one of the organizers of the forum, said in her opening remarks.

“But we do so in the hope that this country’s Muslim community can share their firsthand experience of what works in countering terror. We do so in the hope that we can help point a better way forward—one that does not force us to choose between our security on one hand and our rights on the other, but one that fully and truly guarantees us both.”

An open letter posted online by various sectors that were opposed to the proposed Anti-Terrorism law [appealed](#) to President Duterte to veto the proposed law and commission a review to come up with a “version that is respectful of people’s rights and freedoms.” It said, “The best antidote to terrorism is building a humane Philippine society.”

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In an online forum on 10 June 2020, Basilan Representative and Deputy House Speaker Mujiv Hataman said the Anti-Terror Bill was not the solution to terrorism but would likely worsen the situation in the Bangsamoro region.

Hataman, who had served as ARMM governor, said countering terrorism is not only achieved through firefight or arrests but, as experience has shown, also through development, dialogue, caring for the communities, and educating the youth to prevent them from becoming easy prey for terrorist recruiters. “These reform measures are among the pillars of counter-terrorism,” he said.

On July 2, the Bangsamoro Parliament passed a resolution “respectfully appealing” to the President to veto the Anti-Terrorism Bill “to provide Congress the opportunity to review and address the issues of vagueness, overbreadth and other concerns.”

About a week prior to the passage of the resolution, Ahod Balawag Ebrahim, BARMM’s interim Chief Minister, sent the Parliament a letter calling on the President to “exercise his veto power vis-à-vis the Anti-Terrorism Bill.” Ebrahim gave assurances that they condemn terrorism and have worked consistently to fight it. However, “I cannot help but be alarmed by the language and foreseeable consequences of the proposed Anti-Terrorism Bill,” citing “the long history of persecution, human rights violations, and discrimination suffered by the Bangsamoro.”

But even before the Bangsamoro Parliament could formally forward its July 2 resolution to the President, Duterte signed the controversial bill into law on July 3.

CONTINUING INJUSTICE

Back in Marawi, the rubble in Ground Zero awaits the return of its residents. A pending Congressional action on the proposed Reparation or Compensation Bills will allow them to rebuild their shattered homes – and rebuild their lives. Originally filed in 2018, these bills are gathering dust in Congress.

Failure of the rehabilitation of Marawi was one of two scenarios that civil society leader Guiamel Alim had warned against at the Bangsamoro Civil Society Organization Leaders' Peace Summit in February 2018, alongside failure of the Bangsamoro Basic Law. Either of this “will lead to more frustration and will be a lethal blow to peace,” said the chair of the Consortium of Bangsamoro Civil Society.

Failure of both is “a deadly cocktail of powder keg waiting to explode if not handled properly,” Latiph of the Institute of Peace and Development and co-organizer of the summit said.

For way too long, historical injustices have hounded the Bangsamoro region – Marawi's plight being yet another illustration of this woeful reality – while being denied its rightful place in the nation's narratives.



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