Internet blocks won't solve Southeast Asia's fake-news problem

Region's governments should support media literacy and fact-checking groups

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Millions of Indonesians lost access for several days this week to the services of Yahoo, PayPal and gaming platform Steam.

This was no accidental outage. Rather, the Indonesian government was enforcing an ultimatum requiring internet services to register with the authorities, and each of those U.S. companies eventually caved in after Jakarta showed its seriousness.

Under the next phase of its plan, Jakarta will soon establish a 24-hour deadline for platforms to take down content deemed as unlawful or as disturbing public order, with only four hours allowed in cases deemed urgent. Registered platforms that repeatedly fail to remove objectionable content could have access to their services blocked and be fined.

A similar situation is developing in Vietnam, a $1 billion market for Facebook. There the government has also published a draft decree that would punish platforms that fail to quickly remove content to which the authorities object.

Across Southeast Asia, governments of all stripes are tightening the screws on cyberspace under the banner of curbing fake news, ensuring social order and safeguarding national security, threatening global internet platforms with a loss of access to rapidly growing markets.

In Thailand, a ban on the dissemination of "false messages" has drawn widespread flak for seeking to insulate the authorities from public criticism of their handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Rights groups have decried Malaysia's law on fake news as a smoke screen to squash online dissent. Similar laws in other Southeast Asian countries have all too often been applied in circumstances beyond their stated purposes to stifle unflattering criticism of the authorities or to go after government critics.

These regulatory moves have come at a time of increased global scrutiny of major Western social media platforms and growing concern about how much Big Tech can still be trusted to self-regulate.

This has rekindled the debate over the role of Southeast Asian governments in regulating online activity. Such discussion has never been more important for a region that is home to 400 million internet users, who account for 70% of its population. Four of the 10 countries that boast the highest number of Facebook users are also in Southeast Asia, namely Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam and Thailand.

Proponents of an active regulatory approach, such as Singapore and the Philippines, point to Germany to rationalize their enactment of legislation against fake news. Such justifications should be taken with a pinch of salt, however.

While broadly worded anti-fake news measures have emboldened Southeast Asian governments to bend implementation to their will, Germany's Network Enforcement Act specifically targets hate speech and other extremist messaging, a narrowly defined concept. Under the law, internet users, not the authorities, originate complaints about hate speech.

Fake news and other misinformation and disinformation in cyberspace are real problems, but fixating on content removal is not the best approach. It is time governments across the region rerouted their efforts toward bolstering the power of the press, improving news literacy and nurturing independent fact-checking organizations. Governments can also oblige Big Tech to steer its copious cash toward such efforts.

The importance of higher public media literacy is obvious but has been largely ignored. In Vietnam, the onus of fighting misinformation has been largely put on the ministries of public security and of information and communications. Surprisingly absent from the discussion is what role the Ministry of Education and Training could play in tailoring a national comprehensive curriculum aimed at better equipping internet-savvy youth with media literacy skills.

A more trustworthy and robust press should be good for any government. It is all the more crucial as public trust in the mainstream media in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines and Thailand has generally been low and falling since 2015, according to the Reuters Institute's annual Digital News Report.

This mistrust has led internet-savvy readers in the region to turn to social media for news. Many Southeast Asian governments have followed their citizens there, exploiting social media as a valuable proxy for direct authoritarian control.

In this context, empowering the press would play an instrumental role in not only shielding the public from an onslaught of misinformation but also staving off a vicious cycle: The more people are exposed to fake news, the more they lose trust in the mainstream media, according to research by the Harvard Kennedy School's Shorenstein Center.

A recent report by the U.S. Agency for International Development argued that disinformation is the consequence, not the cause, of democratic backsliding across the Asia-Pacific region. Tackling the scourge of disinformation cannot be done without addressing "societal rifts brought about by worsening socioeconomic inequality and their political manifestations that have resulted in a democratic rollback," the report said.

At a time when government rhetoric and efforts to stem the flow of misinformation and disinformation are almost tantamount to relentless rounds of whack-a-mole, the public is ill-served by weaponizing the issue to serve the authorities' political agenda.