

- Fake news / Virus

'Infodemic' infects Southeast Asia

Bangkok Post · 25 Aug 2021 · 8 · JAMES GOMEZ ROBIN RAMCHARAN

Covid-19 and its subsequent “infodemic” of false or misleading information has impacted access to accurate public health information in Southeast Asia. A suite of existing legislation and recent emergency measures have been used by governments to silence their critics rather than repress the infodemic and have served to block accurate pandemic information. Compounding matters is the weak adherence to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), indicators that aim at fostering more open societies through greater access to information online.

An infodemic is defined by the WHO as “too much information including false or misleading information in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak”.

Within Southeast Asia, governments responded to this phenomenon by using “fake news” clauses in various legal provisions to deliver heavy collateral damage on freedom of expression. The laws allow for incumbent parties to censor and criminalise discussion that contradicts the state-sponsored narrative, severely regressing the overall access to accurate public health information in the region.

According to incumbent governments in the region, the infodemic is pushed entirely by the general population. This premise excludes governments opportunity for their own accountability when drafting new legislation, in stark contrast to reality, where a large amount of false or misleading information in regards to the pandemic is promulgated by the governments themselves.

A review of examples from fact-checking initiatives and institutions, shows there are four primary categories of infodemic, each with their own predominant instigators.

The first type of infodemic to manifest itself came in the form of conspiracy theories on the origin of the virus. Unsubstantiated hypotheses emerged, such as that the virus was bio-engineered in a Wuhan Laboratory or that it originated from the US, and was created in exchange for material benefits, or to distract citizens from other political issues.

Information regarding Covid-19 infections and deaths is the second and most salient type of infodemic. It involves speculation of possible unconfirmed, or under reported clusters, cases or death resulting from the virus, as well as what type of person is more likely to be a virus carrier.

In a more nefarious way however, national and local governments and local authorities have consistently under reported the presence of Covid-19 in their country or local area, in efforts to save face and prevent backlash from the general population. This aspect is particularly prominent in the more authoritarian Southeast Asian states of Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam.

The third primary infodemic type, consists of unscrupulous businesses and sellers pushing unproven preventative measures, or cures for the virus. Most of the claims concern the use of local herbs, traditional medicines, or even religious or magical rituals.

The fourth infodemic type involves vaccine efficacy. False information over reactions to different types of vaccines or their long-term effects. This also includes false reports of

vaccine provisions by hospitals and other agencies. The main agitators consist of anti-vaccine or vaccine hesitant citizens, and national governments.

Given its multiple facets, the infodemic also includes national governments as sources of misinformation. Ignoring this crucial fact, Southeast Asian governments have sought to define the infodemic as purely citizen-induced, in order to provide justification to enact repressive legislation that suppresses online debate and discussion about the pandemic. Hence, governments must also be held accountable for any inaccurate public health information.

Meanwhile, governments are using Covid-19 and its infodemic to crack down upon online dissent. Provisions to penalise “misinformation”, via various laws and decrees, have been used against government critics under the pretext of combating the infodemic. Moreover, some have sought to brand as “dangerous malformation” the media’s reporting on governments’ own statistics of daily infections!

Access to accurate information is important to maintain democratic checks and balances on public health policy implementation to overcome the virus and its resultant infodemic. To best counter the Covid-19 infodemic, governments should aim to foster a transparent information environment conducive to combating the virus, where government officials, media and citizens alike may be held accountable. This should not be too onerous given that they have enthusiastically endorsed the SDGs — 9 and 16 in particular — thus agreeing to uphold free expression, foster more inclusive societies and provide greater access to the internet.

The general population must have easy access to transparent and reliable information sources, facilitating peoples’ abilities to make well informed decisions.

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