

Combating medical misinformation and disinformation amid coronavirus outbreak

February 10 2020, by Nuurrianti Jalli



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

The overwhelming sharing of fake news amid coronavirus outbreak across the globe raised concerns among governments, including in the Southeast Asian region.

In the past weeks, we have quickly found disinformation and

misinformation on social [media](#) stirring public discussion and, at times, leading to unnecessary panic.

In Malaysia, misinformation claiming that [coronavirus would make people behave like zombies](#) raised concerns among [medical professionals](#) after a video went viral on Facebook.

In Indonesia, dozens of hoaxes shared on the internet include inaccurate allegations that [some patients in the country had died after being affected by the pathogen](#).

The new strain of coronavirus, originated from Wuhan, China, spread rapidly across the world, thanks to globalization.

In less than two months since the first case reported in Wuhan, the virus claimed the lives of over [700 people with more than 34,000 confirmed cases](#).

However, we know little about the novel coronavirus except that it is lethal if not treated properly.

This uncertainty is causing speculation among the public. It is worsened by the irresponsible sharing of unverified information about the disease.

To mitigate the dissemination of medical hoaxes, Southeast Asian governments have taken various approaches.

Fighting against hoaxes

In Indonesia, its Communication and Information Ministry announced that it had found [54 false information](#) about the virus on the Indonesian websites and social media earlier this month.

The Indonesian government has worked closely with fact-checking bodies, including [the anti-slander society \(MAFINDO\)](#), to combat this misinformation.

Having no fact-checking bodies, Malaysian authorities are working together with the media to provide reliable information to the general public.

Government bodies, like Malaysian Media and Communication Council through its website [Sebenarnya.my](#), serve as a one-stop center to crosscheck information that went viral on social media.

While in the Philippines, [the country's Department of Justice recently tasked its National Bureau of Investigation \(NBI\)](#) to catch peddlers of medical hoaxes.

Harsher approaches

The severity of information disorder related to the novel virus pushed Southeast Asian government to use stringent body of laws as the distribution of misinformation have caused mass panic.

MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION AMID THE 2019-CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK

ACTIONS TAKEN BY SOME SOUTHEAST ASIAN GOVERNMENTS TO COMBAT MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION AMID THE 2019-CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK



The Philippines Department of Justice assigned the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) to arrest individuals sharing medical hoaxes. Fake news peddlers will be charged under the Republic Act No. 10175 or the Cybercrime Prevention Act of 2012.

As of February 3, 2020, the Malaysian government arrested 12 individuals for allegedly sharing fake news related to the novel coronavirus outbreak. Two laws used are the Communication and Multimedia Act (CMA 2018) Section 233 and Section 505 (b) of the Malaysian Penal Code. Both laws carry penalties prison time, fine, or both. Sebenarnya.my a website developed by Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission serves as a one-stop centre to cross-check information that went viral on social media.



Indonesian government assisted by fact-checking bodies, including Masyarakat Anti Fitnah (MAFINDO), to combat the spread of medical hoaxes. The Indonesian government also look had made arrests, including two women in Balikpapan, Kalimantan, for sharing false information on the novel coronavirus outbreak.

Thai officials arrested two people for posting false information about the coronavirus. The Thai government, on January 30, warned the public not to share unverified news, or they could be charged under the Computer Crime Act, which can carry up to five years in prison.



Vietnamese authorities fined three individuals in January 2020 for sharing medical hoaxes related to the pathogen on Facebook. They were fined in between VND 12.5 million (\$537), VND15 million (\$645), and VND10 million (\$430) respectively.

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO THE SPREAD OF MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION



- Low media literacy level
- Lack of information on the novel coronavirus (nCoV)
- Lack of Internet gatekeepers
- Social media facilitate easy information sharing
- Lack of fact-checking skills
- Absence of relevant laws to contain fake news
- Weak implementation of legislation in certain Southeast Asian countries
- Competition among news media outlets - lead to 'clickbait' headlines

WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

- Start consuming information from social media critically
- Cross-check information obtained by searching further details on available search engines
- Be extra cautious of "sensationalized" news headlines
- Think before you share unverified news
- Press has to be more responsible and responsive to refute false information shared on social media
- Learn about local laws and the potential ramifications for sharing fake news
- Learn fact-checking skills to avoid becoming the next victim of online hoaxes

Misinformation and disinformation amid the 2019-Coronavirus outbreak. Credit: Nuurrianti Jalli

In Malaysia, for example, [the call for a total ban of Chinese tourists emerged](#) fueled by medical hoaxes consumed through social media.

A similar trend was also found in [Indonesia, where anti-Chinese rhetoric exists. Xenophobic treatments against individuals of Chinese descent also happen beyond Southeast Asia](#) amid the outbreak.

In taking serious action against the distribution of hoaxes on the pathogen outbreak, Southeast Asian law enforcers have arrested individuals for allegedly spreading [false information](#) on coronavirus.

Malaysian law enforcers have arrested [12 individuals](#) for spreading fake news on coronavirus. If found guilty, they can face up to two years in prison or fine up to RM 50,000 (about US\$12,000) or both.

[Thai authorities have detained two individuals](#) under the Computer Crime Act. While, [Indonesian officials had arrested two women in Balikpapan, East Kalimantan for the same reason.](#)

What's at stake

aMedical [misinformation and disinformation are two components of the information disorder](#) in Southeast Asia and they require immediate governmental attention.

False content ranging from wrong information on vaccines to inaccurate

content about the coronavirus demands a proper action plan to be instituted to keep information disorder from worsening.

Although people have associated imposing penalties for spreading fake news with limiting freedom of speech, in medical crises such as this, strict control by authoritative bodies to contain hoaxes are necessary.

Weak control over false content could lead to public panic, and jeopardize efforts placed by the government to control further spread of the virus.

Even despite harsh actions from the governments, misinformation and disinformation could still be easily found in the Southeast Asian internet sphere.

Social media have undeniably made sharing medical hoaxes easy, worsened by the public's lack of awareness about the novel virus.

Adding fuel to the fake news fire in Southeast Asia, click-bait headlines by irresponsible media agencies further amplify the spread of misinformation on the new virus outbreak. On social media, people share information without crosschecking their facts and, at times, coupled with xenophobic remarks aimed at China.

Recommendation

Although Southeast Asian governments take various approaches, efforts will go to waste if the public refuse to play their part in containing the further spread of misinformation and disinformation in the public domain.

I would urge the people to always fact check information obtained, particularly ones shared on [social media](#).

The simplest way to crosscheck is to use Google search on the matter and triangulate information from multiple sources.

Scientists across the world are working hard to find the best vaccine to treat the virus, and the public should play a part by acting on recommendations provided by these professionals and not on random posts on the internet.

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