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# Discussion Report Talking ASEAN

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Addressing Disinformation versus  
Freedom of Expression:  
Finding the Right Balance in Southeast Asia

Jakarta, November 13<sup>th</sup> 2019



## Introduction

JAKARTA – On Wednesday, 13 November 2019, The Habibie Center (THC) held a special Talking ASEAN National Seminar entitled “**Addressing Disinformation versus Freedom of Expression: Finding the Right Balance in Southeast Asia**” at Le Meridien Hotel in Jakarta. The Talking ASEAN National Seminar was part of The Habibie Center’s 20th anniversary celebration and will feature **Desi Anwar** (Senior Journalist, CNN Indonesia), **Ismail Fahmi** (Founder and Social Media Analyst, Drone Emprit), and **Yosi Moku** (Chairman, Siberkreasi) as speakers, with **Dr. Rudi Iskandar** (Associate Fellow, The Habibie Center) moderating.

The objectives of this National Seminar were to: (a) discuss the state of disinformation and freedom of expressions in Southeast Asia; (b) examine government efforts to counter disinformation whilst maintaining freedom of expressions in Southeast Asia; and (c) analyse whether government efforts to counter disinformation undermine or respect freedom of expression in Southeast Asia.

This discussion report summarizes the key points of each speaker, as well as the question and answer session that followed.

# PRESENTATION FROM THE PANELIST

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**Desi Anwar**  
(Senior Journalist, CNN Indonesia)



First to speak was Desi Anwar, Senior Journalist, CNN Indonesia. In her presentation she noted that digital technology and the use of social media is a global phenomenon. Indonesia has been enjoying one of the greatest freedom of press, compared to its neighbours. This is something that we should be proud of and grateful for.

President Habibie started it by opening the tap, reversing over thirty years of censorship and authoritarian approach to the press. Now we are enjoying that. And we have started to hear concerns about the excess of having too much freedom. This is something that we need to be aware of. Democracy is not given. It can easily be taken away. All of us need to take care of it. Democracy is being threatened all over the world.

She went on to state that information used

to be top down. Nobody was questioning the veracity of information they got from the media. When people read newspapers they accepted that what they read was the truth. Since the advent of internet and social media, Indonesia has been the 'Twitter capital'. Indonesia is also among the top three in terms of Facebook users. Everything is done through social media now. In total, there are around 150 million social media users in Indonesia. This number continues to rise.

With the prevalence of social media, it also highlights our culture even more. We are young generation. The median age of Indonesian population is 30 years old and most of us are digital natives. We like gossips and rumours. This has impact on society conversation in social media. Over 50% of Indonesian labour force are only high school graduates. That shapes the quality of conversation across social



media platforms.

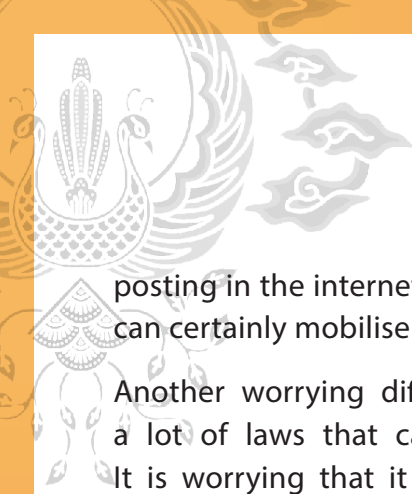
Desi Anwar explained that the impact of disinformation was really felt during election times. It was used to try to get people to vote certain candidates. During the 2014 election, it was the first time that we really feel the impact of disinformation. We have seen black campaigns and smear campaigns. It impacted not only politically but also socially.

The impact actually polarized people to the extreme level. The nature of how the internet and media works, it might sharpen the division and differences that might have always been there.

She recalled how in 2016 we again saw how disinformation affected negatively the Jakarta governor election. We have seen how a video can ruin somebody's career and bring people on the ground to protest. The most recent one,

in 2019 we have seen fights between families, neighbours, friends when it comes to choosing their candidates. This is something that actually produce very negative impacts. It allows people to think that the whole election is flawed and, hence, the result is illegitimate. Of course it was not really flawed. It resulted in violence in Jakarta. These are the impacts. We can feel it.

The government responded by, among other things, limiting access particularly to memes, pictures and videos. These are the ones that drive emotional response. This measure was effective in calming things down. But then we start to question the very fundamental principle that we fought for, democracy and freedom of speech. I think this is where the government is still trying to find the best way of doing things. This shows how difficult and inapt it is to deal with this thing. In another case, a teacher who was abused by her teacher was jailed for



posting in the internet about the case. Internet can certainly mobilise people.

Another worrying difficulty is that there are a lot of laws that can be multi-interpreted. It is worrying that it can be used to impose authoritarianism.

Internet can also certainly be used for a good cause. But we need to understand the nature of disinformation. A lot of times they are done by people who have political agendas. The supporters, the campaigners, the cyber army. They are paid to do these things. During the 2019 election, 45% of stuffs posted in Facebook were about politics. There is always an agenda. It can be as simple as people trying to capitalize from clickbaits. We have to be very careful.

Countries all around the world are struggling in dealing with this. How to regulate, let alone penalize, without violating human rights. These problems are extremely complex. Disinformation is not something entirely new. Disinformation, propaganda, false information, manipulated news. These have existed since the beginning of the existence of media. Authoritarian governments do it all the time for purposes such as suppressing the people, fomenting opinion, and so on. There are laws exist. When it comes to traditional media, countering disinformation is relatively easy. There is the right of reply. People can also file a complaint or sue.

We are dealing with something different. We are actually dealing with this idea of fake news. With internet, the aim is completely different. Facts and lies are blurred. It is because of the nature of the internet itself. It belongs to everybody.

Internet as a platform is borderless. Therefore, nobody feels responsible about the contents. Nobody feels accountable.

Towards the end of her presentation, Desi Anwar mentioned when they come from shady sources, the objective of fake news is not to tell what is right and what is wrong. The objective is to cast doubt. "Everything is a lie". It confuses people. It undermines our society. Conspiracy theories thrive in the internet. Rumours thrive in the internet. Because of that we now have the so-called alternative facts or the post-truth. It casts a doubt on the very existence, legitimacy, and credibility of our democracy. It undermines our civil society.

Going forward, we need to understand how things really work. We need to create atmosphere where public debate is welcomed, where different opinions should be the norm. The best thing to do is to be prepared, to be resilience.

# PRESENTATION FROM THE PANELIST



**Yosi Moku**  
(Chairman, Siberkreasi)



Next to speak was Yosi Moku, Chairman, Siberkreasi. He began by explaining about Siberkreasi which is a movement formed as a response to the rise of hoaxes and disinformation especially during the election period. It tries to raise awareness of the people, government, and community to do something about it. It conducts a lot of activities. It has already conducted 460 activities. It has reached around 194.000 audience. There are around 103 communities and organisations that have joined Siberkreasi network. We hope that by doing this, Indonesians can be wiser when they are using internet. We divide the activities into two. One is about education. We go to the communities, doing workshops and seminars. The other is generating positive contents.

He then went on to note millennials are not

really interested in creating positive contents. The viewers are also more interested in entertaining or recreational contents. That is the culture. Creators want to have more subscribers, more followers, more viewers, more likes, more positive comments. So, they play along.

It is hard to encourage Indonesian content creators to create positive contents. It is also hard to make them viral. People do not share things like that. Because of this, it is really hard for us to spread positive contents. We have to compete with all these non-educational contents.

But there are still things that we can do. And we must do it. That is why when we see the rise of political issues in Indonesia, it gives us motivation. We need to do something about it. We are not living in this country for ourselves. There are generations after us. I do not want my



son to live in a country full of hatreds, he said.

Yosi Moku went on to explain that he was a content creator, I have made a lot of contents. We need to continue to fight for our identity as a nation. We cannot just lay back. If you think you cannot do anything for this country, you are wrong. You can. You can start sharing positive contents. We need to reach out, to talk to the

negative comments. We choose the ones that we can have good communication with. We need to talk to them. We need to tell them that it is okay to have different opinions but in the end we are one nation.

# PRESENTATION FROM THE PANELIST



**Ismail Fahmi**  
(Founder and Social Media Analyst,  
Drone Emprit)



Last to speak was Ismail Fahmi, Founder and Social Media Analyst from Drone Emprit. In his presentation he noted that the problem of disinformation is not only faced by Indonesia, but the whole world. Fake news and state control are international concerns. We are basically talking about three things: misinformation, disinformation, mal-information. We have also 'fake news' but inside 'fake news' is basically misinformation and disinformation. Misinformation is when you share information without knowing that it can cause harm. Disinformation is when you have intention to make something bad. Mal-information is when you share information that are not supposedly shared i.e. private information. This is a global phenomenon.

It is very hard to reverse once misinformation or disinformation are spread. Sometimes spreading misinformation or disinformation

is about manipulating the people's mind, to destroy the conversation.

He went on to explain that there is more than just fake news. There are bias and propaganda. The deliberately misleading information is much more prevalent than fake news. We already had propaganda even before the rise of fake news. This is something that we need to also think about.

He recalled how in Prague, there is an organization called Kremlin Watch. It monitors tools used by Kremlin to influence internal affairs of foreign countries: intelligence and influence operations, disinformation operations, relevant political allies, NGOs and GONGOs, support for radical and extremist groups, using parts of ethnic minority, economic operations with political goals. So not everything is fake news.

Influence operation involves countries trying to



shape what other countries think about them. In the case of Papua, influence operation seeks to make people think that Indonesian government is bad. Social network analysis shows that conversation on 'West Papua' was dominated by the cluster of people that support Free West Papua. Pro-NKRI cluster was very small. So we have influence operation undertaken against Indonesia.

Ismail Fahmi argued that political events tend to be the main driver of fake news. Hoaxes rise leading up to election. Social network analysis on 2017 Jakarta governor election shows that instead of three, there were four clusters of people in Twitter. The fourth cluster was the Moslem Cyber Army. There are many cyber troops nowadays. They play a big role in social media conversation during political events.

Leading up to the 2019 presidential election, there was one big cluster supporting Prabowo-Sandi and many smaller but scattered clusters supporting Jokowi-Ma'ruf. Social network analysis during elections. In terms of issues, 'Jokowi's unfulfilled promises' dominated the conversation. It was not about 'Jokowi being anti-Islam' or 'Jokowi being pro-China'. For Prabowo, the most dominant issue was hoaxes more than 'human rights', 'khilafah', and 'religion'.

Meanwhile, he noted that in Singapore, the government's response can be divided into two: measures against online falsehood and measures against influence operation. With regard to online falsehood, a number of acts are used including Defamation Act, Sedition Act, Protection from Harassment Act (POFHA), and Protection from Online Falsehoods and

Manipulation Act (PFMA). With regard to influence operation, government uses Political Donation Act, Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, and Internal Security Act. While POFHA is for public, POFMA is used when people have issues with platforms.

On the other hand, Indonesia's approach involves UU ITE, internet throttling, as well as multi-stakeholder fact-checking and public literacy. In 2017, the Indonesian Anti-Slander Society (MAFINDO) was declared. There is also fact-checking platforms such as cekfakta.id. The Ministry of Communication and Information also has its own hot lines for reporting negative contents. Lastly, the government launched the Aduan ASN platform.

In terms of internet freedom, Indonesia is actually the best the best in Southeast Asia. With regard to the relations between UU ITE and freedom of expression, when the UU ITE was issued in 2016, the number of reported cases peaked. It is very controversial.

Aduan ASN is quite controversial. It is a repressive tool? There is also the issue with internet throttling. The impact of internet throttling was actually not quite high when it comes to conversation in Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Youtube. The impact was high to traffics in Whatsapp groups. The total of conversation on Whatsapp significantly dropped after internet throttling. The conversation on 'VPN', however, increased significantly. On the issue of 'West Papua', internet throttling did not have a significant impact.

To end his presentation he noted that the current situation is characterized by the vicious

cycle of noises. This is conducive for the spread of fake news and propaganda. Behind the noises, however, there are signals. What we need to do is to increase the ratio between signals and noises. Government should respond these signals not with noises but with responses and engagement.



# QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION





## Questions

**Question I:** How difficult for Indonesian media to maintain their independence?

**Question II:** What is the role of parliament in this matter related to the use of social media?

**Question III:** What are your thoughts about disinformation spread by states?

## Responses

**Desi Anwar:** The position of a journalist is complex. Media is always under the influence of the owners. Things become even more complicated during an election due to political affiliation. We have seen in the last couple of elections that media have been under pressure. Some media owners try to influence the public to vote for particular candidates.

Our democracy is very noisy. The way people consume, produce, and disseminate information poses a challenge for us because there is a risk of us losing credibility. Plus, media need to compete in terms of business. In Indonesia, people tend to go for sensational news. There is this temptation to exaggerate things or create clickbait and those sorts of things.

It is becoming much more challenging to become a professional journalist. In order to maintain credibility, we have to go back to the fundamental aspects of journalism, including rechecking, upholding ethics, promoting an environment that is not conducive for biases, and refraining from giving

opinions and so on. We need to go back to the basics of being a responsible journalist. We ask questions. We act as the real watchdog. This is increasingly difficult to do. Because of the efforts to delegitimize the credibility of journalists even by the governments like what we see in the United States. When you have this kind of environment, it is extremely difficult. But in the long run this is something that we have to keep fighting for. Otherwise, not only journalism that is in danger but also our democracy.

The case of Cambridge Analytica is interesting. These things are manufactured. They are not necessarily lies. There are people who know how mind and emotion work. People are targeted. These are professional works.

We all need to be skeptical. Machines only do what they are programmed to do. Even data is also something we really need to be cautious about. "What are the purposes of the data?" we should ask. We all need to be educated. We need to learn how things work.

**Ismail Fahmi:** We have come to a new kind of democracy. We should think about Democracy 4.0. We share our opinions almost everyday. Government measures so far tend to deal only with the negative aspects i.e. Aduan ASN, cekfakta. Issues like pornography, trafficking, and most recently radicalism. Why do not we do the other way around. Yes, there are those issues. But people also want to be listened by the government. Government should reach out the public.

We should use social media to make this nation smarter. We can use social media as a channel to get to know people's opinions and problems. Instead of looking only at the negative aspects. We can collect and monitor things that are shared by people in the social media. And use these data to inform the reach out policy.

Indeed, we need to be critical when we are presented with data. In the case of Papua, there was a small group of bots belong to Indonesians that tried to promote and say good things about Indonesian government policy in Papua. The bigger cluster, however, was dominated by the 'Free West Papua' narrative. There was influence operation undertaken by foreigners against Indonesia.

There is always motivation behind data. That is fine. We need data to explain clearly our position. That is why internet shutdown is dangerous. Because we cannot check other sources. Since 2017, we at Drone Emprit have made analysis to make the conversation transparent.



### **ABOUT ASEAN STUDIES PROGRAM**

The ASEAN Studies Program was established on February 24, 2010, to become a center of excellence on ASEAN related issues, which can assist in the development of the ASEAN Community by 2015. The Habibie Center through its ASEAN Studies Program, alongside other institutions working towards the same goal, hopes to contribute to the realization of a more people-oriented ASEAN that puts a high value on democracy and human rights.

The objective of the ASEAN Studies Program is not merely only to conduct research and discussion within academic and government circles, but also to strengthen public awareness by forming a strong network of civil society in the region that will be able to help spread the ASEAN message. With the establishment of ASEAN Studies Program, The Habibie Center aims to play its part within our capabilities to the ASEAN regional development.

### **ABOUT TALKING ASEAN**

Talking ASEAN is a monthly public dialogue held at The Habibie Center in Jakarta. Covering a wide array of issues related to ASEAN, Talking ASEAN addresses topics of: Economic Integration, Socio-cultural, & Democracy, human rights and regional peace, among others. Featuring local and visiting experts, Talking ASEAN is one of a series of twelve dialogues regularly held each month and open to a target audience consisting of ASEAN officials, foreign ambassadors & diplomats, academics, university students, businesses, and the media.

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