

Youth, Peace & Security Policy Memo



FROM: Youth, Peace & Security Working Group, US ASEAN Futures Symposium

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SUBJECT: Policy Recommendations for Digital Literacy and Security in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)

Executive Summary

While Southeast Asian youth have the potential to enhance the political, social, and economic landscape, they face increased vulnerability to digital mis and disinformation. Therefore, it is essential to bolster digital literacy for youth by providing them with the tools needed to engage responsibly online and unlock their full potential. In addition, enables them to meaningfully participate in decision-making processes that are tailored to their aspirations and prospects.

To meet these challenges, our policy recommendations underscore the need for a collaborative approach between the United States and ASEAN Member States. Specifically, the need for government-to-government partnerships to enable knowledge transfer on misinformation and disinformation, knowledge-sharing partnerships with technology companies on public policy agendas and toolkits to combat mis/disinformation, media literacy capacity strengthening for key ASEAN government officials, increased resources for civil society and non-government organizations involved in monitoring misinformation and disinformation trends, an expanded ASEAN Digital Literacy program, and mandatory youth involvement in policy negotiations.

Problem Statement

Mis and disinformation is one of the most urgent and consequential challenges in the digitally connected world. While the internet can provide access to knowledge across the globe with just one click, it brings with it a wide range of potential harms, such as confusion, anger, and hatred. The youth, who constitute a crucial part of this digital world but occasionally fall short of real-world experience, can easily fall prey to digital manipulation. Six of the ten ASEAN member states are among the [top 20 countries to spend the most time on the internet](#) each day, with nations like the Philippines averaging ten and a half hours a day. In addition, the ongoing lack of youth representation in decision-making spaces leads to incomplete perspectives and impractical solutions. In this regard, it is important to equip the emerging generation with skills and knowledge to identify, tackle, and counter mis/disinformation and empower youths to decision-making positions.

Background

It is undeniable that the current world is driven by technology and information. The internet has become an inalienable part of life for many people. In 2020, the number of [internet users stood at 4.70 billion](#), or around two-thirds of the global population. In ASEAN countries, there are over 460 million active internet users, and [the number is expected to grow exponentially](#) in the near future. The expansion of internet accessibility means that many more people will gain access to the World Wide Web, but it is not risk-free. The problem can be especially visible in a society with a lower digital literacy rate.

While the internet can grant access to knowledge across the globe with just one click, it brings with it a wide range of potential harms, such as confusion, anger, and hatred. The internet can also be used as a tool to humiliate, harass, and attack others on individual, national, and international levels. The recent examples are the spread of mis/disinformation to discredit the efficacy of COVID-19 vaccines or the dissemination of mis/disinformation by authoritarian states to sway the overseas public towards their own political agenda. Unless these problems are addressed in a timely and effective manner, they can greatly impact a wide range of communities.

Recent studies show that youth is highly susceptible to mis/disinformation. Teenagers – albeit widely regarded as ‘digital natives’ – tend to [struggle with distinguishing fact from online conspiracies](#). They not only slip into mis/disinformation easily but are likely to spread it among their peers. A majority of Filipino youth are only moderately able to [identify fake news](#), in contrast to their self-evaluated confidence in doing so. Moreover, researchers have found [correlations between fake news susceptibility and political polarization](#) of the youth in the Philippines. Similar findings echo across Southeast Asian countries such as [Malaysia](#) and [Indonesia](#). Therefore, there is a compelling need to equip young people in both the United States and Southeast Asian countries with the necessary skills and knowledge to identify, tackle, and counter mis/disinformation.

Formulating an appropriate policy to educate young people is, however, not an easy task for policymakers in the United States and Southeast Asian nations. In these countries, the youth is still heavily underrepresented in the decision-making sphere. They are, at best, dismissed as too inexperienced to be qualified for a pivotal role in politics; at worst, they are [blocked by the seniors because they are too naïve to take a helm](#). The absence of youth representation inevitably creates a worrisome disconnection between generations and hence incomplete perspectives. Most of the policies that concern the youth are articulated and implemented by senior officials who may not truly understand their characteristics and demands. The policies thus fail to address the issues. In this sense, setting up mechanisms to enable younger people to participate in a decision-making process is crucial. The youth should be entitled to represent their group in putting their interests on the agenda, which could be done through consultation on an equal footing, bringing more youths into the currently available political spaces, or creating a new platform for them to take the lead.

To summarize, the ongoing problem of mis/disinformation affecting the youth is two-fold. On the one hand, younger generations themselves are highly susceptible to digital threats due to their lack of media literacy. At the other end, the absence of youth representation in the decision-making process leads to abridged policy options, which in turn fail to tackle the crux of the problem. It is necessary to educate the youth about how to safely navigate the internet and, at the same time, elevate more young people to a decision-making level.

Policy Options

Delegates of the US-ASEAN Futures Symposium reaffirm the need to expand the existing [ASEAN Digital Literacy Program](#), to require all member parties to involve at least one youth coordinator in each negotiation team and provide financial support to civil societies and non-governmental organizations that monitor mis and disinformation trends throughout Southeast Asia. Despite the existence of digital literacy and security programs by ASEAN, which provide training to over a thousand trainers, hosting the ASEAN Digital Ministers' Meeting (ADGMIN), and ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Social Welfare and Development (AMMSWD), these programs are provisional, the most extended program being only two years long. ASEAN needs a permanent digital literacy and security program dedicated to improving rural-urban disparities, decreasing information deficits, and strengthening civil speech throughout the region.

Policy Recommendations

1. ASEAN should facilitate government-to-government partnerships in sharing best practices, information, and expertise in public policy decision-making between the US and ASEAN member states on misinformation and disinformation.

2. The US and ASEAN should undertake joint initiatives to provide greater access and transparency among tech companies to collaborate with ASEAN countries on information sharing and toolkits of public policy agenda developed by tech companies in order for a more streamline mechanism to combat the issues.
3. ASEAN should strengthen the media literacy agenda and outlook among key government officials among ASEAN members through capacity building in training and knowledge transfer, so the host countries can curate best practices in combating misinformation and disinformation.
4. The US and ASEAN should provide support to civil society and non-governmental organizations that are critical in monitoring misinformation and disinformation trends, in which continuous engagement and support from the ASEAN member states and the US through monetary and platforms will benefit the process.
5. While ASEAN has formed the ASEAN Digital Literacy Program to fight disinformation, the program must be enhanced and widened through robust collaboration with other tech companies with bigger budgets in order to cater to all 11 countries in Southeast Asia and the policy outlook produced must be discussed at high-level ASEAN meetings.
6. In future US-ASEAN collaborations and meetings, require all member parties to involve at least one youth coordinator in their negotiation team.