*Background Paper*

# Countering disinformation tools and initiatives in the Philippines

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# List of Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| A4DRN | Artists For Digital Rights Network |
| ABKD | Akademiya at Bayan Kontra Disimpormasyon at Dayaan |
| ACFJ | Asian Center for Journalism at the Ateneo de Manila University |
| AJI | Alliance of Independent Journalists |
| AMSI | Indonesian Cyber Media Association |
| ASEAN | Association of Southeast Asian Nations |
| ASOG | Ateneo School of Governance |
| BOSES Pilipinas | Boses, Opinyon, Siyasat, at Siyensya para sa Pilipinas |
| D&D | Consortium on Democracy and Disinformation |
| FMA | Foundation for Media Alternatives |
| GARM | Global Alliance for Responsible Media |
| GNI | Google News Initiative |
| IDEALS | Initiatives for Dialogue and Empowerment through Alternative Legal Services |
| IFCN | International Fact-Checking Network |
| ISIS | Islamic State |
| KBP | Kapisanan ng mga Brodkaster ng Pilipinas |
| MAD | Movement Against Disinformation |
| Mafindo | Indonesian Anti-Defamation Society |
| MIL | Media and information literacy |
| OOTB | Out of the Box |
| PAMIL | Philippine Association for Media and Information Literacy |
| PFCI | Philippine Fact-Checker Incubator Program |
| PPCRV | Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting |
| PPI | Philippine Press Institute |
| PRSP | Public Relations Society of the Philippines |
| RSF | Reporters sans Frontieres |
| SEA | Southeast Asia |
| SEAPA | Southeast Asian Press Alliance |
| UP | University of the Philippines |
| WikiSocPH | Wiki Society of the Philippines |
| WIR | Wikipedian in Residence |

# Table of contents

# Countering disinformation tools and initiatives in the Philippines

## 1.    Introduction

In recent years, there has been a significant growth in internet usage and social media in the Southeast Asian region. As of 2022, internet penetration in SEA is high, with four out of ten nations above 90% and Malaysia taking the lead at 98%. In terms of social media use, the region had over 500 million active users in 2022, with Indonesia and the Philippines accounting for 191.4 million and 92 million social media users, respectively (see Annex, Table A1).

The emergence of social media was once viewed as a boon to information access and the right to free speech (Kane 2017). Social media has, however, also significantly increased access to and the dissemination of false information in recent years (Smith and Perry, 2022; Sinpeng and Tapsell, 2021; Ireton and Posetti, 2018). Among the social media platforms, Facebook and YouTube continue to be the most used in the region (Table A2), although other platforms, such as video-sharing application TikTok and messaging applications like WhatsApp and Viber, are increasingly being used to spread disinformation.

Meanwhile, the Philippines has been dubbed "patient zero" in the global disinformation epidemic by a Facebook executive because of the staggering volume of disinformation in the 2016 Philippine elections, which preceded the Brexit referendum that year that culminated in the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union and the United States elections in the same year that saw Donald Trump's stunning win (Silverman, 2019). The situation has worsened as malign actors continue to conjure new strategies, as documented during Rodrigo Duterte's brutal war on drugs, the 2019 and 2022 elections, and the Covid-19 pandemic.

Different sectors have responded to the escalation of disinformation in the Philippines with a slew of initiatives to counter it. Among others, fact-checking, one of the swiftest responses, has taken hold since the 2016 election, initially within the media and later expanding to academia and civil society. Media and information literacy (MIL) is a component in formal education, specifically in the senior high school curriculum, and alternative learning systems, and is being pushed as lifelong learning. Multiple stakeholders have coalesced to push back against disinformation. They have deployed tools—some old, some new—as disinformation continues to evolve. For example, the fight against disinformation is being undertaken in more platforms, languages, and formats as anti-disinformation advocates widen their reach to more communities, including the grassroots.

In this paper, we explore practices, initiatives, and campaigns against disinformation that have emerged in the Philippines over the last five years and highlight those that can help build the roadmap for combatting disinformation in the region in the coming years.
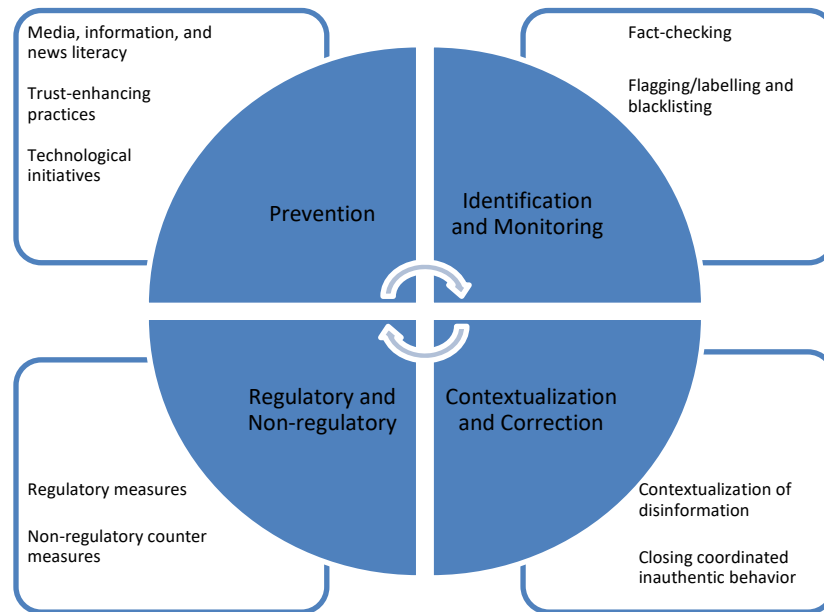
## 2.     **Framework of the Study**

Before further discussion, disinformation should first be distinguished from misinformation. While the terms are sometimes used interchangeably and both lead to the spread of false or misleading information, they differ in creation and intent. Misinformation is false information that is not intended by the author to cause harm, such as satire or a result of an error in reportage. Disinformation, on the other hand, is "false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization or country" (Ireton and Posetti, 2018). This has also been defined as "all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented, and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit" (EU Commission, 2018). Unfortunately, the two terms are not always differentiated by the public.

In any case, disinformation is a multifaceted problem that requires a multifaceted, whole-of-society approach to combat. In our attempt to map out initiatives against disinformation, this study adopts UNESCO's four general classifications for responses to disinformation. These are:

**1.**     Prevention – initiatives in this category focus on countering disinformation by helping audiences discern reliable sources of information; identifying and promoting trusted media sources; technological tools; and/or training programs for educators.

**2.**     Identification and monitoring – initiatives in this category are those that uncover disinformation articles and their sources in the various media/ social media channels to alert the public to their existence and provide truthful information.

**3.**     Contextualization or correction – initiatives in this category go beyond identification and focuses on inoculating the public against these disinformation messages, including directing audiences to the correct sources of information.

**4.**     Regulation or non-regulation – in the context of private sector efforts, this category refers to self and co-regulation responses in an attempt to stop or (at least) hinder disinformation.

The model, derived from McGonagle et al (2019), categorizes the initiatives as follows:

Figure 1: **Framework for Mapping Anti-disinformation Efforts**

Media, information, and news literacy

Trust-enhancing practices

Technological initiatives

Prevention

Fact-checking

Flagging/labelling and blacklisting

Identification and Monitoring

Regulatory and Non-regulatory

Regulatory measures

Non-regulatory counter measures

Contextualization and Correction

Contextualization of disinformation

Closing coordinated inauthentic behavior

Source: McGonagle et al., 2019

The classification above seeks to categorize the responses to disinformation based on the cycle of disinformation production and dissemination. While some initiatives may fall under more than one category, initiatives normally have a primary aim when conceived, and this will guide the research in terms of the method of classification.

## 3.      Taxonomy of disinformation

In 2018, during a ministerial meeting, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) issued a "Declaration on a Framework to Minimize the Harmful Effects of Fake News," which recognized the spread of false information as a growing regional problem and promoted socially responsible online behavior.

Similarly, the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2022, a global survey of online news consumption habits 46 media markets, recorded self-reported exposure to online disinformation to be the highest in the Philippines: Nine in 10 Filipinos say they have come across false or misleading information. Also, a recent study by Pulse Asia, a Philippine research organization, found that a similar proportion of Filipinos see the proliferation of "fake news" as a problem. Self-rated exposure to online misinformation or disinformation is likewise high in Thailand (86%), Indonesia (82%), and Malaysia (81%), but low in Singapore (55%), falling far below the global average of 71%, the DNR showed.

A global mobile industry study (Okeleke and Robinson, 2021) observed that the rapid growth of internet usage and, consequently, social media has led to the faster spread of disinformation primarily because of the following:
- scale of online communities;

- convenience and instantaneity of online channels relative to their offline counterparts;
- use of technological tools and techniques that drive virality, such as bots, videos, and "deep fakes"; and,
- proliferation of often unmoderated user-generated content online.

While these are present in the disinformation landscape of the SEA nations, the types of false information circulating in the region also present great diversity in language, structure, intent, and authorship. Below, based on the latest studies and reports, we note the general typology of disinformation present in SEA nations (Table 1):

## Table 1: Typology of Disinformation in SEA

| Country | Prominent Themes | Dominant Platforms | References |
|---|---|---|---|
| Brunei Darussalam | Covid-19 | Facebook | Smith and Perry (2022) |
| Cambodia | Covid-19, religion, disinformation against opposition leaders | Facebook, YouTube, Facebook Messenger, Telegram | Beech and Narin (2020); UNDP (2021); Vong and Sinpeng (2020); Gomez and Ramcharan (2019) |
| Indonesia | Covid-19 and health, religion, ethnicity, politics and elections, disasters, aid, obituaries | Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp | Hidayah (2022); Kwok (2019); Nadzir *et al.* (2019); Sinpeng, A. and R. Tapsell (2020); Gomez and Ramcharan (2019) |
| Lao PDR | It is a news and information "black hole," according to Reporters sans Frontières | | Reporters sans Frontieres (2023); US State Department (2021); SEAPA (2017) |
| Malaysia | Covid-19, politics and elections | Facebook | Sinpeng, A. and R. Tapsell (2020); Cheong (2020) |
| Myanmar | Covid-19, elections, ethnicity and religion, anti-Rohingya e.g., linking Rohingya with ISIS or the Islamic State, among others. | Facebook | Kyaw (2020); Gomez and Ramcharan (2019); Smith and Perry (2022); Gianan (2020) |
| Philippines | Covid-19, drug war, politics and elections, history (especially EDSA I), historical personalities (Corazon and Benigno Aquino Jr.), disinformation against opposition leaders | Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, TikTok | Chua and Labiste (2019); Combinido and Curato (2020); Smith and Perry (2022) |

| Singapore | Covid-19, economy, personality hoaxes | Facebook, WhatsApp, specific websites | Soon (2019) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Thailand | Covid-19, politics and elections, the economy (e.g., taxation) | Facebook, Line, Twitter | Chuensukiit (2023); Sombatpoonsiri (2020, 2022); Smith and Perry (2022) |
| Timor Leste | Covid-19, politics and elections | Facebook | Smith and Perry (2022) |
| Vietnam | Covid-19, politics, elections (e.g., delegitimizing of independent candidates), online market information, celebrity hoaxes, fake news sites, Vietnamese-Chinese relations | YouTube, Facebook, Whatsapp | Le (2019); Smith and Perry (2022) |

Because majority of the studies were published between 2019 and 2022, there is a prominence in COVID-19 disinformation vis-à-vis other health-related disinformation. Moreover, it should be noted that several SEA nations held elections during the past two years. However, while the elections may have intensified political disinformation, this has remained a constant in the disinformation landscape. In the Philippines, disinformation since 2016 has been largely revolving around historical distortions and personal attacks against politicians (mostly in the opposition) until the advent of Covid-19 disinformation in March 2020 competed for prominence.

## 4.    Case Study: Countering Disinformation initiatives in the Philippines

In this section, we discuss the various coalitions, collaborative efforts, and civil society organizations in the Philippines that have focused their efforts on combatting disinformation.

### 4.1 Multi- sector, multi-stakeholder collaborations and networks countering disinformation

*4.1.1.    Consortium on Democracy and Disinformation (D&D) – The Philippines' first multisectoral anti-disinformation consortium*

In February 2018, a conference on democracy and disinformation at the Ateneo de Manila University gathered around 300 anti-disinformation advocates alarmed by the widespread use of organized disinformation. A cross-section of the participants agreed then to continue the work of countering disinformation by forming a coalition of journalists, academics, bloggers, and civil society representatives. The multisectoral Consortium on Democracy and Disinformation, known by its moniker D&D, now has a core group of 32 members representing some 16 organizations, among them, Ateneo de Manila University Department of Communication; De La Salle University Communication Department; Holy Angel University; University of the Philippines-Diliman Department of Journalism as well as UP Visayas, Cebu, and Baguio; ABS-CBN; Al-Jazeera; GMA Network; Rappler; Philstar.com; VERA Files; Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility;

Citizen Safe; Foundation for Media Alternatives; Democracy.net; Pagbabago@Pilipinas; Phinma universities; Xavier University; and Bicol State University. It has three university-based hubs: Ateneo de Manila in Quezon City, Holy Angel in Angeles, and UP Visayas in Iloilo.

D&D's overarching objective has been to defend press freedom and promote freedom of expression in the Philippines in the light of threats coming from organized disinformation campaigns and from hostile government officials. It works for greater collective action against disinformation and attacks on press freedom through a combination of consciousness-raising, alliance-making, and capacity building and rides on focused research studies to deepen understanding of how disinformation works.

As of December 2022, D&D has organized three national conferences, 10 regional conferences, three international or national fora, and scores of fact-checking and media literacy workshops. It has worked with media organizations to produce special initiatives in journalism (including a DIY fact-checking manual and six counter-disinformation videos) and commissioned academic scholars to conduct 11 research studies on disinformation, several of which have been published in international publications. Another special initiative implemented in Iloilo (central Philippines) encouraged student journalists to produce a special digital issue of their campus newspaper with a focus on disinformation. In its initial years, D&D focused on fact-checking workshops for university students. Its more recent forums, however, are more "teacher-centric," primarily teachers with potential multiplier effect.

Over the past five years, the consortium says it "has built both the convening capacity to reach thousands of like-minded advocates through the forums it organizes and the training capacity to instruct thousands of teachers through the seminars it conducts." But D&D convenor and Rappler columnist John Nery predicts that "the threat from organized disinformation, now understood as part of an alternative information ecosystem, will only become even more serious" following the outcome of the 2022 elections, which installed Ferdinand Marcos Jr., the dictator's son, as president. He says, "It is highly likely that organized disinformation campaigns in the Philippines will mutate into so-called gray content, making them harder to define and to defend against. All the more reason, then, for a program that contributes to the defense of press freedom and the promotion of freedom of expression to continue."

### 4.1.2. *Tsek.ph – Academia-initiated project that coordinates fact-checking initiatives during elections*

Tsek.ph is the first academic-initiated and -coordinated fact-checking collaborative in the world (one year before Italy's *De Facto*) and the first multisectoral fact-checking consortium in the Philippines. It includes Viber fact-check quizzes and TikTok fact-checks.

Tsek.ph pioneered as a collaborative fact-checking project for the 2019 Philippines elections. Initiated by the University of the Philippines (UP), under its Office of the Vice President for Public Affairs and the Journalism Department, the aim of the project is to bring together various fact-checking initiatives to have a coordinated fact-checking scheme and to have a repository for all fact-checks done by consortium members, made up of professional media institutions as well as voluntary academic and civil society organizations while, at the same time, maintain the independence of each group under the Tsek.ph banner.

Despite being a state university, UP is well known for its independence and its Journalism Department is the lone center of excellence in journalism in the Philippines. The university stepped in as Tsek.ph initiator and coordinator at the urging of several big news media organizations who, at the time, cited the need for a neutral and independent institution to take the lead amid fierce media rivalry.

Tsek.ph in 2019 consisted of 14 partners: 11 from the media and three from the academe. It was revived for the 2022 general election with 34 partners and included civil society initiatives for the first time. Members are listed at https://www.tsek.ph/about/.

Tsek.ph verifies and fact-checks the following claims: platforms and campaign promises of candidates; election-related statements and remarks made by candidates, personalities, government agencies, and other entities; and election-related posts on social media, blogs, and other platforms. As a repository of fact checks, Tsek.ph curators collect the fact checks of the member organizations and transpose their individual ratings to the standard ratings adopted by the collaboration. It is guided by the Code of Principles of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) that is committed to fairness and nonpartisanship, transparency of sources, funding and methodology, and openness to corrections. The 2022 project was supported by Meta, Google News Initiative (GNI), Rakuten Viber, Meedan, and the Canadian Embassy in Manila.

Its fact checks reach viral levels. For example, its TikTok and Facebook reels have a range of 800,000 to 1.4 million views, while the Tsek.ph Viber channel can rival the channels of some Philippine broadsheets.

The fact checks curated by Tsek.ph in 2019 and 2022 have also fed into research undertaken by faculty members of the UP Journalism Department, which shows how electoral disinformation plays out in the Philippines. Tsek.ph's findings in the 2019 elections, for example, have been included in a Senate committee report recommending measures on how to curb disinformation and who should be held accountable. In the 2022 elections, Tsek.ph's weekly summaries and special reports served as a barometer of disinformation as these were picked up by the international and local media in their reporting on the country's elections.

Tsek.ph is an *ad hoc* group, however; it ceases to exist when elections are over. Tsek.ph partners have urged the continuation of the collaboration. Tsek.ph, meanwhile, has caught the interest of fact-checkers in India, Malaysia, and Thailand looking for models of fact-checking collaboratives.

### 4.1.3. *#FactsFirstPH – Election-related, multisectoral consortium*

FactsFirstPH is another multisectoral anti-disinformation consortium, established in 2022 for the general election by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Maria Ressa and led by Rappler. Rappler was an original partner of Tsek.ph in 2019. The consortium provided 14 fact-checking organizations with financial incentives to produce a monthly quota of fact checks and tied up with some 130 groups and organizations from the media, academe, civil society, religious sector, and business communities to create a "mesh" that supports activities that fight disinformation on four layers: fact-checking, amplification of fact checks, research, and holding disinformants to account, including taking legal action against them. Members are listed at https://factsfirst.ph/members.

FactsFirstPH continues to provide funding support to fact-checking and several other partners after elections. This collaboration is supported chiefly by Meedan and Google News Initiative.

Aside from FactsFirstPH and being an IFCN verified signatory, Rappler earlier built a database and social monitoring tool, "Shark Tank," to record troll-like and propagandistic behavior. This has been the springboard for its "deep dives" into disinformation.

The unique quality of this consortium is the financial support given to its fact-checking collaborators and the amplification of fact-checks through a "mesh" of civil society organizations and other sectors and its legal response to disinformers, including a database for troll-like behavior.

### 4.1.4. *Movement Against Disinformation (MAD) – Coalition of legal luminaries fighting disinformation*

Another broad coalition of civil society, academe, and mostly legal organizations "united to push back against the systematic and unregulated spread of disinformation," Movement Against Disinformation (MAD) was launched in November 2021 ahead of the May 2022 general election. Its members from the legal sector include the Philippine Bar Association, Philippine Chapter-New York Bar Association, Lyceum of the Philippines Law, Emilio Aguinaldo College Law, Alternative Law Groups, Ateneo Human Rights Center, SALIGAN, and members of the faculty of Ateneo Law.

MAD's opening salvo was directed at tech platforms, releasing open letters addressed to Meta, TikTok, YouTube, and Google seeking transparency, accountability, and more resources to counter electoral misinformation. It assists individuals and groups that have been targets of disinformation or "Red-tagging" – being branded as communist or terrorist – by way of statements and filing of cases. It also focuses on seminars and symposia on disinformation. MAD joined FactsFirstPH and belongs to its accountability layer.

## 4.2 Institutionally implemented efforts to counter disinformation

### 4.2.1. *VERA Files – Independent media and fact-checking organization reaching diaspora*

VERA Files is a nonprofit independent media organization founded in March 2008 by six veteran female Filipino journalists, focusing on investigative journalism and in-depth reporting. It is the first IFCN verified signatory in the Philippines and Southeast Asia. It is also one of the first institutions to introduce fact-checking to different communities in the country, produce a do-it-yourself fact-checking guide and a series of training videos, and launch a tipline chatbot.

It is ahead of other fact-checking groups in reaching out to the Filipino diaspora, one of the largest in the world, to empower them to become "truth warriors." VERA Files has tied up with migrant workers' groups and has to date run intensive fact-checking and online verification workshops for overseas Filipinos in Europe, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and South Korea. It integrates games and activities into its training. VERA Files unveiled its tipline chatbot on Viber in

November 2021, and introduced the chatbot to Filipinos in Taiwan in time for the May 2022 elections by partnering with the Taiwan Fact Check Center. It is also one of the founding members of Tsek.ph.

VERA Files also has initial collaboration with persons with visual disabilities and is set to develop a module for future fact-checking training for this group.

After the 2022 elections, it also launched the podcast "What The F?! to ferret out the facts about burning issues.

### 4.2.2. *University of the Philippines Journalism Department – Media literacy modules for high schools*

Still in the works as of this paper (May 2023), the News Literacy Lab will be the UP Journalism Department's long-term contribution to media literacy. Under this project, the Department will create and launch a publicly available YouTube channel that will allow high school teachers to download and use the Media and News Literacy Materials for their classes. The videos are to be accompanied by teaching modules that will also be made available to high school (intermediate) media literacy teachers.

The Department has also taken the lead in institutionalizing a three-unit undergraduate course on disinformation and fact-checking for journalism majors. It is also credited to be the initiator of Tsek.ph and serves as its coordinator (see 4.1.2).

During the pandemic, the Department held several online fact-checking training workshops for undergraduate students in line with *ad hoc* Fact-check Lab, a project funded by Internews. The Department is unique in having produced an undergraduate course on fact-checking, initiated Tsek.ph, and established an institutional YouTube channel on news literacy.

### 4.2.3. *Ateneo School of Governance (ASOG) – Web app disinformation diagnostics tool aimed at voters*

Through its Ateneo Policy Center's project BOSES Pilipinas (Boses, Opinyon, Siyasat, at Siyensya para sa Pilipinas) led by Associate Professor Imelda Deinla, the Ateneo School of Governance (ASOG) launched in 2021 "What the Fake?!: Ang Fake News Challenge ng Bayan," a university-based web application that aims to serve as a misinformation and disinformation diagnostic tool among voting-age Filipinos in preparation for the 2022 May polls. Ms. Deinla said it aims to enlighten voters amid the "pervasive, insidious, and vile forms of misinformation and disinformation proliferating in the current 2022 election landscape." The application cum survey also serves as the basis for a research study that showed the fake news-sharing behavior of Filipinos.

Meanwhile, its Inclusive Democracy research unit launched in 2022 PARTICIPATE, a nonpartisan coalition to foster the political participation of Filipinos, to serve as a platform for an updated version of the "What the Fake?!" application and also amplify the fact-checks of IDEALS (see 4.2.4).

### 4.2.4. *Initiatives for Dialogue and Empowerment through Alternative Legal Services (IDEALS) – Fact-checking for youths and outreach to marginalized groups*

Initiatives for Dialogue and Empowerment through Alternative Legal Services (IDEALS) is a rights-based advocacy and legal service institution organized to assist marginalized, disempowered, and vulnerable groups in the Philippines. Founded in 2005, it aims to "bridge the disparity between development work and legal services by empowering communities through rights-based legal and technical assistance." Operating from the grassroots, IDEALS has three projects countering disinformation: PARTICIPATE, ALERTayo, and Rooted In Trust (RIT).

PARTICIPATE is a collaboration with ASOG (see 4.2.3) while ALERTayo is a fact-checking effort targeting a youth audience during the 2022 elections as a partner of Tsek.ph. Apart from producing fact checks, the ALERTayo project included a series of fact-checking community workshops for the youth.

Figure 2**: IDEALS' rumor bulletin for Maguindanao**

RIT, on the other hand, is a collaboration with Internews and the Coalition of Moro Youth Movement to counter rumors and disinformation regarding Covid-19, especially targeting two Muslim provinces in Mindanao: Lanao del Sur and Maguindanao. IDEALS would collect rumors ("sabi-sabi") and queries online through Facebook and Twitter posts from that region and on-the-ground Community Patrollers. Then, it would counter the fake messages through an online and offline "rumor bulletin" (see Figure 2). The bulletin is also a repository of fact checks in response to rumors that circulated in the communities served by IDEALS and contains tips on how to evaluate a rumor and verify it.

### 4.2.5. *TikTok Philippines and EON Group – Training of youths on TikTok to defend the truth*

TikTok Philippines launched in 2022 its Digital Literacy Hub, which comprises in-app portal anchored by the hashtags #thinkb4youdo and #eduWow as well as a website on cyber safety. Under this Hub, TikTok Philippines and PR agency EON Group also organize annual media fora on TikTok ethics, such as the 2023 #FlextheTruth forum, and an annual survey on Trusted Media to promote trusted sources in the Philippine news media. TikTok director Kristoffer Rada says the creators contributing to the abovementioned hashtag-initiatives police themselves and call out TikTokers who use the hashtags in vain. The Hub, on the other hand, is a static collection of cyber safety do's and don'ts. Since this effort is ongoing, Mr. Rada said TikTok Philippines has not finished assessing its impact.

In August 2022, TikTok co-led the initiative Creators Forward with the United Nations Development Programme and the European Union, with support from program partner Love Frankie. Creators Forward built the capacity and knowledge of 19 TikTok creators from Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia to spread positive narratives on the social media platform and help counter misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech; build social cohesion, and foster the environment of tolerance, diversity, and creativity. During the project period creators produced a total of 88 TikTok videos that drew 15.6 million views and 1.62 million engagements. Feedback from creators were positive, as one of the Malaysian participants said, "Before the program, I did not see how the concept of content creation could do good for the world, but this has shown me that every step counts."

### 4.2.6. *Foundation for Media Alternatives (FMA) – Comic strips and art raise awareness of disinformation*

Aside from its research studies on disinformation, including gendered disinformation, the nongovernmental Foundation for Media Alternatives (FMA) has been collaborating with prominent artists in popularizing anti-disinformation messages.

As part of FMA's comic series on misinformation and disinformation, five visual artists have created comic strips in their signature humor and illustration styles: Manuel "Manix" Abrera of the Philippine Daily Inquirer and GMA News Online, book author, and winner of several National Book Awards; Kevin Eric Raymundo, creator of "Tarantadong Kalbo" inspired by Filipino pop culture; feminist artist Marian Hukom; Kapitan Tambay, known for his takes on politics; and digital designer Jesie Castro. Abrera's comic book "Social Department from Hell" is specifically aimed at making people aware of troll farms.

The comic strips are online and have gained a lot of traction for FMA's website and social media pages. FMA is organizing this year a comic exhibit and will tour three schools in the Philippines, as well as one in Chiang Mai, Thailand in May 2023, to grow the audience for the comic strips (see Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 3: **Visual artist and animator Kevin Raymundo's "Inuman Sessions: Fake News" for FMA. Inuman sessions means drinking sessions**



Figure 4: **Visual artist and animator Manix Abrera's "Social Department of Hell" for FMA.**
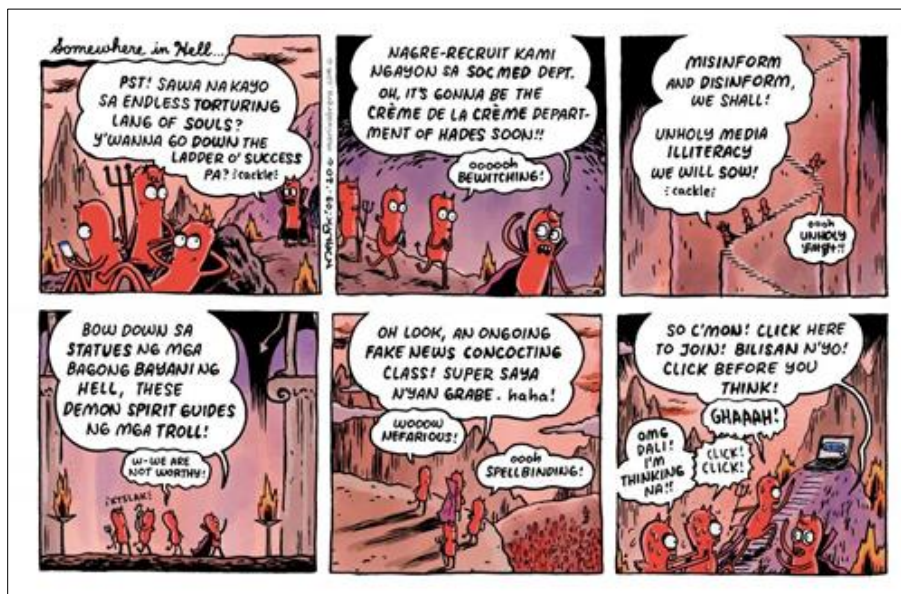
FMA has also released two music videos on disinformation, "Kamalayan" (Awareness) and "Saysay ng salita" (Value of words), written and arranged by Paul Puti-an and performed by The Borrachos. "Saysay ng salita" can be viewed on the FMA YouTube channel, here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BS6QL3igv8A>.

To date, FMA has two Digital Rights Camp and is organizing a third this year. The invite-only camp-style seminar gathers representatives from diverse groups to discuss ways to mitigate disinformation, gender violence online, privacy, among other internet rights.

FMA is at present collaborating with the Malaysia Information Literacy Education (MileMsia) to create a game on disinformation (See 5.3.1).

### 4.2.7. *Akademiya at Bayan Kontra Disimpormasyon at Dayaan (ABKD) – Network of historians and educators*

Founded in 2021, Akademiya at Bayan Kontra Disimpormasyon at Dayaan (ABKD) is a nationwide network of historians, educators, and academic institutions that focuses on combating historical distortion and disinformation. It is an offshoot of Tanggol Kasaysayan founded in 2015 after history was removed as a subject in the Philippine high school curriculum. ABKD expanded into fact-checking to carry out its primary aim to expose, denounce, and correct attempts to rewrite history and current affairs with falsehoods to help Filipinos make a correctly informed choice, especially during elections. It is a member of Tsek.ph and FactsFirstPH.

Figure 5: **ABKD's fact checks on historical distortions as comic strips**



ABKD is among the first to convert its fact checks into comic strips that are shared online and can be downloaded, printed, and distributed offline (see Figure 5). It has also worked with students enrolled in the National Service Training Program of the University of the Philippines Diliman College of Arts and Letters to develop the three-part "The Adventures of Fact Boy" and free e-book Martial Law ABCs, which can be downloaded from https://tinyurl.com/MartialLawABCS.

### 4.2.8. *Fact Check Philippines – Coalition of volunteer student fact-checkers*

Founded in 2017 on the encouragement of Kaya Natin Movement, a good governance NGO, Fact Check Philippines is a coalition of volunteer fact-checkers. It relies primarily on student organizations from nine colleges and universities around the country as its eyes and ears for claims to debunk. It now has a network of student volunteers in Naga, Pampanga, and Pangasinan in Luzon; Cebu and Bacolod in the Visayas; and Zamboanga in Mindanao, among others.

Fact Check Philippines publishes its fact checks on a Facebook page that commands a sizable following (more than 168,000 as of March 2023). It oversees seven public groups with members ranging from more than 100 to 4,500. Fact Check Philippines is a partner of both Tsek.ph and FactsFirstPH.

### 4.2.9. *Philippine Fact-Checker Incubator Program (PFCI) – Mentoring newsrooms in fact-checking*

The Philippine Fact-Checker Incubator Program (PFCI) is a yearlong project of Internews supported by Meta to build the capacity and mentor six Philippine newsrooms in fact-checking, so they could meet the global standards set by the IFCN. At the time the program was launched ahead of the 2022 general election, the Philippines only had two IFCN verified signatories: Rappler and VERA Files.

The project provided news organizations with financial support, dedicated fact-checking mentors, and assistance in preparing their applications with the IFCN. To date, two incubatees, PressOnePH and Mindanews, are now also IFCN verified signatories. Three others–ABS-CBN, Philstar.com, and Probe Productions–are awaiting the IFCN's decision on their application.

PFCI is a pioneering project in the SEA region. The overall aim is to grow the  fact-checking community through intensive mentoring and monetizing fact checks.

### 4.2.10. *Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting (PPCRV) with Pi Gamma Mu and Love Frankie – Church-based group and academics team up for voter education*

The Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting (PPCRV), a Catholic Church-based organization, teamed up with the Philippine chapter of Pi Gamma Mu, an international honor society in social sciences, and social change creative agency Love Frankie to design and produce downloadable posters and flyers aimed at making Catholic churchgoers more discerning with regard information sources, especially in the light of the 2022 elections. They capitalize on common-day themes such as shopping, romantic crushes, gossip, friendship.

Called Bakit.ph (Why?), the project also developed a training guide for parish leaders and volunteers when conducting workshops or facilitating group discussions with the parishes; a mini-booklet that serves as a guide for parishioners to follow along during training in the parish, and take home after; flashcards containing a series of sample questions that can be used during a training session for practice; missalette insert containing sample misinformation with *"spot the*

*misinformation"* challenge; sticker pack that is an adaptation of posters that can be used as everyday stickers on laptops, etc.; and a music video that urges voters to be skeptical of information (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: **Bakit.ph's posters seek to foster questioning minds by linking disinformation to relatable situations like romantic crush**
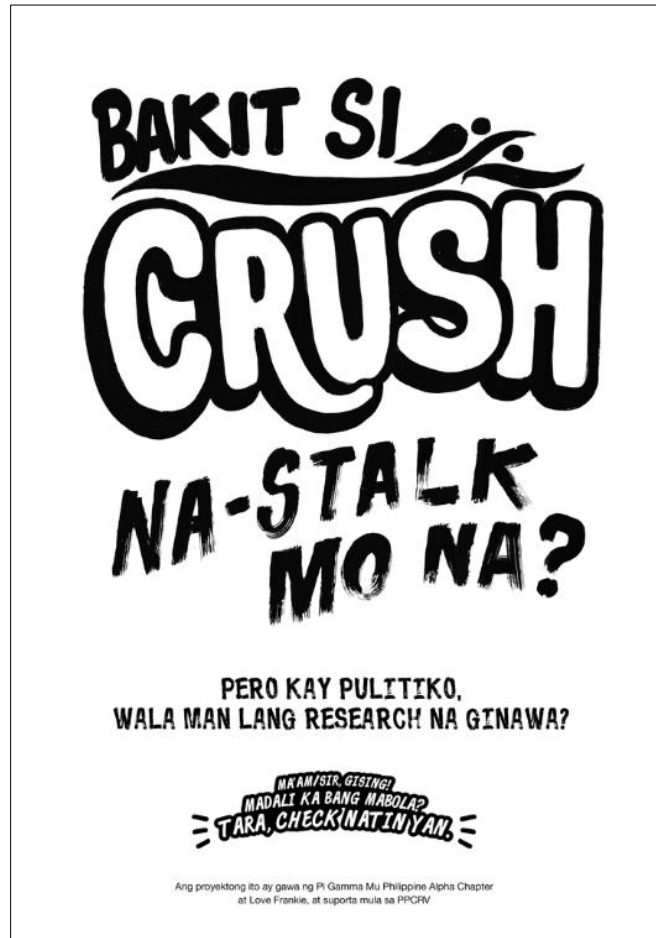


The project is built on empathetic communication rather than a call-out or cancel culture so pervasive during the election period.

### *4.2.11. Asian Center for Journalism at the Ateneo de Manila University (ACFJ) – Engaging the private sector in "Ads for news"*

The Philippines is the first country in Southeast Asia to roll out the global initiative Ads for News which seeks to entice businesses to place advertising in reputable, quality local media brands vetted and curated by local experts, in the process preventing ad budgets from inadvertently reaching websites that spread disinformation.

The index of Philippine online news sites nationwide was created by the Asian Center for Journalism at the Ateneo de Manila University (ACFJ) based on the template used for the global campaign United for News initiated by Internews, World Economic Forum, and various media stakeholders. The template culls from global journalism standards and the Global Alliance for Responsible Media (GARM) Brand Safety and Suitability Standards. GARM was established by the World Federation of Advertisers "to address the challenge of harmful content on digital media platforms and its monetization via advertising."

ACFJ tapped the network of five local Jesuit universities (Ateneo de Manila, de Naga, de Zamboanga, de Davao, and Xavier University), academics, and alumni to produce the index. This in turn has been shared with brands, business owners, and advertising agencies through meetings organized by Internews and Makati Business Club, which is a partner in the advocacy. The initial outcome: Three big business corporations–Alaska Milk, Bank of Philippines Islands, and Globe Telecom have signed up to be part of Ads for News in the Philippines.

The first Philippine corporation to join the Ads for News initiative, Globe said, "This partnership is aligned with our advocacy to promote responsible online behavior…Our goal is to bring to the fore what journalism ought to be: a chronicle of truth and a source of quality and useful information that could help communities realize their full potential." Globe also said its efforts to promote a safer online environment and access to quality information is part of its commitment to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

According to Alaska Milk, the five-decade-old corporation "understands that nation-building is anchored on truth-telling and a work in progress. The prospects and effects of progressive nation building are enhanced considerably if members of the private sector, civil society, and government find innovative ways to work harmoniously through partnerships such as this (Ads for News)."

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### 4.2.12. *Pinas Forward – Informing youths about elections*

Pinas Forward is a nonstock, nonprofit corporation dedicated to strengthening democracy. Founded in 2018 by former student leaders, it is a pioneer organization in the field of e-democracy by engaging youth leaders at the grassroots. In 2022, Pinas Forward partnered with several institutions such as the PPCRV, Tsek.ph, and Philippine Association for Media and Information Literacy (PAMIL) to combat disinformation. Specifically, it ran three programs: E-Boto, Pinas Forward Academy, and #PakCheck.

E-Boto is a website in collaboration with the PPCRV that seeks to inform Filipino youth about election-related information, from backgrounders on each candidate in the national elections to TikTok-style fact checks and comic pamphlets, produced by volunteers under the #PakCheck project. The website amplifies Tsek.ph fact checks.

Pinas Forward Academy is an online academic program in which various short courses are offered for free through UDemy (education platform). One of these courses is #DapatChoosy: Staying Safe Online and Combating Disinformation.

On the other hand, #PakCheck is the grassroots fact-checking initiative, in which Pinas Forward trained community-based teams of volunteer fact-checkers, including youth leaders, campus journalists, content creators, and young professional volunteers. The volunteers were tapped to contribute to the E-Boto site. The #PakCheck team also produced a weekly online game show on debunked topics. This initiative has been successful in tapping youth volunteers from all over the country and producing publicly available digital short courses on digital literacy.

### 4.2.13 *GMA Network – Pivot to pre-bunking*

GMA Network, the country's biggest commercial media network, is set to launch InoculatED, a project that aims to prebunk online falsehoods using new technologies, including AI-powered tools, for early detection of false claims and rapid production of counter-narratives.

GMA will also develop news products that would "inoculate" audiences and complement other existing anti-disinformation intervention, including debunking and fact-checking.

The project, spearheaded by GMA's Digital Video Lab, won Google News Initiative Asia Pacific Innovation Challenge for a comprehensive new project that aims to combat online misinformation.

## 4.3 Individual/small group initiatives

### 4.3.1. *Out of the Box (OOTB)*

Fresh out of school in 2014, three journalism graduates of the University of the Philippines Diliman (Marlon Nombrado, Sara Torres, and Darlene Cay) began undertaking media literacy training for educators and students alike through Out of the Box (OOTB). That was two years before the senior high school program was implemented nationwide in the Philippines and educators were at a loss over how to teach what would be a newly required course in senior high: Media and Information Literacy.

OOTB has since become known for its MIL modules built on what it calls the "Interrogate-Create-Participate" framework. It has trained 5,000 educators and 10,000 students from 500 schools. Other MIL organizations such as PAMIL have partnered with OOTB.

OOTB won the first prize in UNESCO's Global Media & Information Literacy Awards in 2021.

### 4.3.2. *PumaPodcast – Podcasting about disinformation*

The award-winning Philippine podcast production company PumaPodcast launched in April 2022 "Catch Me If You Can," a podcast that dives deep into networked disinformation in the Philippines, including trolls. Co-hosted by University of Massachusetts-Amherst professor and Harvard researcher Jonathan Ong and journalist Kat Ventura, the podcast has had two seasons. This was among the first longer podcasts focusing on disinformation in the Philippines.

### 4.3.3.  *Social media influencers fighting disinformation*

In the same way that influencers use TikTok and other social media platforms to peddle disinformation, anti-disinformation advocates have found them to be powerful vehicles as well.

On TikTok, which has increasingly become a major source of news and information for Filipinos, are personalities who have committed themselves to fact-checking false or misleading narratives and have cultivated a sizable following of their own. A number of them hold day jobs.

Among these TikTok influencers are genealogist Mona Magno-Veluz (@mightymagulang), who battles historical and political disinformation; pharmacist Arshie Larga @arshielife), who focuses on medical misinformation; and lawyer Tony Roman (@attytonyroman), who clarifies the law in bite-sized chunks.

Meanwhile, Break the Fake Movement, a local civic society organization promoting MIL that is led by Gab Billiones, collaborated with OOTB and Pinas Forward (see 4.3.1 and 4.3.3, respectively) to hold an "Influencers' Bootcamp" in March 2023 with a focus on training social media influencers to fact-check their sources. In August 2020, Break the Fake also organized a Vlogathon, a mobile vlogging and documentary competition that aims to spread awareness of the harmful effects of fake news and help combat disinformation.

### 4.3.4.  *Artists For Digital Rights Network (A4DRN) - Creating awareness regarding disinformation through fine arts*

Artists For Digital Rights Network (A4DRN) is an ongoing project spearheaded by Philippine and Indonesian artists that aim to provide a creative venue for addressing the information disorder and digital rights issues. As an initial project, the founders (Mac Andre Arboleda, Bernice Soriano, and Precious Marie Gunayon of the Philippines, and Rangga Purbaya from Indonesia) collaborated with 10 other artists to produce "Counternarratives," an open access and free-to-download publication of artworks which serves as a permanent and readily accessible counter-disinformation resource. Their latest project, supported by a grant from the British Council, "Toolkits for Counterparts," is a "playful approach to investigating disinformation, disability justice, and the logics of code, anatomy, and infrastructures, the works take the final form of games, an interactive dictionary, video, maps, and archive."

### 4.3.5.  *Wiki Society of the Philippines (WikiSocPH) – Wikipedians fight distortions of history*

Established in 2010 primarily to promote Wikipedia and Wikimedia projects in the Philippines, Wiki Society of the Philippines (WikiSocPH) has been drawn into the fight against disinformation because of historical untruths that find their way into Wikipedia pages about the Philippines, especially on the Marcoses and martial law. Volunteer Wikipedians have closely monitored and cleaned pages to rid them of historical negationism, sometimes ending up in an "edit war" with disinformers. In 2016 alone, the Ferdinand Marcos Wikipedia page was edited 1,328 times (His son and namesake ran for vice president that year).

WikiSocPH's projects to counter online disinformation and historical distortions also include the appointment of a "Wikipedian in Residence" (WIR) at the Bantayog ng mga Bayani

(Monument of Heroes), which is dedicated to preserving the memory of the heroes and martyrs that suffered under the Marcos dictatorship. The WIR helps the institution by digitizing its library and improving coverage of topics related to the Marcos regime in Wikipedia and its sister projects.

### 4.3.6. *Community Engagement Plan/Fund – Research and raising support for community interventions against disinformation*

Hatched by six academic researchers based in the Philippines and overseas, the Community Engagement Plan is the outcome of their pivot from policy-engaged research on disinformation to supporting more community action research. Offering a modest seed fund of 75,000 Philippine pesos per project, the researchers (Jonathan Corpus Ong, Nicole Curato, JM Lanuza, Ross Fallorina, Ferdinand Sanchez II, and Juan Gabriel Felix) have been seeking collaborators to pitch community interventions to implement creative storytelling about disinformation beyond the "bobante (dumb voter) trolls" narrative, open-access disinformation and digital ethics educational resources, and supporting whistleblowers to expose disinformation-for-hire.

The initial list of collaborators that qualified for the Community Engagement Fund will create a children's book and parental activity guide for children ages 6 and up (from the UP Diliman Department of Family Life and Child Development); develop basic education modules, lesson plans, and pedagogical materials on critical disinformation studies targeting grade school, junior high school, and senior high school students (from Ateneo de Manila Junior High School); and produce creative storytelling materials, conversation and discussion guides, and discussion sessions with orphans and senior high school students (Makiramdam PH).

### 4.3.7. *Deliberative forums – Diagnosing the problem of disinformation*

Academics Nicole Curato, Jonathan Ong, and Ross Tapsell used a different technique to uncover what ordinary Filipinos think about disinformation: a deliberative forum. Akin to a citizen assembly, a deliberative forum is "a civic engagement strategy designed to bring communities together to diagnose a problem."

Over three days in April 2021, the scholars gathered 26 randomly selected citizens with diverse backgrounds from different parts of the country to diagnose the problem of disinformation. In particular, they were asked to reflect on the question, "How can we protect social media from 'fake news' during elections?"

Citizens were given the opportunity to learn more about disinformation, consider expert evidence, listen to the views of a diverse group of people, reflect on their perspectives, then generate collective recommendations for stakeholders leading campaigns against disinformation.

Curato has used deliberative forums to also surface citizen perspectives on the war on drugs and human rights.

## 5. Notable initiatives across the ASEAN

### 5.1 Indonesia

#### 5.1.1. *Cek Fakta <cekfakta.com>*

Cek Fakta is the joint fact-checking site built by civic society organization Indonesian Anti-Hoax Society (MAFINDO) and two media organizations: the Indonesian Cyber Media Association (AMSI) and Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI).

Launched in 2018 with 22 partner newsrooms with support from Google News Initiative (GNI), the anti-disinformation collaborative project is the first of its kind in Southeast Asia combining the strengths of each organization.

MAFINDO provides the technological resources needed for Cek Fakta's operations and is behind the site's self-made content management system called Yudistira.

AJI, as a journalist association, provides human resources in the form of fact-checkers. Since its inception, AJI has concentrated on holding fact-checking training with standardized modules, so that fact-checking competencies are spread evenly among thousands of journalists. AJI also routinely organizes training of trainers, so that the number of fact-checking trainers and mentors continues to grow every year.

Meanwhile, as an association of digital media publishers, AMSI has members to amplify the fact checks. These cyber media are spearheading the dissemination of fact-checking content that is co-produced at Cek Fakta. Apart from that, the existence of fact-checking channels in the media of AMSI members also made this movement more massive and spread evenly in various provinces.

#### 5.1.2. *MAFINDO*

Having the widest network among the three Cek Fakta organizations, MAFINDO has likewise spearheaded fact-checking training and workshops among various groups of people, such as students, community leaders, and stay-at-home spouses. It also operates a Chatbox on WhatsApp called "Kalimasada" or TurnBackHoax.id to make verified information and reporting claims more accessible.

#### 5.1.3. *SiberKreasi <siberkreasi.id>*

Another multisectoral Indonesian-based anti-disinformation collaborative project includes both civil society organizations and the Indonesian Ministry of Communication. SiberKreasi hosts a website and a podcast intending to educate the general public on the dangers of disinformation and other cyber issues such as hate speech and cyberbullying.

**5.2. Thailand**

### 5.2.1. _Thai Disinformation Detector (DI)_

A joint project of two Bangkok universities, Chulalongkorn University and the King Mongkut University of Technology, the Thai Disinformation Detector (DI) machine <https://thaidimachine.org/> uses an artificial intelligence natural language model with pre-trained criteria to rate the reliability of the information prompted by the user.

Launched in 2018 but still in its research phase, the machine does not do fact-checking *per se* but informs the user of the reliability of the source of the information or links them to an existing fact check. According to project head Dr. Phnom Kleechaya, the goal is media literacy, i.e., to make Thai citizens used to checking their sources and to help deter the sharing of disinformation. The site is partly funded by the Thai government's Minister of Digital Economy and Society Anti-Fake News Centre.

### 5.2.2. _CoFact.org_

Inspired by CoFact of Taiwan, CoFact Thailand is a fact-checking collaboration that was started in 2019 by eight organizations: Safety and Creative Media Development Fund, Thai Health Promotion Foundation, Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom (FNF), Public Sound and Broadcasting of Thailand, National Press Council, Online News Producers Association, Faculty of Communication Arts at Chulalongkorn University, and Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication at Thammasat University.

**5.3 Malaysia**

### 5.3.1. _Malaysian Media Literacy Education (MILE aka MileMsia)_

The brains behind Malaysian Media Literacy Education (MILE)–journalists Darshini Kandasamy and Kuek Ser Kuang Keng and digital creator Hazwany Jamaluddin–liven up their info-lit workshops with videos and games. As the Covid-19 pandemic spawned an infodemic, MILE in 2021 released Choices I Make, a browser role-playing game to help Malaysians navigate the public health crisis. Inspired by real events, the choose-your-own-adventure game allows players to take on the personalities of a retired satay seller, a college student, and an online game creator and navigate disinformation as a victim or creator of "fake news." The game imparts lessons on disinformation, fact-checking and content farms, and the legal and criminal consequences of spreading disinformation. It is available in English, Chinese, Bahasa, and Tamil.

In November 2022, ahead of Malaysia's general election, MILE released another interactive story game, Are You Yang Bijak? (Are you wise?), to address electoral disinformation and targeted mainly first-time voters. The game is available in English, Chinese, and Malay. MILE has been collaborating with FMA to develop a similar game for Filipinos.

**5.4 Singapore**

### *5.4.1.  Fake News Detective game*

A project of Nanyang Technological University's Center of Information and Integrity of the Internet (IN-cube), the web-based game Fake News Detective can be accessed at https://fakenewsdetective.com/#/. Players navigate a maze, and the only way out is by answering questions that pertain to whether a news item is true or false. Developers used fact-checked information to build the game structure, which is patterned after the two-dimensional Mario Brothers' game.

The project was funded by Singapore Social Science Research Council. The art asset pack was created by pixel artist LimeZu and the characters and artwork by Singapore's National Library Board.

**5.5 CIVICUS | Disinformation Counter**

The website Disinformation Counter created by CIVICUS, a global alliance of civil society organizations and activists dedicated to strengthening citizen action and civil society, showcases the works of artists from the Philippines, Indonesia, and Hong Kong as a form of creative resistance against disinformation, "especially how governments are using such (disinformation) to impact negatively on civic space and democracy around the world."

ARTSvsDISINFORMATION features the following projects from the Philippines: Palace Pa-Troll, an online game; ABCDuterte, A to Z of disinformation in the Philippines; Sugar-Coated Source Codes, digital print on canvas and online web pages that shows the number of clicks it takes to unravel truth from fiction; and Poetry/Striving, street graffiti.

**6.     Insights into the mapping of the anti-disinformation landscape in the Philippines**

This study shows that as disinformation takes a turn for the worse in Southeast Asia, the search for innovative solutions and whole-of-society approaches against disinformation has become more vigorous and diversified, as the case of the Philippines shows.

Figure 7: **Mapping the Anti-disinformation Actions**

1. D&D: Regional fora and training
2. VERA Files: MIL training for OFWs
3. UP Journalism Department: News Literacy Lab
4. IDEALS/Pinas Forward: Community-based fact-check training
5. PPCRV: Bakit.ph
6. FMA: Comic series, music videos
7. Break the Fake Movement: Vlogathon
8. OOTB: MIL for students, teachers
9. Community Engagement Fund
10. ACFJ: Ads for News

Other ASEAN initiatives
1. Mafindo: Kalimasada
2. ThaiDI Machine

1. Tsek.ph
2. FactsFirstPH
3. ABKD: Fact check comics, FactBoy
4. Fact Check Philippines
5. IDEALS: Rumor Bulletin, ALERTayo
6. PFCI
7. TikTok Phils/EON group: #EduWOw
8. Social Influencers

Other ASEAN initiatives
1. Cek Fakta
2. SiberKreasi
3. CoFact Thailand

**Prevention**

**Identification and Monitoring**

**Regulatory and non-regulatory**

**Contextualization and Correction**

1. Movement Against Disinformation

1. Tsek.ph: Research, Fact-check weekly summaries/quizzes
2. D&D: Research
3. FactsFirstPH: Research
4. Rappler: Shark Tank
5. ASOG: What the Fact?
6. ABKD: Martial Law ABCs
7. WikiSocPH
8. GMA: InoculatED (tools)
9. PumaPodcast: Catch me if you can.
10. Social influencers
11. A4DRN: Counternarratives
12. Deliberative forums

Other initiatives:
1. MileMsia
2. Fake News Detective Game
3. CIVICUS

Mapping of the Philippine initiatives (see Figure 7) shows anti-disinformation advocates leaning toward three measures over the past five years: (1) preventive, (2) identification and monitoring, and (3) contextualization and correction.

In the Philippines, various sectors are increasingly involved in pushing back against disinformation: media organizations, educational institutions, civil society organizations, the private sector, funders, and even individuals such as social influencers, Wikipedians, artists, lawyers, and the youth. The establishment of coalitions or consortiums such as D&D, Tsek.ph, FactsFirstPH, and MAD, have proved to be a good avenue to gather the diverse groups to help support and amplify their work, and, more important, forge a united front.

Initiatives that are preventive in nature take the bulk of the anti-disinformation effort in the Philippines. UNESCO's call to step up MIL efforts since 2008, renewed in recent years in light of digital disinformation, and the introduction in 2016 of MIL as a mandated course in Philippine senior high schools brought to the fore the inadequacies of the school system in empowering students to think critically about disinformation, especially through the use of digital tools. This explains why many of the MIL efforts so far have been targeted at students and teachers, in order to fill the immediate need. That has largely been the case for OOTB, D&D, and the UP Journalism Department partnerships with schools and youth groups to hold MIL training are apparently easier to forge. But other groups are going beyond schools and have attempted to reach out to communities such as overseas workers like the media VERA Files does, the Muslim community through the IDEALS initiative, and voters and their families through Pinas Forward and PPCRV.

As a result of the widespread disinformation during the 2016 Philippine elections and the COVID-19 pandemic, fact-checking or verification has also become a prominent feature in MIL seminars and workshops in recent years. It explains why some fact-checking groups have easily moved into MIL training. Artists, meanwhile, have also played a large part in making MIL materials more enticing. Comics remain popular in the Philippines, and groups like FMA have been quick to capitalize on that, as well as on music videos, for its MIL initiative. The search for ways to innovate these materials, especially how to engage communities, continues. FMA, for example, will curate and print the comics its five artists have produced and exhibit them on school tours. Break the Fake, meanwhile, has tried a vlogathon while a group of academics recently launched the Community Engagement Plan to provide seed capital to innovators.

Getting the private sector involved in the fight against disinformation has been the goal of the global campaign, Ads for News. It entails providing the private sector with a list of trusted media brands vetted by experts and urging them to channel ad spending on these brands to help keep them sustainable and at the same time starve disinformers of financial support. Ads for News was successfully rolled out in the Philippines by Internews in partnership with ACFJ and Makati Business Club, which are looking to expand the program's reach.

Meanwhile, identifying the sources of disinformation and monitoring its spread take up as much attention. In many respects, fact-checking remains the front-line action in the fight against disinformation in the Philippines and elsewhere in the region, especially in monitoring, identifying and flagging false or misleading information. After all, it feeds the content for other initiatives,

including MIL as earlier discussed, creative gamification models and those using artificial intelligence, and deep dives into the disinformation phenomenon.

In the 2022 elections, there were two fact-checking collaboratives (Tsek.ph and FactsFirstPH) that brought together about three dozen fact-checking initiatives from media, academe, and civil society. Many partners continue to fact-check after the elections, including those from Tsek.ph, an *ad hoc* collaboration that stopped operating after the elections, and FactsFirstPH that continued to subsidize its partners' fact checks. The fact-checking landscape has evolved. Although still dominated by news organizations, the fact-checking community now consists of other successful nonmedia models. These include one that runs strictly on volunteers (Fact Check Philippines); another consisting of historians and educators chiefly correcting historical distortions (ABKD); those relying on the grassroots or communities for leads (IDEALS); and social influencers. To grow the ranks of IFCN verified signatories, PFCI was launched to help newsrooms kickstart or strengthen the fact-checking operations of six (later five) newsrooms and get them up to par so they could apply with IFCN. The recent accreditation to IFCN of two news organizations, MindaNews and PressOnePH, is proof of the concept. (The applications of other newsrooms were still pending at the time of writing).

A more recent development in anti-disinformation work is the push to contextualize and correct disinformation. The volume of research studies has increased, with academics given support not only from their educational institutions (e.g., ASOG, UP) but from consortiums such as D&D and FactsFirstPH besides funders. Rappler and VERA Files have occasionally gone beyond fact checks to produce deep dives, thanks to the database of their fact-checks and in the case of Rappler, its Shark Tank, a database of disinformation collected from social listening.

Riding on the inoculation theory, many groups hope to stop disinformation in its tracks by exposing them to the phenomenon or specific falsehoods before they encounter one. ABKD's glossary on martial law, GMA's Inoculated, PumaPodcast's "Catch Me If You Can" are but a few examples. Others resort not to fact checks *per se*, but to counternarratives or alternative narratives as well context pieces and explainers (WikiSocPH, social influencers, A4DRN), as well as surfacing citizens' sentiments, including on how to fight disinformation (deliberative forum).

Outside of MAD, this study has not tracked nongovernmental initiatives in the Philippines with regards regulation. In MAD's case, this has been chiefly pitching measures to platforms to curb disinformation during elections, responding to attacks on fact-checking and free expression, and filing legal action against Red-tagging. In light of unending attempts by Congress to come up with legislation against disinformation, it is crucial to monitor and guard against developments that may result in draconian laws in the name of fighting disinformation.

One of the challenges in terms of regulation—whether state, co-regulation or peer regulation—is how to patrol and dismantle troll farms that form part of organized or networked disinformation such as those operated by public relations and marketing firms, as noted by Ong and Cabañes in their study, Architects of Networked Disinformation (2018). The Public Relations Society of the Philippines (PRSP) said the unscrupulous PR firms are not among its members. "Usually, these are boutique or independent firms or individuals," said PSRP board member Ritzi Ronquillo. "They don't join professional associations as they will be subject to our code of ethics."

Interviews with PRSP as well as with two news media associations, the Philippine Press Institute (an association of newspaper publishers) and Kapisanan ng mga Brodkaster ng Pilipinas (an association of broadcast networks), revealed that they do not have measures to police their ranks against disinformation apart from an ethics guide.

Another challenge is measuring the actual impact on society of these anti-disinformation initiatives. While there are the usual metrics (attendance, web and social media metrics) to gauge their reach, these are unable to test the theory of change, including behavioral change of those who were exposed to ways to counter disinformation.

Just as significant, the sustainability of these efforts pose yet another challenge, especially in terms of manpower and financing. While innovations are likely to attract financial support, funding to continue some initiatives (e.g., post elections) have been put on hold or have ceased altogether as funding dries up or funders move on to new innovations. These challenges have dire implications on large-scale, multi-layer projects.

Collaborative initiatives, like D&D, Tsek.ph and the "mesh" partners of FactsFirstPH, are primarily run by volunteers, who have day jobs and can only contribute to the initiative for fixed periods of time. They may band together as a show of force during crucial periods, such as elections, but are unable to continue with the same intensity in the long run. Institutional initiatives, on the other hand, are more sustainable because they contribute to the mission of the organization.

**7.	Conclusion**

As can be gleaned from this report, anti-disinformation initiatives are diverse and creative, but whether they're for prevention, monitoring and identification, or contextualization and correction, the current initiatives can be scaled up and new ones added. Firstly, the initiatives have still to reach a large segment of Philippine society, especially those living far from the capital, as well as certain sectors like senior citizens, persons with disabilities, and offline communities that depend greatly on others for information, including word of mouth.

Secondly, another area that could be enhanced is research, which still takes long gestation periods when the need for findings and recommendations is immediate. Where possible, studies need to be fast-tracked. Instead of waiting for an event to end, e.g., elections, academic researchers should collaborate with anti-disinformation initiatives from the get-go. Institutions and individuals fighting against disinformation should also be encouraged to produce rigorous research, as well as provide deep dives or snapshots of disinformation landscape as it evolves.

Furthermore, although AI tools have been employed by fact-checking initiatives such as Tsek.ph and FactsFirstPH, the study also shows that there is room for development in employing AI Journalism in the fight against disinformation. The ThaiDI Machine is the only purely AI tool on the list and is still in the development stage.

As this paper shows, the Philippines currently has a number of initiatives addressing the proliferating disinformation in the country, but disinformation is a problem of the entire SEA region. The Philippines has a a plethora of unique, cross sectoral/multi stakeholder coalitions and initiatives that work together to counter disinformation despite all odds – initiatives and coalitions that could inspire similar set-ups for other countries in the South and Southeast Asian region. Joining forces across sectors, stakeholders and countries - such as the A4DRN where artists from Indonesia and the Philippines are working together to fight disinformation – would certainly strengthen the pushback against this mutual challenge that continues to threaten the stability of democratic institutions around the region and shows no signs of abating just yet.

## 8. Annex

**Table A1: Internet and Social Media Penetration in Southeast Asia**

|  | Population (million) | Internet penetration (in percentages) | Mobile connections (million) | Social media penetration (in percentages) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Brunei Darussalam | 0.45 | 119.7 | 8.26 | 116.5 |
| Cambodia | 15.99 | 81.1 | 21.18 | 73.9 |
| Indonesia | 274.86 | 76.5 | 125.1 | 68.9 |
| Lao PDR | 7.48 | 57.5 | 5.91 | 51.1 |
| Malaysia | 33.11 | 93.8 | 24.3 | 91.7 |
| Myanmar | 53.89 | 51.9 | 73.48 | 37.7 |
| Philippines | 111.74 | 91 | 56.4 | 82.4 |
| Singapore | 5.33 | 92 | 4.7 | 89.5 |
| Thailand | 70.08 | 88.3 | 53.1 | 81.2 |
| Timor Leste | 1.37 | 37.9 | 1.47 | 31.7 |
| Vietnam | 99.22 | 86 | 62.8 | 78.1 |

Source: Statista.com 2022, We Are Social country reports 2022

**Table A2: Traffic Share of Popular Social Media Platforms in Southeast Asia (in percentages)**

|  | Facebook | YouTube | Twitter | Instagram |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Brunei Darussalam | 68.54 | 6.7 | 5.25 | 9.1 |
| Cambodia | 56.4 | 19.57 | 6.68 | 4.67 |
| Indonesia | 76.59 | 17.48 | 1.83 | 3.1 |
| Lao PDR | 61.36 | 12.21 | 16.36 | 0.96 |
| Malaysia | 85.97 | 3.36 | 3.17 | 4.25 |
| Myanmar | 92.07 | 3.47 | 0.47 | 0.23 |
| Philippines | 85.54 | 6.26 | 3.47 | 1.08 |
| Singapore | 66.92 | 5.19 | 12.00 | 5.49 |
| Thailand | 62.63 | 8.5 | 17.3 | 0.91 |
| Timor Leste | 99.56 | 0.14 | 0.06 | 0.03 |
| Vietnam | 61.5 | 18.26 | 7.41 | 2.64 |

Source: Statcounter 2022, Statista.com 2022

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