

## COMPLETION REPORT

### **Research on Fake News and Lessons from Japan for Southeast Asi**

James Gomez  
Chairperson, Board of Director  
Asia Centre, Thailand

The problematization of fake news occurred after the 2016 United States presidential election. At first, the question raised was the prospect of foreign interference in domestic democratic processes via influence operations. However, this soon expanded to questions over the role of giant technological companies and their social media platforms in the context of democratic practices, and dissemination of false or misleading contents.

In Southeast Asia, when general elections were looming, the implications of fake news or online disinformation were examined and discussed. Unlike the United States, where President Trump has invoked ‘fake news’ to attack the reputation of fact-based traditional media, what emerged was that authorities in Southeast Asia were more preoccupied with discrediting vocal critics of those in power. Hence, this led to a series of announcements to introduce legislation to curb fake news. Often these announcements were made in the period leading to elections or rise of political activities changing the political authority of the incumbents.

Traditionally, since the introduction of the internet to the region in 1995, Southeast Asia governments have succeeded in forestalling democratic potential of the internet by enacting legislation. Such legislation is often introduced in the run up or following heightened political activity such as elections or public resistance to the state. In the present context, its target is content disseminated, discussed and shared on social media, that critiques the currently ruling elites. Invoking ‘fake news’ as a threat to public morality, social harmony and reputation of public institutions, the decision to introduce fake news legislation, or non-legal measure, is the latest installment in the decades long efforts by illiberal democracies to suppress dissent against its rule.

Measures to address online disinformation differ, from drafting new legislation, or reforming the existing ones, to using non-legal approaches such as fact-checking platforms, information monitoring centres. In any case, the most important concern remains unaddressed: who decides the truth? With the tendency to disregard its own propaganda, governments in the region are assuming the role of arbiter of truth, which pose the risk that countermeasures to fake news are everything but another tool in governments’ disposal to manipulate online discussion and shape public opinion. In the worst case scenario, these measures could be used to whitewash officials’ wrongdoings and lay blame on critics for spreading fake news, which may invite criminal investigations and lawsuits. Overall, this is creating a chilling effect on freedom of expression and is encouraging self-censorship.

Certainly, this is not to deny that harmful effects of fake news, or online disinformation, do not exist, but policymakers need to tread carefully when responding to the challenge, lest the cure for fake news is worse than the disease. Observations from the 2017 prosecution of the Rohingyas in Myanmar, 2018 elections in Cambodia and Malaysia and 2019 elections in Indonesia and Thailand, fake news and government responses can go beyond character assassination to physical harm, or, worse, large scale communal violence.

Publication of the Results of Research Project:

<p>Verbal Presentation (Date, Venue, Name of Conference, Title of Presentation, Presenter, etc.)</p> <p>18 Nov. 2019, Liberal Democratic Party of Japan's Headquarters, Briefing for Parliamentary Caucus, <b>Fake News Legislation in Southeast Asia</b>, James Gomez</p> <p>21 Nov. 2019, Japan Federation of Bar Associations, Briefing for Japan Federation of Bar Associations, <b>Fake News and Hate Speech in Southeast Asia</b>, James Gomez</p> <p>21 Nov. 2019, Sophia University, Institute of International Relations, seminar, <b>Hate Speech and Impacts on Human Rights in Southeast Asia</b>, James Gomez</p> <p>Nov. 2019, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, seminar, <b>Fake News Legislation in Southeast Asia</b>, James Gomez</p> <p>Nov 2019, Graduate School of Letters, Osaka University, <b>Fake News Legislation in Southeast Asia</b>, James Gomez</p> <p>Nov. 2019, Osaka Jogakuin University, seminar, <b>Fake News Legislation in Southeast Asia</b>, James Gomez</p> <p>Sumitomo Grant Aids Asia Centre's Engagements in Japan:</p> <p><a href="https://asiacentre.org/sumitomo-grant-aids-asia-centres-engagements-in-japan/">https://asiacentre.org/sumitomo-grant-aids-asia-centres-engagements-in-japan/</a></p>
<p>Thesis (Name of Journal and its Date, Title and Author of Thesis, etc.)</p> <p>N/A</p>
<p>Book (Publisher and Date of the Book, Title and Author of the Book, etc.)</p> <p>The research findings from this project will be incorporated into the introduction of the forthcoming book.</p> <p>Palgrave Macmillan (upcoming), Fake News and Elections in Southeast Asia: Impact on Democracy, James Gomez and Robin Ramcharan (eds.)</p> <p>List Book Project and link</p> <p><a href="https://asiacentre.org/fake-news-cfc/">https://asiacentre.org/fake-news-cfc/</a></p>