



HOW INFORMATION DISORDER AFFIRMS AUTHORITARIANISM AND DESTABILIZES DEMOCRACY

**EVIDENCE, TRENDS, AND ACTIONABLE MITIGATION
STRATEGIES FROM ASIA AND THE PACIFIC**

December 2021

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HOW INFORMATION DISORDER AFFIRMS AUTHORITARIANISM AND DESTABILIZES DEMOCRACY

Evidence, Trend, and Actionable Mitigation Strategies from Asia and the Pacific

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Photo Credit: Participants at Democracy Camp in the Kyrgyz Republic (IFES, June 2017)

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ACRONYMS

ABCID	-	Australian Broadcasting Corporation International Development Unit
AEO	-	Asia Emerging Opportunities
ASEAN	-	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BRI	-	Belt and Road Initiative
CCTV	-	Closed-Circuit Television
CIA	-	Central Intelligence Agency
CSO	-	Civil Society Organization
FFP	-	Future Forward Party
ICG	-	International Crisis Group
IFES	-	International Foundation for Electoral Systems
IFJ	-	International Federation of Journalists
IO	-	Information Operation
ISOC	-	Internal Security Operations Command
ISP	-	Institute of Security Psychology
LGBTQIA+	-	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual
MCC	-	Millennium Challenge Corporation
NBC	-	National Broadcasting Corporation of Papua New Guinea
NGO	-	Non-governmental Organization
PNG	-	Papua New Guinea
PNGIMR	-	Papua New Guinea Institute for Medical Research
PR	-	Public Relations
PRC	-	People's Republic of China
ROTC	-	Reserve Officer Training Corps
RSS	-	Rashtiriya Swayamsevak Sangh
SOW	-	Scope of Work
TRT	-	Thai Rak Thai Party
UK	-	United Kingdom
WHO	-	World Health Organization

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

Democracy has been in decline across Asia and the Pacific for more than 10 years. Information disorder, an environment in which distorted and manipulated information is ubiquitous, is believed to play an important role in affirming authoritarianism and destabilizing democracy across the region.

To understand how distorted information is being used to gain and maintain unchecked and unaccountable power in Asia and the Pacific, USAID/Asia Bureau's Technical Services requested, under the Asia Emerging Opportunities mechanism, an analysis of how information disorder affirms authoritarianism and destabilizes democracy in Asia and the Pacific.

In discussing the scope of work with the USAID/Asia Bureau, the research team received guidance that the analysis should present a series of in-depth country case studies that examine *if and, if so, how information disorder affirms authoritarianism and destabilizes democracy in Asia and the Pacific*. The team approached this question through a series of in-depth country case studies that concentrated on identifying supply- and demand-side factors that contribute to information disorder at the national and subnational levels in four countries in Asia and the Pacific. The case study countries are the Kyrgyz Republic, Nepal, Papua New Guinea, and Thailand. The countries represent regime types ranging from relatively democratic political systems to de facto military dictatorships.

METHODOLOGY

Five experts on Asia and the Pacific conducted desk-based research, consulting open-source documents such as academic books and peer-reviewed journal articles, think tank reports, and publicly available government documents, as well as broadcast, print, and social media publications. The report also draws on grey literature, unofficial documents, and other materials that are not readily available but to which the team members had access due to their local networks and language skills. If team members found that not enough information on a case study was available through desk research, they conducted key informant interviews with people they identified through their networks on the ground. Drawing on such resources, each team member then conducted a review of the material regarding his or her case studies.

KEY FINDINGS

Many accounts of information disorder in Asia and the Pacific focus almost exclusively on influence operations by states in *other* states. China and Russia in particular are often singled out as disinformation behemoths that manipulate information across the region.

However, situating the current information disorder in the region in its historical context and considering it alongside original research material obtained through a series of carefully selected country case studies reveals a more complex picture.

TABLE I: THEMES AND KEY FINDINGS	
THEMES	KEY FINDINGS
A long history of information manipulation for political ends	Actors affiliated with the Chinese and Russian governments figure prominently in the region’s present-day information disorder. However, actors in the United States and Western Europe have played important roles in the region’s information disorder for centuries and continue to do so.
Democratization and decentralization of information disorder	Information disorder in Asia and the Pacific has undergone both democratization and decentralization in recent years. Regional powers and even small states in the region have engaged in information disorder in their own right. The disinformation landscape has also seen an outward and downward shift of power. Politically motivated players with no direct links to governments in the region, as well as actors that manipulate information for purely financial reasons, play increasingly important roles in distorting information in Asia and the Pacific.
Variation in information disorder among countries	The country case studies suggest that national contexts mediate the impact of information disorder. They also show that mitigation strategies to contain and counter information disorder need to be tailored to specific local contexts. There are no silver bullets.
Cause and consequences of democratic rollback	The case studies also suggest that information disorder may be as much a consequence as a cause of democratic decline. A focus on improving the institutions and socio-economic structures on which democracies in Asia and the Pacific rest, rather than on technology, may therefore yield the most effective mitigation strategies in the long term.

I. INTRODUCTION

I.1 FOCUS OF THE STUDY AND RESEARCH QUESTION

Democracy has been in decline across Asia and the Pacific for over 10 years (Freedom House 2020). Information disorder, an environment in which distorted and manipulated information is ubiquitous, has been said to play an important role in affirming authoritarianism and destabilizing democracy across the region (Capri 2019).

Such accounts often focus almost exclusively on influence operations by states in *other* states. However, despite influence operations conducted by foreign powers that figure prominently in the public imagination, “[m]ost government-sponsored disinformation operations...are domestic in scope” (Linville and Warren 2021: 2). Domestic political agendas, rather than international geopolitics, are the main drivers of disinformation campaigns, in other words. Furthermore, manipulated information seems to reverberate more in domestic politics than in international relations. “[R]esearch has increasingly shown, homegrown disinformation is making democracy sicker than any foreign efforts can” (Gunitsky 2020: 1), while “[a]vailable evidence strongly suggests that the strategic effects of disinformation [on international relations] are exaggerated” (Lanoszka 2019: 1). Finally, while use of distorted information for political ends has become ubiquitous around the globe over the last few years (Bradshaw et al. 2020; Bradshaw and Howard 2019), there is also growing evidence that not all distorted information spreads in the same ways and that country-specific conditions mediate the impacts of information disorder (Benkler et al. 2018: 8).

In light of these findings, the USAID/Asia Bureau’s Technical Services requested, under the AEO mechanism, an analysis of how information disorder affirms authoritarianism and destabilizes democracies in Asia and the Pacific. In discussing the scope of work (SOW) with the USAID/Asia Bureau, the research team received guidance that the analysis should present a series of in-depth country case studies that examine *if, and if so, how information disorder affirms authoritarianism and destabilizes democracy in Asia and the Pacific.*

I.2 DEFINITION OF CORE CONCEPTS

Information disorder has become the preferred term among analysts to describe an environment in which “disinformation,” “misinformation,” and “malinformation” are present and often combine to shape politics in new and unexpected ways.

Wardle (2019: 8) defines these terms as follows: “**Disinformation**...is content that is intentionally false and designed to cause harm. It is motivated by three distinct factors: to make money; to have political influence, either foreign or domestic; or to cause trouble for the sake of it...When disinformation is shared it often turns into **misinformation**. Misinformation also describes false content, but the person sharing does not realize that it is false or misleading.” Finally, **malinformation** “describes genuine information that is shared with an intent to cause harm.”

I.3 METHODOLOGY AND CASE SELECTION

The research team relied primarily on open-source documents such as academic books and peer-reviewed journal articles, think tank reports, and publicly available government documents as well as broadcast, print, and social media publications. The report also draws on grey literature, unofficial documents, and other materials that are not readily available, but to which team members had access due to their local networks and language skills. If team members found that not enough information on a case study was available through desk research, they conducted key informant interviews with people they identified through their personal networks on the ground.

Drawing on such resources, team members analyzed and organized the material on their case studies in five dimensions by asking *who* spreads *what*, *why*, *how*, and to *what* effect? Annex I presents batteries of guiding questions for each of these dimensions.

The research team for this activity consisted of Michael Buehler, Christopher Greene, Sameen Mohsin Ali, Edward Schatz, and Janjira Sombatpoonsiri. Dr. Buehler served as Team Lead, with the support of four country experts to draft the case studies. Each expert examined his or her country of expertise through the lenses of actors, objectives, tools, narratives, causes, consequences, and mitigation strategies. Each expert also supported Dr. Buehler by providing critical input to the overview and comparative

RESEARCH TEAM

Michael Buehler — Team Lead

Ed Schatz — Kyrgyz Republic Expert

Sameen Mohsin Ali — Nepal Expert

Christopher Greene — Papua New Guinea Expert

Janjira Sombatpoonsiri — Thailand Expert

sections of the report and reviewed key sections pertinent to their areas of expertise. The research team presented preliminary findings in several oral presentations and Q&A sessions to USAID and local counterparts in Asia and the Pacific to gain further insight for this report.

In consultation with USAID, the team examined how information disorder affirms authoritarianism and destabilizes democracy in the Kyrgyz Republic, Nepal, Papua New Guinea, and Thailand. The case studies represent regime types ranging from relatively democratic political systems to de facto military dictatorships, with different levels of exposure to the kinds of technologies commonly seen as the main reasons for the rise of information disorder—such as the internet and social media. Ideally, this diversity will help readers develop an understanding of the causes and consequences of information disorder that goes beyond the national context of the four case studies.

Section 2 of this report provides an overview of information disorder in Asia and the Pacific and describes how it destabilizes democracy and strengthens authoritarianism. After situating information disorder in Asia and the Pacific in its historical context, Section 2 examines which actors 1) spread what narratives 2); the causes; 3) why disinformation is spread and why it *does* spread; 4) the tools used to manipulate and disseminate information; and 5) what impact information disorder has on democracy in Asia and the Pacific.

Section 3 presents the four country case studies, which examine information disorder in depth in a specific country context along the five dimensions listed above. A brief cross-country analysis identifies similarities and differences in information disorder among the case studies and examines whether they are indicative of trends beyond a national context.

Section 4 identifies mitigation strategies that contain and counter the manipulation of information for political ends and critically examines their feasibility for the context of Asia and the Pacific. The aim of this section is to identify areas of engagement for future USAID projects on information disorder.

2. MAPPING INFORMATION DISORDER IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

2.1 SITUATING INFORMATION DISORDER IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC IN ITS HISTORIC CONTEXT

The Asia and the Pacific region have a long history of domestic and foreign political actors manipulating information for authoritarian ends. It is important to be aware of this past, as present-day manipulation of information often refers to, whether explicitly or implicitly, and builds on earlier incidents of instrumentalizing distorted information for political ends.

During the colonial period, foreign powers were the main drivers of information manipulation for authoritarian ends across Asia and the Pacific. The British government, for instance, deliberately distorted facts to portray the Burmese monarchy as an “aggressor” that needed to be pacified. It used such narratives to justify the British invasion of Burma (now Myanmar), leading to Anglo-Burmese wars in 1820, 1850, and 1885. Similarly, the US government and media portrayed Filipinos as a belligerent, savage people when the United States began to colonize the archipelago state in the late 19th century (Noor 2017: 90).

Colonialism also triggered information manipulation for political ends in states that were never colonized. For example, the government of Siam (present-day Thailand) tried to foster a sense of national unity during the colonial period through campaigns about the dangers that foreign states and their inhabitants posed to the country. In this context, the government launched several anti-Chinese campaigns, claiming that the Chinese were boycotting Siamese rice; that Chinese women refused to marry Siamese men; and that the Chinese were “bleeding the Siamese white” by transferring money to China (Yu 1936: 198).

Many countries in Asia and the Pacific freed themselves from colonialism after the end of World War II. However, foreign powers remained among the main drivers of information disorder across the region. Particularly during the Cold War, global powers manipulated information as they competed for influence in the region. To this end, they sought to destabilize the newly independent democracies they regarded as enemies and to shore up the authoritarian regimes they considered friends through disinformation campaigns across the region. In particular, the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia became major battlegrounds for foreign influence operations due to their geostrategic importance.

In 1967, for instance, the Soviet Union disseminated false narratives that the United States was planning to “balkanize” the Indian subcontinent by taking territory from both India and Pakistan to establish a “United States of Bengal” (McGarr 2019: 13).

The dominant Western powers during the Cold War, the United States and the United Kingdom, pursued disinformation campaigns to undermine democratic governments they suspected of sympathizing with

Communism across Asia and the Pacific. For example, in Malaya (present-day Malaysia), the British government resisted the bottom-up pressures for widening political participation that had crystallized around Communist ideologies toward the end of World War II. It did so through a combination of military activities and disinformation campaigns. For instance, it printed a fake Communist newspaper, *New Path News*, through which it tried to demobilize rebels (Cull 2003b: 371).

The United States also sought to destabilize democracies through disinformation campaigns across the region. For example, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) unsuccessfully supported local rebellions against the democratic government of President Sukarno in Indonesia in 1958 (Martin 1982: 55). The CIA then went as far as to contract American entertainer Bing Crosby to produce a pornographic movie featuring a man of Hispanic descent wearing a mask resembling Sukarno. The CIA hoped to discredit the democratically elected leader by leaking the film to the public at an opportune moment (Ranelagh 1986: 332).

Increasingly, newly independent governments across Asia and the Pacific themselves began to manipulate information for political ends. Many of the democratic systems that emerged across the region in the immediate post-colonial years were short-lived. Counterrevolutions or the slow erosion of democratic principles led to the rise of authoritarian regimes in many parts of Asia and the Pacific within not more than a decade after independence. Many of these authoritarian states mimicked colonial powers in quashing opposition and stifling support for democracy (Anderson 1983), including by manipulating information for authoritarian ends.

In short, the use of manipulated information for political ends is not a recent phenomenon in Asia and the Pacific. It existed well before the rise of the internet and social media. Furthermore, a brief historical overview finds that “[t]here are far too many people responsible and much more complicit in the expansion of disinformation [...] to reduce the fight against disinformation to simplistic good versus-evil narratives” (Ong 2021: 5).¹ Finally, our review of information manipulation during the colonial and Cold War period finds that many in the region have been receptive to meta-narratives about the danger of Western powers trying to influence domestic politics for a reason. Such narratives resonate across the region precisely because foreign powers have manipulated information to strengthen their grip over

¹ Actors may also manipulate information to undermine undemocratic political systems. For instance, insurgency movements manipulated information in an effort to destabilize colonial regimes across Asia and the Pacific during the colonial and Cold War period (Hunt 2018). However, such efforts were relatively uncoordinated and poorly resourced compared to the influence operations Western powers conducted in order to undermine undemocratic political systems in Asia and the Pacific. The USA, for instance, spent enormous resources on creating and disseminating disinformation aimed at discrediting communist regimes across Asia and the Pacific during the Cold War, mainly through the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the United States Information Agency (USIA). For example, the CIA established “Radio Free Asia,” which broadcast anti-communist propaganda across China between 1951 and 1955 (Cull 2003a: 351; Martin 1982: 54). Likewise, in 1953, the CIA disseminated “a fictitious autobiography of the pro-Soviet Iranian émigré poet, Abulqasim Lahuti...[p]acked full of criticism of Moscow’s policies towards Soviet Central Asian Republics and the wider Middle East...” (McGarr 2019: 13), initiating a long tradition in US secret service operations to instrumentalize intellectuals for the manipulation of political narratives (Saunders 2000; Whitney 2017; Marchetti and Marks 1974: 145). Furthermore, during the 1950s and 1960s, the CIA not only disseminated leaflets containing disinformation across Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, but also “reputedly dropped giant condoms over Laos in order to start rumors concerning the prodigious and intimidating nature of American manhood” (Cull 2003b: 371). In a slightly more subtle influence operation, the CIA – with the help of development agencies such as the Asia Foundation (founded by the CIA as the Committee for Free Asia in 1951) (Marchetti and Marks 1974 1974: 36) – tried to co-opt Buddhist monasteries and networks of religious leaders across Southeast Asia in order to use them as conduits for propaganda aimed at discrediting communist regimes in Asia (Ford 2017). In 1967, the CIA launched hot air balloons from Taiwan destined for mainland China. The balloons carried forged local Chinese newspapers that featured stories about the failure of the Communist government in Beijing. The balloons were launched from Taiwan so that the USA could deny any responsibility for the operation and instead inculpate the Chiang Kai-shek regime in power on the island at the time (Marchetti and Marks 1974: 135; Martin 1982: 54). In any case, this report won’t examine how distorted information was and is being used by foreign and domestic actors to undermine undemocratic regimes.

domestic politics in the past. The case studies below describe in more detail how present-day information manipulation often builds on anxieties and suspicions rooted in historical experience.

2.2 WHY INFORMATION DISORDER CONTINUES TO WARRANT OUR ATTENTION

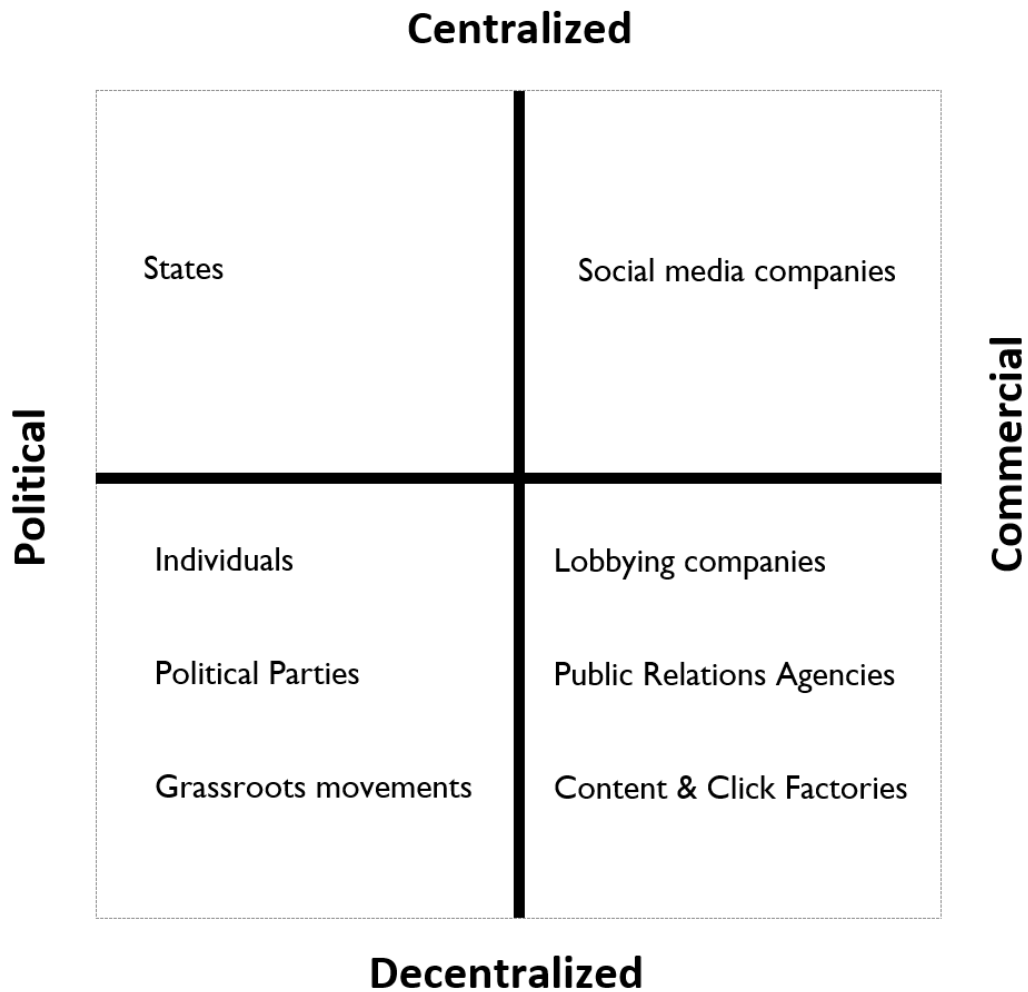
If the use of disinformation for political ends has been a steady presence in the region's politics for years, why pay attention to it now? After all, "[t]here might be some comfort in that, as if the current assault on facts and truth were merely the latest iteration of a threat we have lived with for decades and which we can, demonstrably, survive. That, though, depends on the answer to a tricky question: Is today's disinformation merely different in degree from that of the past, or different in kind?" (Freedland 2020: online).

Arguably, current information disorder has a range of new and unique features that warrant our attention. First, the scope of information manipulation is both broader and deeper today than ever before. Never in history has it been possible for distorted information not only to reach such *numbers* of people but to reach them in such *personalized* form at such an *individual* level. Second, there has been a "democratization" of the information disorder over the past 30 years. Creating and disseminating distorted information with the potential to reach a mass audience used to be the prerogative of states, as shown by the anecdotes above. However, with the advent of the internet in the 1990s, manipulating information has become both cheaper and easier. This means that small groups, and even individuals, with relatively little effort, modest financial means, and poor technical know-how have the potential to make a disproportionate impact (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017: 11). Third, the current manipulation of information seems particularly consequential in affirming authoritarianism and destabilizing democracies as it coincides with the rise of populism across the region, which is inherently anti-democratic (Müller 2016).

2.3 ACTORS

There are several dimensions along which to categorize actors contributing to information disorder. Are they manipulating information for political ends or for financial gain? Furthermore, are they located at the center of a country's political arena or economy or at the margins? (See Figure 1).

Figure 1: Who Contributes to Information Disorder?



Source: Author (based on Benkler et al. 2018:21–22)

CENTRALIZED PLAYERS WITH POLITICAL MOTIVATIONS (UPPER LEFT QUADRANT, FIGURE 1)

Until recently, states were the most common actors in the region’s information disorder, as discussed above. Most players were therefore concentrated in the upper left quadrant of Figure 1.

States continue to play an important role in the region’s information disorder. The governments of China and Russia in particular are frequently singled out for creating and disseminating disinformation to influence politics in other countries across the region. However, a close reading of the situation on the ground reveals a more complex picture.

The governments of China and Russia indeed figure prominently among states that contribute to information disorder in Asia and the Pacific. In recent years, however, a growing number of countries have entered the fray, often facilitated by knowledge transfers between the governments of China and Russia and smaller states in the region. For example, the Chinese government has provided training to established

media representatives from across Asia and the Pacific (Lim and Bergin 2018: 18). Similarly, the Philippine government sent communications staff to Russia for training (Cibralic and Connelly 2018). Furthermore, Russian government operatives went to Southeast Asia to show members of the Tatmadaw, Myanmar's military, how to manipulate information on social media (Bradshaw and Howard 2019: 17). Military officials from Myanmar were also sent to Russia for training (Mozur 2018).

In addition to building capacity along vertical lines, knowledge transfers along horizontal lines seem increasingly common. India, for instance, provided disinformation training to cyber troops from Sri Lanka, as described in a 2019 report (Bradshaw and Howard 2019: 17). That is, states that once were mere targets of distorted information have become drivers of manipulated information, too.

The upper left quadrant in Figure 1 has therefore become more crowded in recent years as “democratization” of the information disorder is under way in Asia and the Pacific.

CENTRALIZED PLAYERS WITH FINANCIAL MOTIVATIONS (UPPER RIGHT QUADRANT, FIGURE 1)

Over the past 15 years, large companies have collected personal data that people provide online and then sold it to advertisers. These firms also play important roles in the information disorder in Asia and the Pacific. They include US-based platforms such as Facebook and Twitter as well as platforms that originated in the region, such as WeChat, Weibo, and TikTok (Bradshaw and Howard 2019: i).

Such companies do not actively create and disseminate manipulated information. However, they passively tolerate it on their platforms as it guarantees user traffic, a metric that is at the heart of social media companies' business models (Zuboff 2019: 97). For those companies, “truth is undesirable, unprofitable, and irrelevant,” a recent USAID-financed report poignantly observed (Turčilo and Buljubašić 2018: 7).

Social media companies are important players in the region's information disorder not only because they tolerate the creation and dissemination of manipulated information on their platforms; all large social media companies operating in Asia and the Pacific regularly comply with requests from authoritarian, semi-authoritarian, and, increasingly, democratic governments to censor or remove content that those governments consider “fake news” (Bradshaw and Howard 2019: 128).

DECENTRALIZED PLAYERS WITH POLITICAL MOTIVATIONS (LOWER LEFT QUADRANT, FIGURE 1)

The information disorder in Asia and the Pacific has become more decentralized in recent years with regard to both politically and financially motivated actors. Individuals, political parties, ethnic and religious groups, and grassroots movements, as well as comparatively small private sector companies, have all begun to contribute to the information disorder in Asia and the Pacific in ways that, whether deliberately or not, affirm authoritarianism and destabilize democracy across the region.

Numerous examples from across Asia and the Pacific show how politically motivated players that would have been confined to the margins of the political arena just a few years ago have become powerful forces in the region's information disorder. For instance, in Myanmar, an ultra-nationalist Buddhist monk, Ashin

Wirathu, began to use social media to disseminate disinformation about Muslim citizens in 2011. His activities on social media eventually led to violent clashes between religious groups (McLaughlin 2018). Wirathu is linked to Sri Lankan Buddhist groups with similar antipathies to the “Abrahamic faiths.” This suggests that information disorder involves some form of knowledge transfer between decentralized players with political motivations.

DECENTRALIZED PLAYERS WITH FINANCIAL MOTIVATIONS (LOWER RIGHT QUADRANT, FIGURE 1)

Some players manipulate information for purely financial reasons but nevertheless have (often unintended) political impact. Public relations (PR) companies and lobbyists in Western democracies have manipulated information for fees on behalf of politically motivated actors in Asia and the Pacific for decades. In one recent example, the government of Bangladesh contracted PR companies in Brussels and London to manage its public image after it began to execute leading opposition politicians for alleged war crimes in 2015 (CEO 2015: 20). Similarly, the authoritarian regime in Kazakhstan hired PR agencies from Germany and the United Kingdom, which subsequently “massaged Wikipedia entries in ways that cast the Kazakhstani government in a better light,” the Open Society Institute reported (Tynan 2012: 1). Actors from the United States influence-for-hire industry have also been active across the region for many years. For instance, between 2008 and 2011, Joshua Treviño, a US blogger and former speech writer for the administration of President George W. Bush, received \$400,000 from the Malaysian government, paid via two PR companies based in Washington, D.C. and London, to write articles for the US media that cast the Malaysian opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim in a negative light (Hutt 2016: 19). There are numerous other examples of European and US companies, lobbyists, and think tanks manipulating information aimed at both domestic and foreign audiences for profit on behalf of authoritarian governments across Asia and the Pacific (Rushford 2017: 3; Michel 2013).

However, such Western companies face increasing competition from an influence-for-hire industry that has emerged in Asia and the Pacific in recent years. It includes players that range “from content farms through to high-end PR agencies” (Wallis et al. 2021: 3). Content farms often create and disseminate distorted information because sensational headlines about celebrities, health issues, and politicians generate views that translate into advertising revenues. Many of these companies also sell their services to clients that explicitly pursue political goals. In the Philippines, for instance, “[s]ocial media campaigners are often seasoned veterans in engineering viral campaigns for popular soft drink and fast-food brands in the country. They merely transpose tried-and-tested techniques of corporate attention-hacking into the political realm” (Ong 2021b: 31). Similarly, much of the China-linked disinformation and malinformation targeting pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong throughout 2019 was disseminated via Indonesian companies that usually run spam operations to market consumer products (Uren et al 2019: 6).

The influence-for-hire industry in Asia and the Pacific is also burgeoning because cheap labor costs have made the region an important destination for politicians around the globe seeking such services (Wallis et al. 2021: 3). In other words, it is not regional but *global* demand for such services that drives the expansion of the influence-for-hire industry in Asia and the Pacific. “Previous research by scholars and journalists suggest that the majority of click farms focusing on US social media platforms are based in Asian countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines, Bangladesh, and India, while most click buyers are concentrated in North

America and Europe” (Lindquist 2019: 3). In 2018, for instance, it was revealed that former Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili of Georgia had purchased thousands of “Likes” and “Haha” comments for his Facebook posts criticizing NGOs from click farms in countries as diverse as Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Vietnam (Bradshaw et al. 2020b: 141). Likewise, US Senator Mitt Romney’s campaign tactics during his presidential campaign in 2012 drew attention after it emerged that his team had bought tens of thousands of followers for Romney’s social media accounts (Furnas and Gaffney 2012).

The rise of an influence-for-hire industry in Asia and the Pacific over the past few years is further evidence that, increasingly, “disinformation production follows distributed workflow arrangements rather than being centralized in the state or coordinated top-down by one firm or strategist” (Ong 2021b: 30).

ACTORS THAT ARE NEITHER POLITICALLY NOR FINANCIALLY MOTIVATED

Finally, some actors contribute to information disorder in Asia and the Pacific by creating and disseminating distorted information for reasons other than political or financial gains, so they cannot easily be placed within the matrix in Figure 1. Many actors that fall into this group are ordinary citizens who spread disinformation and malinformation because they fail to recognize it as such (Wardle 2019: 8). They distribute misinformation—which is disinformation and malinformation spread without the intention to harm, as defined earlier in this report.

However, other communities *knowingly* create and disseminate disinformation and malinformation, but without any immediate political or financial motivations. They do so simply because they can (GCS 2021: 18). Such communities often originate in internet subcultures (Katayama 2007: 1).

Internet subcultures meeting online on Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) such as 4chan, 8chan or Reddit have gained notoriety in Western democracies for harassing people, especially women and minorities, through online shaming campaigns (Ronson 2015: 80) that involve doxxing and SWATing²; for posting racist and sexist messages; and for peddling conspiracy theories based on disinformation and malinformation (Nagle 2017).

While US-American BBS dominate the discourse about the role of internet subcultures in spreading manipulated information and giving birth to movements with extremist political views³, they are actually modelled after 2channel, which originates in Asia and is the largest BBS in the world (Price 2015).

2channel was established in Japan in 1999⁴ and has since become so popular that the “site has more influence on Japanese popular opinion than the prime minister, the emperor and the

² SWATing is an online harassment technique that is particularly popular in the USA. Individuals or groups report a fictitious hostage situation to a local police station, often from thousands of miles away. In reaction to such calls, Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) teams, which are trained to remedy such situations, are often sent to the house of unsuspecting citizens. Several people have been killed as the result of such SWATing hoaxes (Lovitt 2018).

³ In the USA, on the right side of the spectrum, internet subcultures have given rise to the so-called “alt-right” movement (Miller 2018). On the left of the political spectrum in the USA, the so-called “dirtbag left” creates and disseminates disinformation and conspiracy theories on podcasts such as Chapo Trap House and Red Scare (Tolentino 2016).

⁴ Hiroyuki Nishimura, the founder of 2channel, lost ownership of the domain name to Jim Watkins, a US-entrepreneur, in 2014. Watkins also hosts 8chan, an imageboard that hosts and disseminates conspiracy theories and manipulated information worldwide. Jim Watkins and his son, Ronald Watkins, play an important role in spreading the QAnon conspiracy theory that has become politically consequential in the USA and other

traditional media combined” (Katayama 2007: 1). While most discussion groups on 2channel focus on mundane issues such as cycling or cooking, 2channel also hosts numerous hyper-partisan sub-boards, ranging from ultra-right-wing groups agitating online against China and Korea to conspiracy theorists that create and disseminate disinformation. Some of these groups rally against what they see as the “invasion” of Japan by Korean popular culture while others co-opt cartoon characters popular in Japan to turn them into symbols of Japanese cultural and racial supremacy (Fujioka 2020: 8).⁵

It is important to be aware of such internet subcultures for two reasons. First, they provide insights into what scholars have called “emotional content sharing” (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017: 7). People often knowingly share manipulated information to signal that they belong to a group (Jungherr and Schroeder 2021: 3). Such rationales for information sharing need to be taken into consideration when drafting mitigation strategies to contain and counter the creation and dissemination of manipulated information. Section 4 elaborates on this. Second, the manipulated information and conspiracy theories present in such online subcultures often spill over into offline politics in ways that undermine the social fabric of democracies in the region (McCurry 2014; Fujioka 2020: 9).

2.4 TOOLS

In Asia and the Pacific, means of communication most immediately identified as vectors in present-day information disorder, such as the internet and social media, have become potent because they are rooted in past information disorders.

Colonial authorities introduced modern means of communication such as the printing press and radio to much of the region. While such technologies facilitated the rise of “imagined communities” (Anderson 1983) and therefore laid the foundations for nationalist liberation movements across Asia and the Pacific, they were also intimately linked to political elites. They were, then, tools of oppression (Mrazek 2002: 170) as much as conduits for liberation.

This top-heavy concentration of control over means of communication, in combination with political structures established by colonial powers that segregated communities along class, race, and religious lines, often resulted in highly stratified media landscapes across the region after independence. Broadcast and print media catered to specific classes and ethnic and religious communities (Anuar 2005) even prior to the emergence of internet-based “echo chambers” and “filter bubbles.” As a result, independent media outlets have always been rare across the region. Such siloed media landscapes, stratified along vertical lines, are vulnerable to manipulation as they can be easily instrumentalized to exploit societal cleavages for political ends and oppress dissent.

AN APPETITE FOR ALTERNATIVE NEWS SOURCES

countries. Jim Watkins established the Super-PAC “Disarm the Deep State” in 2020 to finance US-politicians that support the QAnon conspiracy theory (Walker 2020).

⁵ The equivalent in Western democracies would be online communities that have turned Pepe The Frog into a symbol of white supremacy.

The deep concerns in many societies in Asia and the Pacific about the quality and impartiality of news disseminated by traditional media have whetted an appetite for “alternative” news. This is one of the main reasons that social media has become so popular across the region as a source of information.

The rapid replacement of traditional media by social media as a gatekeeper for news creation and dissemination is not only demand-driven, however. It is also the result of synergies between social media companies and technology companies eager to sell electronic consumer goods to Asia’s rising middle classes. Social media companies such as Facebook have collaborated with technology companies such as Apple to distribute phones on which communication apps such as Facebook Free Basics or Whatsapp are already installed (Yuniar 2016).

Hence, for many citizens in Asia and the Pacific, the internet is synonymous with social media apps. Entire societies disenchanted with traditional news outlets look to those apps for information. This combination is an important driver of information disorder in Asia and the Pacific. Maria Ressa, a Filipino-American investigative journalist based in the Philippines and the winner of the 2021 Nobel Peace Prize, described the opportunities that the synergies between social media and consumer electronics companies have opened to create and disseminate distorted information in the Philippines: “[Governments] can so easily manipulate the people who are on Free Basics because all they see is the headline, and they can add anything on top of that headline. And when you click it, you have to pay, so Filipinos won’t click it. They can’t afford to. That then made it even easier to spread this information—forget it—to spread lies” (Jacoby 2018: 17).

To summarize, the internet in general and social media in particular are important sources and vectors for the creation and dissemination of distorted information. However, the use of these modern means of communication to fabricate and spread such information is in many ways an extension of established political processes through different means. Colonial powers and many post-independent governments that replaced them across Asia and the Pacific have manipulated information to gain and maintain political power. The current information disorder rests and capitalizes on such historical structures of information manipulation. Thus, the importance and efficacy that the internet and social media have acquired as vectors in the region’s information disorder can only be understood in its historical context.

2.5 NARRATIVES

It is impossible to provide an exhaustive list of all the manipulated information that affirms authoritarianism and destabilizes democracies in Asia and the Pacific. However, “[t]he fluid nature of disinformation means that it is more important to understand the principles behind its creation, i.e., the intentions behind it and its communicative building blocks, than to expect a coherent and consistent toolbox of techniques to be used” (GCS 2019: 20).

While the examples of distorted information mentioned above create the impression of an infinite number of stories populating the information disorder in Asia and the Pacific, similar themes run through most of them. The paragraphs below identify some of the most common metanarratives for information disorder in the region and help situate the country-specific information disorders described in the case studies in Section 3 in a broader context.

METANARRATIVES USED TO AFFIRM AUTHORITARIANISM AND DESTABILIZE DEMOCRACY

AFFIRMING AUTHORITARIANISM

The bluntest of disinformation campaigns that attempt to affirm authoritarianism simply manipulate information to discredit and silence political opponents. More sophisticated campaigns are embedded in metanarratives that exaggerate an authoritarian regime's achievement or downplay its failures (and often combine both approaches). Such strategies have been referred to as “promotional” and “obstructive” forms of authoritarian image management (Dukalskis 2021: 2). Disinformation campaigns to affirm authoritarianism may target either domestic or foreign audiences (Fifield 2019: 2; Liu 2021: 27).

Two issues regarding the use of distorted information to affirm authoritarianism are worth pointing out. First, narratives about the pitfalls of democracy and the advantages of undemocratic forms of government are also used by (opposition) politicians in *democracies* who want to undermine the political status quo, as the case study on Nepal shows. Second, there is often a symbiotic relationship between narratives emphasizing the achievements of authoritarian regimes and those that aim to undermine democracies. Narratives intended to destabilize democracies abroad may also be used to strengthen authoritarianism at home. Thus, many disinformation campaigns that are directed at undermining democracies also have a domestic audience in mind. If democracies are portrayed as incapable of providing solutions to people's most pressing problems because of a chaotic, slow, and unpredictable political deliberation process, the message for audiences in authoritarian regimes such as Russia is clear: “They are designed to show that [democracies] are no alternative to Putin's Russia. Life under Putin, the message runs, may be less than perfect; but at least it is stable” (Stelzenmüller 2017: 2).

DESTABILIZING DEMOCRACY

A CIA analysis of Soviet disinformation campaigns on the Indian subcontinent in the late 1950s concluded that the aim of those campaigns was not to spread Communist ideology. Rather, they aspired “to compromise, discredit, and ultimately destroy the governments, organizations and individuals most likely to block the increase of Communist and Bloc power in the area concerned...” (cited in McGarr 2019: 2).

Similarly, at present, “most (...) [distorted] content is designed not to persuade people in any particular direction but to cause confusion, to overwhelm and to undermine trust in democratic institutions from the electoral system to journalism” (Wardle 2019: 1). Hence, many current disinformation campaigns associated with the Chinese and Russian governments do not advocate authoritarianism. Instead, they try to undermine states considered to be critical of the Chinese and Russian government. Many of those states simply happen to be democracies. Consequently, Chinese and Russian influence campaigns attack the very pillars on which democracies rest. In other words, disinformation and malinformation campaigns spread narratives that undermine the “liberal epistemic order, or a political system that places its trust in essential custodians of factual authority” (Rid 2020: 12). To this end, stories are disseminated that cast doubt on academia, journalism, the judiciary, the public administration, and/or science (Freedland 2020: 3).

In this spirit, a theme frequently played upon in manipulated information is the incapacity of democratic systems to address the challenges of our time. The deliberative political process on which democratic systems rest only creates chaos and divisions in society, the story goes. Hence, democracies are unable to reach consensus on how to solve many of the most pressing problems that societies in Asia and the Pacific face. Even if political factions were to agree on how to move forward, democracies would be unable to deliver solutions because the participatory policymaking process is slow.

Often, actors also manipulate information to create evidence that their narratives push about the chaos at the core of democratic politics. For this reason, many disinformation campaigns that aim to undermine democracy try to amplify existing ideological cleavages in democratic societies.

In India, for instance, disinformation campaigns frequently try to exacerbate inter-religious tensions. In 2016, Pakistani Twitter users disseminated a video that allegedly depicted a Hindu girl being set on fire for having attended a Christian church service (*Times of India* 2018). In 2017, right-wing Hindu groups distributed the same video but claimed it showed a Muslim mob killing a Hindu girl (Bradshaw and Howard 2019: 51). In 2018, Indian Twitter users again shared the video widely, claiming that it showed a Hindu girl being killed for having attended a Christian church service. In fact, the video shows the lynching of a girl in Guatemala in 2015 (*Times of India* 2018; Bradshaw and Howard 2019: 51).

Another narrative running through many information disorders in Asia and the Pacific is that “the West” threatens local cultures and customs. In this context, the colonial past of many countries in Asia and the Pacific has acquired new potency as a reference point for disinformation campaigns. Indeed, disinformation campaigns often play up a political narrative that elites in the region have pushed for decades. Human, political, and civil rights are portrayed as tools of “foreign interventions” and therefore incompatible with local value systems (Zakaria 1994).

2.6 CAUSES

There are three broad reasons for the creation and dissemination of distorted information: 1) to gain and maintain political influence, either at home or abroad; 2) to profit financially; and 3) for the sake of it (Wardle 2019: 8; Benkler et al. 2018: 21–22; GCS 2019: 19). Different actors contribute to information disorder for different reasons, as detailed in Section 2.3. Often, major events such as political elections or natural disasters serve as a pretext to manipulate information for reasons listed above.

With regard to the supply side of causes, it is important to note that information disorder in Asia and the Pacific is unruly. Many governments indeed control their own disinformation apparatuses, cooperate with politically motivated grassroots organizations, coerce large enterprises into manipulating information on their behalf, and regularly contract some of the thousands of small click farms and troll factories that have sprung up across the region to amplify their message and harass opponents. However, manipulated information rarely emerges and spreads in such a coordinated fashion.

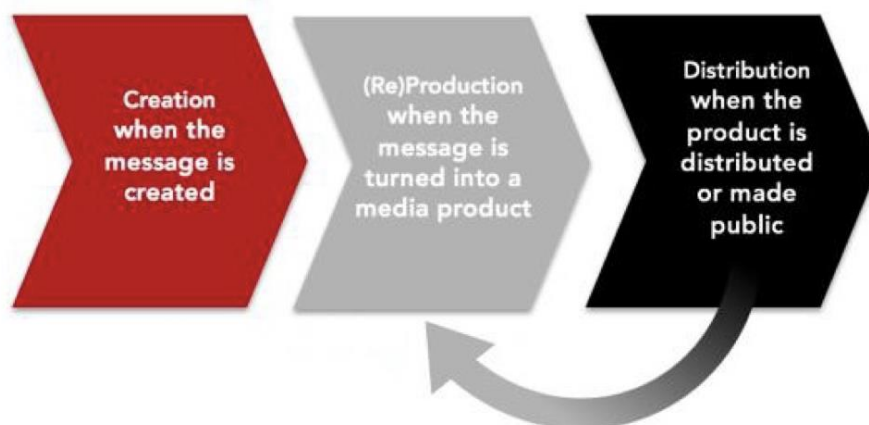
More often than not, the interests of the different players introduced above interact in unplanned ways with unintended consequences, constantly reconfiguring information disorder in the region in ways beyond the complete control of any of them. On the one hand, those without government links may repurpose disinformation originally created by states. On the other hand, governments or politically motivated actors

may co-opt disinformation that spam operations initially created for purely financial reasons, thereby channeling it in new directions (Laruelle and Limonier 2021: 318; Brandt and Taussig 2020: 2; Brandt and Taussig 2019: 134). Sometimes rivalries *within* governments trigger disinformation campaigns (Buehler 2015). Cross-pollination of the creation and dissemination of distorted information also occurs between political and commercial influence entrepreneurs (Ronzaud et al. 2020: 1).

Often, the tools to create and manipulate information change hands regularly. Many botnet operators rent out the networks of followers they have accumulated and curated by promoting certain content to the highest bidder. The client may then push different content to those networks. Some botnet providers in Asia and the Pacific even offer free “refills” of followers to their clients in case too many followers disappear after a botnet changes the content of its messages.

In light of these findings, experts argue that attempts to identify actors cannot be separated from the process shaping the information disorder. Wardle and Derakhshan, for instance, separate this process into three distinct phases. During the *creation* phase, disinformation is created. During the *production* phase, disinformation is converted into a product ready for dissemination. Finally, disinformation is spread during the *distribution* phase (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: The Three Phases of Information Disorder



Source: Wardle and Derakhshan 2017: 23.

It is important to differentiate among these phases because actors with different motivations may be involved in each. “For example, the motivations of the mastermind who ‘creates’ a state-sponsored disinformation campaign are very different from those of the low-paid ‘trolls’ tasked with turning the campaign’s themes into specific posts. And once a message has been distributed, it can be reproduced and redistributed endlessly, by many different agents, all with different motivations” (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017: 23). Awareness of the different actors and their motivations to manipulate information is needed to design mitigation strategies that contain and counter information disorder effectively (see Section 4).

2.7 CONSEQUENCES

Numerous recent studies have tried to understand the impact of information disorder on politics. Information disorder may affirm authoritarianism and destabilize democracies on a variety of levels, according to the literature.

DESTABILIZE DEMOCRACY

Information disorder may undermine democratization and corrode democracies at the individual, institutional, or systemic level. For example, distorted information can weaken the credibility of individuals, organizations, or movements critical of the status quo, or cast doubt on the causes or the communities supported by such political actors. Distorted information is used to “silence any dissonant voices” by “shrinking space” available to them (Turčilo and Obrenović 2020: 23). Disinformation and malinformation in particular have been used to oppress political participation, discredit opponents, and drown out voices that contradict official narratives in both democracies and authoritarian systems across Asia and the Pacific (Bradshaw and Howard 2019: 2), as mentioned above.

Information disorder may also facilitate exclusivist political agendas. For instance, it affects women and the LGBTQIA+ community disproportionately (Tactical Tech n.y. 3). It has been used to cast doubt on women’s credentials, smear their reputations, drive them out of politics, or prevent them from participating at all. Likewise, the LGBTQIA+ community has often been the target of disinformation campaigns. As such communities become more visible and vocal in the public sphere as they strive for greater equality, distorted information is often used to push them back to the margins of the political arena. Since information disorder seems to have a disproportionate impact on women and gender minorities, the case studies pay particular attention to how information disorder affects such communities.

Information disorder may also have more *indirect* unintended consequences that are nevertheless detrimental to democratization and democracies (Colomina et al. 2021: v). Confusion and distrust may also create and amplify political divisions as bipartisan agendas are replaced with populist politics claiming to offer guidance in an ever more complex world. Populists may therefore take advantage of information disorder to engage in divide and rule strategies, and also to rally people behind their causes after using disinformation to construct internal or external threats (Turčilo and Obrenović 2020: 23). Over time, therefore, information disorder may not only corrode the quality of public discourse but also depress voter turnout and participation in political affairs more broadly (Avaaz 2021: 1).

By sowing confusion and distrust, information disorder may also undermine the broader context in which core democratic institutions are embedded and on which they depend to function properly. For example, “[f]ake news changes the way people interpret and respond to real news, impeding their abilities to differentiate what is true from what is not” (Shu et al. 2020: 2). This is why many influence operations are, in fact, designed to be found out. Their goal is to sow distrust, cynicism about the political process, and general institutional skepticism (Diresta and Rose-Stockwell 2021: 15), as well as reluctance to believe *any* kind of information (Cormac and Aldrich 2018; Wardle and Derakhshan 2017: 12; Pomerantsev 2019). In short, they aim to create “a climate where any news or material is concurrently both circumspect and potentially vital” (Ward et al. 2019: 10).

Some reports point out that local context mediates the consequences of information disorder on democratization and democracies. Some scholars argue that levels of democracy and socio-economic

development, for instance, may shape the political impact of distorted information (Chincilla 2019; Turčilo and Obrenović 2020: 18). This seems particularly relevant for the region that this report covers. “The Asia–Pacific region contains many states in different stages of democratization. Many have transitioned to democratic forms of governance from authoritarian regimes. Some have weak political institutions, limitations on independent media and fragile civil societies. The rapid rate of digital penetration in the region layered over that political context leaves populations vulnerable to online manipulation” (Wallis et al. 2021: 3). This report now turns to this local context.

3. CASE STUDIES OF INFORMATION DISORDER IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

The following case studies provide in-depth examinations of information disorders in four countries in Asia and the Pacific along the dimensions introduced in Section 2—*who spreads what, why, how, and to what effect?*

3.1 THE KYRGYZ REPUBLIC

3.1.1 INTRODUCTION

The Kyrgyz Republic is a small, poor, mountainous, post-Soviet state. Four aspects of context are crucial to understanding how Kyrgyzstan has experienced the politics of disinformation.

First, Kyrgyzstan has a chronically weak economy. With few natural resources, enormous reliance on remittances,⁶ low per capita GDP,⁷ and weak capacity to tax, the government is poor and structurally disadvantaged, especially vis-à-vis its wealthier neighbors Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and China. (Kyrgyzstan also borders Tajikistan, with which it shares many challenges of poor economic performance and weak state capacity). Widespread government corruption further erodes state capacity, including the ability to address information challenges.

Second, Kyrgyzstan remains largely in a Russian-language media space (with the lion's share of Russian-language media originating in the Russian Federation). To be sure, the Kyrgyz language is used broadly for television, print, and internet material—much of which is influenced by, if not directly translated from, Russian. This means that Kyrgyz audiences are fairly inundated with worldviews that are largely sympathetic to Moscow's. Key Russian television channels are beamed across Kyrgyzstan, and Russia leases an airbase at Kant, in the northern part of the country. Russia has not used its military force in Kyrgyzstan to date, but the prospect—however remote—of that occurring limits the circulation of views strongly critical of Russia. With Kyrgyzstanis normally sharing Moscow's perspectives, disinformation campaigns *per se* are rare.

Third, like other post-Soviet states, Kyrgyzstan inherited a Soviet-style relationship between media and society, a legacy that remains prominent. The Soviet media were granted the privileged role of leading society to a bright future; indeed, Soviet citizens looked to their media for information about what was politically correct, not necessarily what was factually accurate. While Kyrgyzstan saw an explosion of independent media outlets in the 1990's, Kyrgyz citizens, even today, tend to view the media as by

⁶ World Bank data estimate remittances received in 2020 at 28.4 percent of Kyrgyzstan's GDP. See <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS>

⁷ World Bank data estimate this at \$1,174 in 2020. See <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=KG>

definition pushing an agenda. As a result, there is a broad baseline tolerance for obviously biased reporting and clearly one-sided narratives.

Finally, Kyrgyzstan is the only state in Central Asia that has witnessed a clear rise of populist, ethnic nationalism to date. Indeed, the government of President Sadyr Japarov has embraced this sentiment and appears likely to push to use digital technologies and social media to shore up his authoritarian rule. How far this will go is an open question.

3.1.2 ACTORS

While false and misleading information circulates in abundance in Kyrgyzstan, disinformation—understood as deliberate and intentional efforts to deceive—are a more complex matter. As a recent book by Radnitz (2021) describes in great detail, conspiracy-style thinking is a staple across the region. Yet, actors who deliberately mount disinformation campaigns are less common. Among them, Russia stands out. China is a latecomer to this arena. Less visible to date, but poised to increase in significance, are domestic actors across the political spectrum, including the Japarov regime.

Russia is the most important actor and, of course, the inheritor of major Soviet legacies. Among them, broadscale cultural and linguistic Russification of the Kyrgyz population stands out (Agadjanian and Nedoluzhko 2021). Further, since Vladimir Putin's second term, Russia has mounted a more assertive foreign policy regarding its so-called near-abroad (former Soviet republics that Moscow considers its privileged sphere of influence). Russia's assertiveness has found expression in the use of force, with the Russian-Georgian war in 2008 and the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2014 that resulted in the annexation of Crimea and in many ways remains unresolved.

Russia's assertiveness is of a new type. Instead of a heavy military presence, Moscow prefers a less visible form of influence that it forges via so-called hybrid war (Orenstein 2019). Putin learned much about military overextension in Eastern Europe to support Warsaw Pact nations and about budget-depleting and delegitimizing invasions, such as the one in Afghanistan (1979–1989). By contrast, hybrid war has the key advantages of being (generally) less costly, involving a lighter footprint in a war theater, keeping the opponent off-balance, and preserving a degree of plausible deniability, should that prove politically useful (Orenstein 2019: 31).

Russian influence therefore hinges in significant part on its information campaigns. As discussed below, some of this is pure disinformation (in the sense of intentional creation and dissemination of falsehoods designed to deceive), but the lion's share of this strategy is the diffuse dissemination of preferred narratives, with the effect of flooding the information space.⁸ Moscow cares enormously about developments in Central Asia in general and Kyrgyzstan in particular, but this is not to say that it pulls all levers and determines political outcomes, as described below.

China, for its part, is a latecomer to the information game for several reasons (Jiménez-Tovar, Soledad, and Martin Lavička 2020). First, Beijing is uninterested in roiling Moscow by being seen to interfere in post-Soviet space. Even clearly China-led initiatives, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, must

⁸ See Wedeen (1999) on the logic of crowding out alternative narratives.

carefully avoid angering Russia (Cooley 2019). China's nearly trillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that is generating infrastructure financing and development across Eurasia and beyond is likewise depicted as a win-win-win—good for China, good for Russia, and good for states like Kyrgyzstan that see BRI projects. Whether this is true is a separate question (Yue 2008), but the point is that China does not usually like to announce (let alone tout or trumpet) its presence in Central Asia generally or in Kyrgyzstan in particular.

This default “quiet” approach to influence is consistent with Beijing's claim to be engaged in a peaceful rise, which it implicitly contrasts with the warlike rise that some theories suggest will occur when a major state rises to contest an existing hegemony (Yue 2008). Regardless of whether this is factually accurate, the rhetoric has had the impact of dampening Beijing's involvement in information campaigns. This may be changing, as a new assertiveness surrounding topics like Xinjiang and anti-Chinese protests in Central Asia has emerged (see Section 3.1.5 below). More generally, China has begun to mount a soft-power push that, while dwarfed by Russia's, is poised to grow in importance.

To date, domestic actors including the Kyrgyz regime have not had the deep pockets necessary to mount major information campaigns. Clearly, domestic actors are involved routinely in circulating false and misleading information, as politicians in particular (and the public in general) suffer from low media literacy. Sharing and spreading falsehoods via social media is common in a context that is characterized generally by a lack of interest in adjudicating among competing factual claims.

Kyrgyzstan has not yet seen many domestic actors engaged in intentional strategies to deceive the public. The exceptions tend to occur during electoral campaigns. For example, Raimbek Matraimov, a former customs official who developed a corruption and money laundering scheme worth an estimated \$700 million (Organized Crime and Reporting Project 2019), has been involved in hiring troll mercenaries to influence election outcomes. Moreover, some reporting suggests that doing so has become a normal part of electoral campaigning (Eshaliyeva 2020), although the scope of such activities is not known. As discussed below, there are reasons to believe that this scope will change dramatically as Sadyr Japarov consolidates a digital authoritarianism.

OBJECTIVES

Russia, China, and domestic actors all have different objectives as they engage in information campaigns.

Russia's central objective in post-Soviet space is positional. That is, it seeks to maintain its privileged great-power influence in a region that Moscow considers its backyard. Such positional objectives are designed to prepare the information field for any assertive action that Moscow deems necessary. Crucially, Moscow's actions regarding information should not be understood to be ideological or about autocracy promotion *per se* (Way 2015). Moscow is not interested in controlling Kyrgyzstan in any strong sense of the word. Rather, it aims to delimit the broad range of acceptable behaviors within which official Bishkek operates.

Russian information campaigns in Kyrgyzstan are best understood as an extension of its domestic politics. The Putin regime is interested in tilting the playing field to its distinct advantage, without eliminating spaces

for independent speech entirely.⁹ In Kyrgyzstan, this translates into a hegemony of Russian broadcast media and, increasingly, internet and social media. The objective is to ensure the ongoing production and dissemination of Russia-sympathetic narratives to eliminate the need for disinformation campaigns (i.e., targeted efforts to mislead over the short term). The prerequisite for this is to ensure that the Russian language continues to dominate Kyrgyzstan's information space.

In contrast, China's general objectives are to expand its influence across Eurasia via economic ties. To date, this has not translated into a large information footprint; indeed, China has preferred to keep its presence in the region quiet to avoid unnecessarily provoking Russia. With the mistreatment of Uyghur and other Muslim minorities in the Xinjiang region, Beijing faces a potentially explosive problem, given that these populations are linguistically and culturally Turkic (as are the Kyrgyz and other Central Asian peoples). Typically, China has been able to get Central Asian governments to clamp down on anti-Beijing sentiment, using strong-arm tactics when necessary. Ultimately, Kyrgyzstan is too weak to raise the issue of Xinjiang with China, a fact that most citizens recognize. Further, many Kyrgyz citizens find the heavy-handed government regulation of religion to be consistent with both the Soviet approach to religion and—to a lesser extent—the approach of their own post-Soviet governments. As a result, to date, China has not been forced to develop and deploy a robust narrative about Xinjiang.

China's economic expansion has hit more than a few obstacles. Some are purely economic, such as a relative slowdown in GDP growth and overseas lending.¹⁰ Among the political obstacles are anti-China protests that have emerged from time to time in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan (RFE/RL Kazakh Service 2021). In Kyrgyzstan specifically, protests have taken the form of mobilization against China's internment camps in Xinjiang as well as opposition to Kyrgyzstan's growing debt to China (Reuters 2019). Here too, Beijing has used information campaigns either to win hearts and minds or to deceive the Kyrgyz public.

China has recently bolstered its “soft power” efforts across the region, including Kyrgyzstan (Nogayeva 2015). This includes student exchanges, educational scholarships, sister city arrangements, and so-called Confucius Institutes which offer cultural and educational programming (Shailoobek kyzy 2021). However, Russia and the West remain much more attractive to most Kyrgyz. Chinese soft power initiatives include some nascent efforts on the information front. In neighboring Kazakhstan, for example, the official *People's Daily* now publishes in the Kazakh language on its website (People's Daily Online 2021). This effort remains preliminary and modest in scope.

Domestic actors tend to be less involved than their international counterparts in systematic efforts to shape the information space. During election campaigns (which to date have been competitive, even if they fall short of being free and fair), mudslinging and character assassination are par for the course. The general objective is to secure seats in Parliament. While in other post-Soviet contexts (Russia prominently among them), the incumbent has a significant information advantage over challengers, the regime in Kyrgyzstan (to date) has lacked capacity and therefore has not necessarily had an equivalent information advantage over its competitors. Thus, incumbents' common objective of deploying disinformation to stay in power has not yet materialized in Kyrgyzstan. That may change with the current president, Sadyr

⁹ On the importance of a level playing field for democracy, see Levitsky and Way (2010).

¹⁰ On GDP growth, see World Bank data at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?end=2020&locations=CN&start=1994>; on the challenges of measuring trends in lending, see Zhang (2021).

Japarov, who owes his rapid populist rise to the use of social media. In the near future, it is conceivable that the regime will actively use disinformation to consolidate its power.

3.1.3 TOOLS

Russia has rarely had to resort to overt disinformation. The reason is that its primary tactic is to establish an information hegemony—one that, rather than crushing dissent, ensures that Moscow-friendly narratives are widely disseminated. Its television programming, largely through its First Channel, is beamed across Kyrgyzstan. Year on year, First Channel is among the most viewed stations in the country and particularly in the capital city, Bishkek (Toralieva and Dragomir 2019). Russian content also comes from myriad Russian sites via social media platforms. Even internet material that appears in the Kyrgyz language is often translated from content that appeared first in the Russian Federation. Because Kyrgyzstan has generally enjoyed a wide range of media freedoms, content from the Russian Federation competes with other content for the attention of citizens. That said, the linguistic and cultural affinity of the countries, as well as Russia's aggressive information efforts, ensure that Russian-friendly narratives predominate.¹¹

If a general flooding of the information space is more common and targeted disinformation campaigns are less so, the exceptions are worth considering. In 2010, Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev publicly declared an end to the US military base arrangement at Manas before changing his mind and allowing the American presence to continue. Moscow understood this as a betrayal and unleashed a media barrage publicizing corruption in the Bakiyev family. The timing and the intensity of the campaign suggest that it was designed to rapidly discredit the president. Thousands of Kyrgyz citizens took to the streets, eventually achieving Bakiyev's ouster. In this instance, Russian disinformation appeared to make a difference.

In contrast, Russian efforts in 2010 to shore up then-president Sooronbay Jeenbekov failed. Jeenbekov was the target of public discontent, with protesters decrying the widespread fraud that occurred during parliamentary elections. After a series of chaotic, contingent developments, Jeenbekov resigned and Japarov was installed in his place. While the Russian media actively portrayed Kyrgyzstan as being on the brink of a destabilizing “color revolution” ostensibly fomented by Western actors and supposedly bringing the country to the verge of chaos under the guise of promoting democracy, the Kyrgyz public appeared to ignore these efforts. While we cannot know for certain that Russia was in general absent from the transition, its information efforts in particular failed to keep Jeenbekov in power.

These contrasting examples underscore the point that Russia is ever-present as an information actor in Kyrgyzstan. However, its ubiquity does not mean it is all-powerful. Russian efforts can fail as well as succeed.

China, as mentioned, is a latecomer to information campaigns. To date, its campaigns have been limited in scope and largely reactive. Thus, when Kyrgyz media post reports of anti-China protests across the country, Beijing responds with silence or a flat claim that the reports are “fake news.”¹² This is not, however, to say that the narratives that China offers globally—that its rise is peaceful, and it is dedicated

¹¹ It is less crucial that such efforts persuade than that they flood information space. As Chapman and Gerber (2019) highlight, changing actual opinions is a tall order.

¹² The claim about “fake news” has been the response from numerous Chinese representatives at various public forums in the past five years.

to win-win modernization via a specifically Chinese development model—are absent. While the narrative is not broadly propagated in Kyrgyzstan, it nonetheless finds its way into public discourse in the country.¹³

A related, though separate, consideration is the introduction of Chinese-made closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras in Kyrgyzstan (Marat and Sutton 2021), which should be seen as a part of a broader push on Beijing's part to bundle new technologies (Hemmings 2020: 6). The presence of these cameras has been unpopular in Kyrgyzstan, in part because it is unclear how the data they collect are being used and secured (Dall'Agnola, unpublished). It is also unclear whether China harvests data using this hardware; were it to do so, it would likely use these data to tailor future information campaigns.

Domestic actors are widely engaged in spreading false information, but this is rarely systematic or intended to deceive. The exceptions, like Raimbek Matraimov's use of troll mercenaries (Eshaliyeva 2020), may become more common as Sadyr Japarov takes advantage of digital technologies to shore up his rule. In 2021, Japarov enjoys genuine popularity, but he would likely turn to the digital techniques of authoritarian rule if he were to sense a change in public sentiment.

3.1.4 NARRATIVES

The actors involved deploy various narratives, to varying degrees, with varying effects.

Russia's broad narrative is that democracy brings disorder and generates social discord. This does not necessarily mean that Russia cannot countenance democratic regimes within its sphere of influence. For years, Kyrgyzstan flirted with democratic governance (although it never consolidated democracy), but Moscow did not act to rein in Bishkek. Indeed, Russia is less an ideological actor than an opportunistic one. Nonetheless, the Russian narrative is that democracy has serious disadvantages—of which Kyrgyzstan and other post-Soviet states should be aware.

A related narrative is that the post-Soviet space remains a privileged sphere of influence for Russia. In this depiction, it is natural that Russia should exert influence in Kyrgyzstan and across Eurasia, whereas other actors (China, Europe, the United States) are interlopers, and their presence is unnatural. Here, too, Russia's narrative does not entirely preclude space for these other actors, but it normalizes Moscow's hegemony in the region.

A final narrative that emanates largely from Russia but has resonance in Kyrgyzstan relates to so-called traditional values. This narrative depicts non-heteronormative behaviors and identities as unnatural; they have no place in Russian society and indeed have been imposed on Russia by Western liberalism. Moreover, in this depiction the threat is existential; Russia must take swift legislative and other action to ensure its survival as a civilization. The same logic applies to feminism and its push for gender equality; this, too, represents a fundamental threat that must be countered.

China's narrative does not specifically target Kyrgyzstan or indeed Central Asia. Its premise is that China is a new type of modernizer that provides a distinctive model for development. In this depiction, China is unlike other great powers in that it does not impose its values or establish conditions in international

¹³ On public perceptions of China in Kyrgyzstan, see Gerber and He (2021).

affairs. Rather, the narrative seeks to position China as inherently more attractive to developing countries than are its Western counterparts.

Extensions of this narrative are the occasionally occurring mini narratives surrounding Xinjiang and anti-China protests in Kyrgyzstan. The claim is that those who do not appreciate the value of China's state-led developmentalist modernity have no right to object. Just as Muslim minorities in Xinjiang should accept China's modernization as leading to a win-win outcome, Kyrgyzstan should recognize the great value of China's efforts in the region.

Domestic actors in Kyrgyzstan deploy a wide range of narratives as they seek to shape the information space. Some of this is the normal stuff of competitive politics, with actors seeking to get their respective messages out—with content that depends on those actors' ideological positions. As for outright falsehoods, it has become common to use the language of corruption to discredit opponents. While corruption is indeed rampant in Kyrgyzstan, perhaps even more so are accusations of corruption.

3.1.5 CAUSES

Two key distinctions were apt in discussing causes. First, we should distinguish the *origins* of disinformation from its *spread*. What gives rise to disinformation may indeed be separate from what facilitates the further spread of false narratives. Second, we should distinguish supply-side causes from demand-side ones. The latter are rarely discussed, but they are crucial. To be clear, it is not that Kyrgyz citizens prefer false information designed to deceive them. People generally do not seek to be fooled. However, it is certainly true that people can harbor preferences that lead them to find aspects of disinformation deeply appealing. We must pay close attention to those preferences.

What are the origins of disinformation campaigns that target Kyrgyzstan? On the supply side, Russia's ongoing cultural penetration enables false information to be created and achieve *a priori* plausibility in the eyes of targeted populations. The supply of Russian narratives appears unlikely to shrink in the medium term given the relative retreat of the West from Central Asia, the generally skeptical orientation of Kyrgyz citizens toward Chinese alternatives, and concern about Islamic narratives, in part because they are viewed through the prism of Afghanistan's decades-long tragedy. The fact that up to one million ethnic Kyrgyz work in Russia means that another source of narrative transfer emerges when these laborers return to Kyrgyzstan to visit their families.

The supply of Chinese disinformation is low but growing. As China experiences an uneven reception to its expanding economic footprint, it can no longer ignore the perceptions of local populations (Van der Kley and Yau 2021). Instead, it has committed to a stepped-up soft power push that should create opportunities for targeted information campaigns. As discussed below, it is unclear whether such campaigns will gain traction.

The supply of domestic disinformation is also low but growing. Kyrgyzstan's political contests have been fairly competitive in general (even while falling short of being democratic), but these contests generally have not included sustained disinformation. This may change, as the regime of Sadyr Japarov clearly sees value in managing the information space (and his competitors will likely respond in kind). Thus, in July 2021, Japarov signed into law so-called "anti-fake" legislation. Nominally designed to combat

disinformation about COVID-19, the law gives remarkable powers to an unspecified government agency to order the removal of content it deems false (Talant 2021). In using the language of fighting disinformation, Japarov seems keen to shape the information space more aggressively than his predecessors were able to do. Indeed, at least some government agencies have taken to disseminating slick videos that accentuate their apparent accomplishments, such as one by the Ministry of Internal Affairs (Roziyev 2021).

Separate from the question of origins, what supply-side factors enable the spread of disinformation in Kyrgyzstan once it has been created? The answer is simple: The environment is ripe for false narratives to spread. The Kyrgyz government does extremely little to limit supply. The anti-fake law underscores the point that, to date, the government has not been concerned with solving the problem. Similarly, social media giants like Facebook, Twitter, and the Russian VKontakte, have taken only a few tentative and entirely inadequate steps to highlight false narratives circulating on their platforms (RFE/RL Kyrgyz Service 2021).

The supply of disinformation is likely to increase in the near future, but an equally crucial consideration is on the demand side—what factors make Russian narratives emerge in the first place?

First, we should consider the appeal of the familiar. Kyrgyz citizens have a broad taste for Russian-language programming, the bulk of which is produced in the Russian Federation. While in the 1990s Russian material seemed to have lost some appeal, this had shifted by the 2000s, with Russian sports, films, television, and social media again becoming staples of Kyrgyz viewing. Clearly, the supply of Russian programming of high production quality had risen, in part due to rising demand. In turn, that demand was a background condition for political narratives to find fertile ground in Kyrgyzstan.

Second, Kyrgyz citizens have developed an appetite for narratives alternative to Western ones. To be clear, Russian narratives need not be deeply believed to be of major consequence. Indeed, Kyrgyz citizens do not necessarily buy into the specifics of Moscow's vision. It is enough if this vision clutters the information space, crowding out alternatives. But such narratives do need a minimal appeal, and that can be accounted for by considering that the West overpromised in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse.

In the 1990s, Western narratives of democratization and prosperity generally rang true with Kyrgyz citizens (Schatz 2021), and the first independent Kyrgyz government readily embraced liberalism's language. For a complex series of reasons, many post-Soviet transitions failed to deliver on their promises; fairly or unfairly, the Kyrgyz people in large part blamed the West for rising social inequality, political corruption, and unmet expectations. An appetite for non-Western—and often conspiracy-centered (Radnitz 2021)—narratives had emerged, and these resonated not because of their veracity but because of their emotional appeal.

A final consideration for the demand side is the legacy of the Soviet media. During the Soviet era, the state-owned and party-controlled media did not serve in the fourth estate role that media historically have played in democracies. As Sarah Oates (2007) describes, rather than serving as a check on the use of power, media were tasked with *leading* citizens toward a bright future. It was literally the media's role to communicate the politically correct line. The public came to expect that the media, by definition, would have a bias.

While the Soviet-era media monopoly disappeared and a plural media environment ensued in the 1990s, even today Kyrgyz citizens normatively expect their media to pursue their own biased agendas. As a result, Kyrgyz citizens have a high tolerance for overtly partisan, skewed coverage. Fighting disinformation and misinformation becomes challenging when citizens do not view skewed information as a problem but rather as the natural order of things (Interview, Begaim Usenova 2021).

Thus, three factors—the attractiveness of Russian culture and entertainment, the draw of non-Western narratives, and the legacy of the Soviet media—help account for the appeal of Russian narratives in the first place. The same factors also contribute to the further spread of these narratives, once created. Beyond them, two additional factors are at play.

First, Kyrgyz citizens have little interest in discriminating among sources that come across their feeds; in general, media literacy is quite low (Interview, Begaim Usenova 2021). There may be a hardware aspect to this dynamic. Many Kyrgyzstanis receive information on their smartphones via cheap plans that might prioritize simple and sensationalist Facebook headlines. Concentrating on headlines (rather than delving more deeply for information or cross-referencing to ensure validity) plays into clickbait algorithms that have the potential to further politicize information.

Second, citizens may be involved in spreading information of questionable accuracy for social or psychological reasons. Sharing information in general is a way to assert one's membership in a community, as mentioned in Section 2. Doing so also enables citizens to feel efficacious and assert agency, especially in contexts where other forms of participation may be costly or more generally foreclosed (Interview, Begaim Usenova 2021). Given this, and the overall wave of populist ethno-nationalism in Kyrgyzstan that President Japarov is riding, many Kyrgyz citizens rather unthinkingly participate in the dissemination of information if doing so helps cement their membership in the ethno-national community.

3.1.6 CONSEQUENCES

The creation and dissemination of false information (with or without malicious intent) has many troubling consequences for Kyrgyzstan. Given that the country might be characterized as a swing state in the Central Asian region—that is, one whose future may or may not be authoritarian—such consequences for Kyrgyzstan are indeed consequences for the broader region.

The first consequence is democratic backsliding. While it is clear that the willingness to spread false narratives can be as much a consequence of democratic backsliding as a cause (Bennett and Livingston 2018), the Kyrgyzstan case study suggests that it can be both. At a minimum, extensive use of false or misleading narratives does nothing to alleviate public cynicism, undermining the broad-based social trust that is an essential ingredient for successful democratic governance.

The availability of such false narratives and the rise of social media that abet them have contributed to the growth of populist ethnic nationalism. Populism by itself is a force that established democratic institutions can constrain, but doing so certainly exerts stress on those institutions. In the case of Kyrgyzstan, which

has never consolidated its political system,¹⁴ populism has the potential to generate a broad swing in an authoritarian direction.¹⁵

As mentioned previously, the prevalence and circulation of false information can serve as a pretext for an authoritarian ruler to crack down on the opposition. This is the likely outcome of Japarov's anti-fake law, which will create and empower a government watchdog to "react to complaints" about online content. While it is too early to know how this will work in practice, the timeline envisaged for responding to complaints is telling: two days for the watchdog to respond and one day for the content provider to comply with the watchdog's decision.¹⁶ Clearly, this unelected body will enjoy broad discretion and will be burdened by few (if any) oversight protections. In the meantime, it will place the onus of compliance on citizens, and it is unclear if citizens will have any right to appeal decisions. The law is also unlikely to be effective in combating actual disinformation, as critics have detailed.¹⁷

This leads to a second area of major consequence: eroding human rights protections. In addition to developments that limit speech protections, false and misleading narratives that circulate broadly signal that restrictions on minority rights are to be considered not just acceptable but virtuous. The so-called traditional values narrative is central. To be clear, conservative social values have an organic appeal among segments of the Kyrgyz population, and those espousing them should enjoy the same free speech protections as anyone else. The problem is that anti-LGBTQIA+ vigilantes take false narratives that depict LGBTQIA+ people as an existential threat to pursue an agenda of hate. When this occurs in a weak-state context like Kyrgyzstan, the rights of gender and sexual minorities are routinely violated. In March 2020, when arrests were made in the aftermath of a women's rights march, Member of Parliament Zhyldyz Musabekova offered the following:

Very right. Tired of these gays who are turning the holiday into a mess. They did the right thing, that they were dispersed. Now we need to drive them out of the country (ILGA Europe 2021: 69).

This narrative, representing LGBTQIA+ people as an ostensible existential threat, dovetails with rising Kyrgyz ethno-nationalism that is increasingly xenophobic and racist (Aitkulova 2021).

The Kyrgyz parliament (Jogorku Kenesh) has entertained legislation copied roughly from Russia's 2013 ban on so-called "gay propaganda." While the Kyrgyz version did not pass under previous governments, it may gain new life under the populist Japarov. In the meantime, the overall atmosphere for LGBTQIA+ people in Kyrgyzstan has deteriorated rapidly, consistent with but also more dramatic in scale than the deterioration seen across Central Asia and Europe (ILGA Europe 2021).

If gender minorities are targets, such narratives also foster an environment that is not conducive to equal rights protections for women. To reiterate: Free speech protections should address the circulation of

¹⁴ See Hale (2014) on the cyclical politics that occurs in Kyrgyzstan and broadly across Eurasia when formal institutions remain unconsolidated. See also Radnitz (2012), who details this dynamic in the Kyrgyzstan case.

¹⁵ Likewise, Slater (2013: 730) correctly notes that it is quite common across Southeast Asia and beyond to see regimes engaged in "unpredictable and alarming sudden movements, such as lurching, swerving, swaying, and threatening to tip over." Bluntly put, regimes are rarely as "consolidated" as they might at first appear.

¹⁶ RFE/RL Kyrgyz Service, "Kyrgyz President Signs Controversial 'False Information' Bill Into Law," August 24, 2021. <https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-false-information-law/31425483.html>

¹⁷ Analiticheskii tsentr po Tsentral'noi Azii, "Kyrgyzstan: president podpisal skandal'nyi zakon 'o feikakh,'" August 26, 2021, <https://acca.media/kyrgyzstan-prezident-podpisal-skandalnyj-zakon-o-fejkah/>

socially conservative views about gender and gender roles. The problem emerges when considering the broader context. Not only is Kyrgyzstan chronically weak and unable, for example, to support victims of domestic violence (Childress and Hanusa 2018; Margolis and Rittmann 2020), but the country has been challenged by so-called bride kidnapping (Kleinbach and Salimjanova 2007), a practice that, while not widespread, is nonetheless a clear indication of how a weak state combines with a public acceptance of “traditional practices” to infringe on women’s rights *de facto*.

A third area of major consequence is the rule of law. Corruption and weak institutions have long made the rule of law a tenuous project in Kyrgyzstan, and one that can be expected to worsen. Japarov rammed major constitutional changes through in 2021. The new Constitution creates a system of “executive centralism” reminiscent of other authoritarian regimes in Eurasia and simultaneously erodes institutional checks and balances (Partlett 2021). The Constitution also creates an unelected *Kurultai* (assembly) with an unspecified advisory and supervisory role.

Further, the new Constitution offers a clear push for “traditional values,” opening the way for further informal crackdowns on gender minorities and women. Article 10.4 reads, “For the purpose of protecting the younger generation, activities that *contradict moral and ethical values*, the public consciousness of the people of the Kyrgyz Republic, may be limited by law.” Article 23.2 reads, “Human and civil rights and freedoms may be limited by the Constitution and laws in order to protect national security, public order, the health and *morality* of the population, and the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.”¹⁸ This new emphasis on morality creates a legal opening for social groups interested in shifting the terrain of gender relations.

To be clear, democratic backsliding, diminishing space for free speech, and the erosion of human rights protections have many causes. But in the context of Kyrgyzstan’s weak state institutions and rising populist ethno-nationalist sentiment, false and misleading narratives greatly accelerate these processes.

3.1.7 MITIGATION STRATEGIES

The problem of disinformation is ubiquitous. Even strong states like the United States have trouble contending with the challenges that disinformation brings. Solutions may be even harder to come by for weaker, smaller, and poorer Kyrgyzstan. Nonetheless, some key mitigation strategies should be considered.

The first strategy is a broad one. We should recognize that the Japarov regime at this juncture is more likely to be a part of the problem than a part of the solution. The anti-fake law is deeply concerning and is an indication that any support the government receives to “fight disinformation” may in fact shore up an increasingly authoritarian regime.

A second strategy is related to the first. Social media giants like Facebook should be considered allies in this effort. While these actors have been roundly criticized in the West for how little they do to combat disinformation, the context in Kyrgyzstan is different. Here, they may be more likely to implement meaningful policies to flag disinformation and minimize its spread than would the Japarov government.

¹⁸*Konstitutsiia Kyrgyzskoi Respubliki*, April 11, 2021, <http://www.president.kg/ru/konstituciya>. Emphases added.

Indeed, in interviews local activists have suggested that these giants have deeper pockets than the government and more of an incentive to rein in the problem (Interview, Begaim Usenova 2021). In addition, given rising global criticism of their business models, these platforms might be seeking public relations wins that could be visibly effective in a small market like Kyrgyzstan.

A third strategy is to support the creation of content in the Kyrgyz language. Given the powerful torrent of Russian-language material, any support for content creation in Russian might be misplaced as it could be lost in the larger pool of Russian-language material. By contrast, high-quality content in Kyrgyz is a potential growth area, and demand exists.

A fourth strategy is a staple in the fight against disinformation: support for professional journalism. Over the years, the US government has provided considerable aid to Kyrgyzstan for this effort, but much remains to be done. The more that journalism is governed by the logic of “more clicks” than the logic of “high-quality news,” the greater the risk to Kyrgyz society. The strategy should focus in part on the demand side. Campaigns to communicate the value of professional journalism and impartial fact-checking (see below) should be broadly disseminated to the public, since the Soviet legacy of the media otherwise combines with commercial trends to powerfully abet disinformation.

Fifth, fact-checking needs robust support. This already occurs to a degree, with the involvement of some tremendously dedicated individuals (including via factcheck.kg and [politklinika](http://politklinika.kg)). However, these efforts are underfunded and subject to harassment and violence. In one incident, the editor-in-chief of a fact-checking website was beaten by two unidentified men (Analytical Center for Central Asia 2020). Given this context, the Kyrgyz government should consider modifying criminal law, for example treating the specific targeting of journalists and fact-checkers as an aggravating factor and a sentence multiplier.¹⁹

Sixth, a general and well-funded push for media literacy is vital. After all, disinformation and misinformation are unlikely to diminish, given Russia’s ongoing efforts, China’s new interest in soft power, and the Japarov regime’s apparent infatuation with social media. Therefore, the demand side becomes crucial. Media literacy remains generally poor across Kyrgyzstan (Media Policy Institute 2018). A sustained effort across the country’s schools and universities is imperative. Importantly, such a program should first educate the educators, as many instructors are not skilled in spotting false narratives. Further, such an effort would do well to conduct broad public service announcement campaigns that highlight the value of one or two simple tools for identifying false information (e.g., fact-checking websites, reverse image searches).

Finally, given the unreliability of the Japarov regime in this area, any support for Kyrgyzstan should center on partnerships with local actors, with the Kyrgyz government playing a secondary role (if any). Possible local partners include the Media Policy Institute (<http://media.kg/>), factcheck.kg, soros.kg, and [politklinika \(https://www.pk.kg\)](https://www.pk.kg).

¹⁹ On the need for journalists to have special protections, see Heyns and Srinivasan (2013).

3.2 NEPAL

3.2.1 INTRODUCTION

Nepal's experience with information disorder cannot be separated from its turbulent political history, its present experience with a democratic transition under its new Constitution, and its complex social structures.²⁰ As a Hindu monarchy, Nepal was a tightly regulated state with no active political parties until the 1990s. After a decade of civil war (1996–2006) between the state and Maoist separatists, the Nepali Parliament voted to limit the monarchy's power. Following a peace agreement, the Maoists joined an interim government operating under a temporary Constitution. In 2001, a prince massacred other members of the royal family. In 2007, the monarchy was dismantled entirely as a condition for the Maoists to rejoin the government, and Nepal became a republic in 2008. However, Nepal's political elite was not able to agree on a new Constitution until 2015, when a secular, federal parliamentary republic was formed.²¹ This sequence of events conceals a considerable amount of political turmoil, instability, and citizen dissatisfaction, including 16,000 deaths during the civil war, a massive earthquake, states of emergency, a royal coup, widespread inequality and exclusion—and 53 changes of government, not one of which resulted in a completed five-year term (Acharya and Thapa 2021).

Expectations of Nepal's political parties were high from 1990 onward, when the monarchy allowed parliamentary politics to resume. Despite impressive achievements, such as the end of the civil war and the sidelining and eventual dissolution of the monarchy, Nepal's parties are regarded as ill-equipped to bring about stability (Karn 2017: 68; Wild and Subedi 2010; Dahal 2010). The major parties have factionalized and merged at various times, but Karn (2017: 68) notes that this was not due to ideological or policy disagreements, but was a result of “personality clashes and opportunism.”²² Acharya and Thapa (2021) argue that this makes political leaders suspect if they seek support from external actors, leading to “malign foreign influence.” At the same time, domestically, elite interests have led to the tactical deployment of “polarization techniques to create cleavages along ethnic and regional lines” (BTI 2020: 32). Therefore, in the Nepali context, the primary aim of information disorder is not to undermine the entire political edifice; that would close the space for political competition and lead to more turmoil for the political elite itself. Rather, the aim is to inflame existing divides (political, religious, or diplomatic) within society, “polarizing an already polarized political climate” (Shu et al. 2020: 79), thereby strengthening autocratic rule by elected governments. These cleavages have been particularly evident in Nepal's efforts to agree on a constitution.

Nepal has had three constitutions in the last 30 years—1990, 2007, and 2015. The last is still being interpreted and implemented amid multiple changes of government. The Constitution envisions Nepal as a secular federal democratic republic. The federal structure was the main demand of a range of social movements and smaller parties in Nepal that sought “the restructuring of the state” so they could use their diverse languages in the official sphere, have greater representation, and ensure the preservation of their cultures. However, the period prior to the adoption of the Constitution was marked by the rise of conservative groups that criticized the demands of identity-based groups and emphasized a singular

²⁰ For more on Nepali politics, see ICG 2010.

²¹ The International Crisis Group (ICG) has a number of reports on Nepal's 2015 Constitution.

²² See Rajib Upadhyaya's “Cabals and Cartels: An Up-Close Look at Nepal's Turbulent Transition and Disrupted Development” for more on this point.

national identity (Tamang n.d.). Some argue that, because much of the mainstream media in Nepal is dominated by those with such conservative views, the opinions of identity-based groups and movements are “presented as a divisive agenda that promotes national disintegration or ethnic conflict” (Tamang n.d.: 105). Others believe the implementation of a local government system, by bringing politics and governance closer to the people, has arguably shifted young people’s perspectives on democracy and governance, particularly in rural parts of the country (Karki 2021). Interviewing young people who joined a mentorship program to support the newly elected local governments, Karki (2021) finds considerable hope that local governments will allow for a move away from the politics of fear and violence and toward greater accountability, inclusiveness, and responsiveness.

From a societal standpoint, homogenization of the populace was a critical aim of the state under the monarchy’s *Panchayat* system of “limited, guided democracy” (Hutt 2020a: 141). Hutt (2020a: 141) identifies three pillars of Nepal’s national identity: Hinduism, the monarchy, and the Nepali language. Of course, this singular notion of identity overlooked diversity in religion, ethnicity, sect, and caste, feeding into ongoing patterns of exclusion (BTI 2020; Cox et al. n.d.). It has also meant that any reckoning or reconciliation through transitional justice with the events of the decade-long civil war remains a distant goal (Jha and Ghimire 2019; HRW 2020). Although the new Constitution goes some way toward guaranteeing the rights of citizens, it does not go far enough in ensuring equal representation for women or those who are not members of the high Hindu castes. Nor does the Constitution sufficiently address the grievances of the Madhesi people who protested against its provisions in an incident that escalated to involve India and soured Nepal-India relations. At the same time, recovery efforts following the 2015 earthquake are still incomplete; many people still live in temporary structures. Inequality between the capital city, Kathmandu, and the rest of the country is increasingly evident, and thousands leave every day to seek work abroad (Hutt 2020a: 145). All of these factors contribute to a situation in which the state is keen to promote a particular narrative and crackdown on dissent through any medium, while citizens view the state with considerable mistrust and do not believe the state machinery or political elite are acting in citizens’ interests.

Nepal is neighbored by India and China, and both countries have come to exercise considerable influence within the country—the former through open borders and cultural exchange and the latter through diplomacy over the issue of Tibet, ties to the Communist Party, and the BRI. As such, Nepal’s information and media space is considerably impacted by what takes place in India and China, and by their interests. For all these reasons, Nepal remains susceptible to the adverse impacts of information disorder driven by regional tensions, with the space and traction for disinformation heightened and trust at a low point.

3.2.2 ACTORS

Information disorder in Nepal lacks the strategic organization of similar operations in India or Pakistan. It is difficult to identify centralized actors or entities engaged in such activities since disinformation or misinformation presents as seemingly individualized acts by prominent political figures, members of a particular religious group, or individual citizens.

DOMESTIC ACTORS

The lack of coordinated information disorder activity is perhaps a consequence of the multifarious crises that Nepal faces. Factionalized politics, unstable and short-lived governments, and intra-party tensions mean that political elites spend considerable time jockeying for control of their respective parties. This leaves little time to organize the kind of concerted disinformation campaigns that typify political activity in other countries. Arguably, party elites consider social media a threat to the integrity of their support base, and therefore limit space for dissent to avoid internal conflicts (Pradhan 2020). For instance, the Nepal Communist Party proposed a ban on public criticism of party leadership following an internal leadership crisis in 2020: “Responsible comrades and all concerned are directed to strictly stop the tendency to write nonsense against the party’s policies, leaders, and cadres and to act in opposition to the benefit of the party” (Pradhan 2020). The party issued a similar directive in 2019 that has largely been ignored.

However, political dynamics change when a party wins an absolute majority in Parliament and is able to pass laws and regulations relatively unimpeded. This is what happened during the tenure of Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli (February 2018–July 2021). The Nepal Communist Party held sufficient seats in the Assembly to pass bills limiting dissent and proposing increasingly harsh penalties for journalists. Progress on some of these bills stalled when Oli’s government fell apart and he was replaced by Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba. Thus far, Deuba seems to have refrained from similarly harsh measures. Nonetheless, consecutive governments and party leaders have a history of cracking down on dissent and freedom of expression, both within and outside their party ranks, through legislation and regulations. Arguably, this is an attempt to retain authoritarian governance in response to instability. Indeed, Nepal’s immediate and long-term future as a democracy is dependent on how political elites respond to political instability. Thus, the government is engaging not in *de facto* disinformation but rather disinformation by withholding information and by active censorship. These moves are justified as a solution to “fake news” and anti-state narratives, but they actually undermine democracy and cement authoritarian power in a still-nascent democracy. In this respect, the government (regardless of the party in power) acts as a centralized actor in Nepal’s information disorder, targeting alleged “fake news” and controlling discourse in print and online media.

Although social media use among parties is growing (S. Giri 2017; Key Informant Interview 1), they lack dedicated experts or strategies for online outreach, relying instead on traditional methods such as door-to-door campaigning, rallies, and mass media outreach (Sedhai 2017). In fact, NDI (n.d.) notes that party expenditures are limited to printing campaign materials; other media costs do not often feature in party budgets. A journalist based in Nepal (key informant 1) commented that, with the upcoming general election in 2022, the major parties increasingly look to social media to organize their campaigns. Indications are already evident: in January 2021, following Prime Minister Oli’s dissolution of the House of Representatives, the Facebook group for the Nepal Communist Party renamed itself the NCP Cyber Sena (Army). The group went from mostly inactive to frequent posts and hundreds of new followers. Sedhai (2021) notes that the posts were mostly in favor of Oli; some encouraged party members to establish district-level cells and spread the party’s message. The man thought to be behind the turn to social media is Mahesh Basnet, an advisor to Oli and a former member of the Communist Youth wing. In speaking to the news website OnlineKhabar, Basnet commented that the Cyber Sena had been envisioned as “the messenger of the government to disseminate true messages to the people” while counteracting “fake news” against the party and its leader” (Sedhai 2021). The establishment of Cyber Sena and its work led to similar accounts of other political leaders and parties.

Although the government serves as a unified actor to label critical or dissenting speech as fake news and attempt to censor it through legislation and regulation, other forms of information disorder remain fragmented and decentralized. Most would be categorized as misinformation or could be viewed through the lens of commercial interests—news organizations being careless in checking and reporting sources in their haste to be the first to get the news out.

FOREIGN ACTORS

It is difficult to separate domestic and foreign contributors to information disorder in Nepal. This is because both India and China have an outsize influence on life and politics in the country, and it can be difficult to disentangle these foreign actors from domestic actors and events. Nepal shares a long and porous border with India, with extensive movement for work and tourism. Thus, events in India have a considerable influence on Nepali society. Nepal was a Hindu state until the fall of the monarchy in 2008, and India exercised considerable political power in Nepal, including mediating between the Maoists and other political leaders in 2005 (Adhikari 2020).²³

However, a border dispute in 2015 signaled a temporary decline of Indian influence in Nepal's politics and an expansion of ties with China.²⁴ Within Nepal, false claims around the dispute were few. One political commentator's inaccurate statement regarding Nepal's historical control of these territories was soon fact-checked (South Asia Check, July 29, 2021). Still, the political leadership capitalized on nationalistic fervor to gain support by manipulating information shared with citizens. For example, Prime Minister Oli claimed that India was conspiring with his opponents to remove him from power (Shekhar 2020) and blamed rising COVID-19 cases on India. Additionally, he expanded ties with China (S. Giri 2017; Adhikari 2020). Meanwhile, the Indian media's coverage of the territorial dispute was highly sensationalist, with "choreographed misinformation and hostility" (Pandey 2020). One offending comment was a reference to Prime Minister Oli being "honey-trapped by 'poison maiden' Chinese ambassador Hou Yanqi" (Purohit 2020).

In their pursuit of influence in the region, India and China undermine each other in various ways, particularly through the manipulation of information. At the height of the border dispute in 2015, Indian Chief of Army Staff M.M. Naravane suggested that Nepal was being goaded by China (Dixit November 2020). China has also used information operations through outlets such as the *Global Times*, a news website geared toward positive reportage on China that claims to eliminate the "'information deficit' toward China." In 2021, the site published an extensive report on India's perceived "intrusion" into Nepali affairs, linking it to the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party in India and its Hindu nationalist ideology through the Rashtiriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a right-wing volunteer paramilitary organization. According to the report, groups linked to the RSS work to educate young people about the Hindu religion in a bid to develop their influence in Nepal (Global Times 2021).

China's influence in Nepal has grown considerably in the last few years. While it engages in considerable soft diplomacy (journalist visits, student exchanges, city partnerships, and cultural exchanges) along with

²³ See Dixit November 2020 for a detailed analysis of India's role in Nepal: <https://www.nepalitimes.com/here-now/new-delhis-new-dealings-in-nepal/>

²⁴ Dixit November 2020 notes an attempt to spread the narrative that the blockade was the work of Madhesi activists. <https://www.nepalitimes.com/here-now/new-delhis-new-dealings-in-nepal/> This incident also led "hackers on both sides [to] exploit vulnerabilities on the websites of official agencies in each other's countries." (Dixit May 2020).

military and political visits and financial aid to Nepal (AidData 2021), its influence is most evident in the Nepali media's coverage of Tibet. In 2019, three journalists working at Nepal's Rastriya Samachar Samiti, the national news agency, translated into English and distributed a news item about the Dalai Lama (whom China regards as a separatist and exiled from Tibet in 1959) being discharged from a New Delhi hospital and returning to his home in Dharamshala (Giri 2019). For disseminating this item, Minister for Communications and Information Technology Gokul Baskota ordered an investigation of the journalists, apparently following an intervention by the Chinese Embassy in Kathmandu (Giri 2019).

In February 2020, The *Kathmandu Post* republished an opinion piece, "China's secrecy has made the coronavirus crisis much worse," written by an American and originally published in the *Korea Herald*. In a quick response on Twitter, Chinese Ambassador to Nepal Hou Yanqi stated that the piece, accompanied by an illustration of Mao Zedong in a surgical mask, "deliberately smeared the efforts of the Chinese government and people fighting against the new coronavirus pneumonia and even viciously attacked the political system of China" (Patrakar 2020). The Tweet stated that the *Post's* editor "has always been biased on China-related issues" and was a "parrot of some anti-China forces" (Patrakar 2020). The initial response to the content of the opinion piece and illustration was not surprising; Patrakar notes that Chinese embassies in Pakistan and other countries have issued similar statements. It was the attack on the editor which was unusual and worrisome (Patrakar 2020).

With the factionalization of the Nepal Communist Party in 2021, Nepal's ongoing fragmented political landscape makes it difficult for international players to identify allies. Although India and China may not directly manipulate information in Nepal, they have considerable influence on how information is used or misused in the country—including through their media and populace. As a result, the Nepali government and citizens are very aware of Indian and Chinese discourse on their internal affairs. However, the lack of clarity as to who exactly is responsible for information disorder makes it difficult to think in terms of actors and more useful to study disinformation in Nepal based on narratives and objectives.

3.2.3 TOOLS

The tools used to spread disinformation in Nepal are not complex. Rather than concerted campaigns that encourage information disorder, Nepal's political parties and government seem tied to simpler methods of information control. The government has thus far worked through official channels or uses party cadres to harass and intimidate members of the media in an effort to control the spread of information. Youth wings are a key means of mobilization for Nepal's parties, many of which engage in violence on their behalf (Shrestha and Jenkins, 2019). Social media has been instrumental in motivating young people to join youth wings and engage in violence (Shrestha and Jenkins 2019; Hutt and Onta 2017). In 2018, for example, student members of the ruling Communist Party threatened journalists affiliated with an online news website who had published an item about a Member of Parliament and the head of the student union (IFJ 2018–2019: 58).

That Nepal's parties are so far behind counterparts in other countries in using social media to spread a particular narrative is perhaps due to the fear of dissent that internet platforms can engender. Such dissent can endanger parties that are already fragile and prone to factionalization. As a result of varying priorities, Nepali parties lack aggressive and well-funded social media cells and strategies unlike those in India, China, and Pakistan. Also lacking is government control over the content on social media platforms. Although

the Nepali government attempts to regulate expression through legislation, it makes comparatively few requests for social media platforms to remove material. This is in sharp contrast to Pakistan and India, which use social media platforms' content regulation policies liberally, to their advantage. For example, Twitter's 2017 transparency report identifies the first instance of the Nepali government requesting information on accounts on its platform and requesting the removal of content (Twitter 2017). Between January 2012 and December 2020, the Nepali government made only 24 information requests and 25 content removal requests to Twitter. In comparison, respectively, Pakistan made 162 and 1,742 requests and India made 9,492 and 12,435 (Twitter Transparency)—despite the fact that internet and social media penetration in Nepal is higher than in Pakistan and comparable to India's. In 2020, 37 percent of Nepal's population had internet access (60 percent, compared to 28 percent in Pakistan and 45 percent in India; 44 percent used social media in Nepal compared to 21 percent in Pakistan and 32 percent in India (Kemp 2021). In effect, these numbers suggest that disinformation in Nepal is not as widespread or as institutionalized a problem as in Pakistan or India—yet. Sedhai (2017) notes that the use of social media by Nepali parties is growing as a result of their ability to reach large numbers of people otherwise and that disinformation or information manipulation online, on television, or in the press tends to be on a small scale and Nepali or regional fact checking organizations can often easily debunk it. However, retractions are rare and fact checks are less likely to go as viral than the original news items.

However, it soon becomes evident that the Nepali government has sought to manipulate information internally through intimidation and by withholding information. In 2019, the Oli government began to withhold decisions by the Council of Ministers from the media, fearing criticism and reversals in the courts. Instead, Minister for Communication and Information Technology Gokul Prasad Baskota began to speak at press conferences about some government decisions and warned private media organizations to consider their “investment and their jobs while writing news stories that are unfavorable to the government” (IFJ 2018-19: 59). The IFJ report (2018–2019: 59) claims that Baskota also said that “[the] media should not forget that the government is the main source of news as well as advertising revenue.” Baskota has a history of intimidating journalists. For example, in 2018, a program on the state network, Nepal Television was taken off air after the host quizzed Baskota about his properties (IFJ 2018–2019: 59). In April 2021, the home and office of Babin Sharma, a journalist affiliated with the online news website Ujyaalo News Network was raided in retaliation for posting a news story “alleging a secret agreement involving Nepal's prime minister and a foreign official,” which the “authorities” claimed was “fake news” (CIVICUS 2021). In May 2021, the editors of two news websites published an item about a meeting between the Prime Minister and the Chief Justice. They were summoned to the Supreme Court to name their sources and apologize for what the justices referred to as “baseless news” (CIVICUS 2021). State authorities' use of the language of information manipulation, and its weaponization against journalists, is a growing feature of media space and regulation in developing democracies such as Nepal. For instance, at the 49th Davos meeting, then-Prime Minister Oli stated (IFJ 2018–2019: 59), “In the name of press freedom, if somebody gives false news and hurts others and damages another's family life, prestige, and business, then it is not good.”

Arguably, the roots of such intimidation tactics lie in Nepal's authoritarian past and prior attempts to censor the press. The Printing Press and Publications Act 2048 (1991–1992) banned the government from confiscating or censoring materials from any registered press, but the Nepali media continued to self-censor on the basis of “much older codes of deference and secrecy and by the insistence of the powerful

that there were still certain ‘things that should not be said’...and certain questions that could not be asked” (Hutt 2006: 362). Equally, the media remained bound by the 1990 Constitution, which included provisions that the monarch could not be questioned in court and that no aspect of the monarch’s or his family’s conduct could be discussed in Parliament. In November 2001, King Gyanendra declared an emergency following Maoist attacks across the country and mandated the Terrorism and Destructive Activities (Control and Punishment) Ordinance, which effectively defined journalists as terrorist accomplices (Hutt 2006: 375). The Royal Nepali Army required that all reports on its activities first be vetted by its news department, and the Ministry of Information and Communication published a list of items that could not be included in broadcasts or publications (Hutt 2006: 376 provides the full list). The press fell in line, acknowledging the extraordinary circumstances that had led to the declaration of the emergency and the temporary nature of the restrictions. Intimidation of journalists continued whenever state institutions or actors were criticized; to prevent the spread of dissenting ideas beyond Kathmandu, targeting was more likely for those writing in local languages and in smaller publications (Hutt 2006). Hutt (2006: 380) notes that the emergency brought investigative journalism, “which did not have very deep roots in Nepal,” to an end. Arguably, Nepal’s press may still not be fully recovered, continuing to engage in “a process of continual, almost daily, negotiation between the commercial interests of proprietors, the tolerance or intolerance of the state authorities and the sanctions they are prepared to apply, the readership’s demands and expectations, and journalistic integrity and competence” (Hutt 2006: 389).

It is critical to assess informational manipulation as it is deployed in Nepal, as well as the potential for its further (and expanding) misuse. Social media analysis by the Local Interventions Group during the 2019 by-elections found that, although most online posts were used for campaigning, small percentages of posts spread disinformation or misinformation in the localities studied: “7.7% in Kaski, 5.4% in Adarsha Doti, 3.6% in Dharan, and 3.3% in Bhaktapur.” Certainly, there is sufficient concern for the Election Commission of Nepal to have developed a code of conduct for online campaigning during elections and to have initiated numerous outreach activities using social media (ECN 2021). However, the Election Observation Committee Nepal (EOC–Nepal 2017: 49) report on election finance notes that monitoring of social media campaigns is lacking, and code violations are common: “candidates used biased and misleading information to attack opponents.”

3.2.4 NARRATIVES

For the most part, disinformation in Nepal lacks the organizational structure to perpetuate a consistent message or campaign. Instead, disinformation in the country is channeled through disparate actors and is designed to amplify or exacerbate existing cleavages (political or social) in society—for example, religious differences among the country’s Hindu, Muslim, and Christian communities and challenges to the secular Constitution. Disinformation spread along these lines further entrenches the position of different camps on a particular issue and the potential for weaponization as these schisms become increasingly politically salient.

RELIGION AND COMMUNITY RELATIONS

For some, the increasing “saffronization” of politics (that is, the spread of right-wing Hindu nationalism) reflects the pattern of politics in India and is indicative of a threat to the secularism and federalism that underpin the constitutional state of Nepal (Giri 2021). For instance, although the Constitution of 2015

declares Nepal a secular state, Giri (2021) notes that now former Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli made a number of overt references to Hinduism and its roots in Nepal while he was in office. Through the growth in the Hindu movement over the past few years, community relations have become increasingly charged and susceptible to disinformation and information manipulation, especially under the strain of the COVID-19 pandemic. The most frequently quoted example of such manipulation and the threat it poses to community relations is an incident that took place in April 2021. Two Muslim women in Janakpur mistakenly dropped some currency notes while walking in the street. A CCTV video of this event soon circulated on social media, along with allegations that the women had COVID-19 and had spat on the notes to spread the disease (Aryal 2021). The women were innocent and tested negative for COVID-19 when they were detained, but their Muslim identity was what made the news spread like wildfire (Aryal 2021). This was only one in a surge of Islamophobic incidents in Nepal following a Tablighi Jamaat²⁵ gathering in February 2021 when 13 men, mostly Indian Muslims, tested positive in Saptari. The incident led to an allegation that the men had hidden in the mosque (Aryal 2021) with the intention of spreading the virus. There has been speculation in Nepal and India that Muslims are spreading the virus (The Global State of Democracy 2020), engaging in “corona jihad,” and deploying the virus as a “suicide bomb” (Aryal 2021). Aryal (2021) quotes a journalist from Rautahat as saying,

“I have not reported on these stories directly, but I know that Muslims from India and other countries are hiding in Nepali mosques,” said Patel, who’s shared a number of unverified reports about Muslims on his social media profile. “This is permitted because the chief minister of Province 2 is Muslim.”

The problem goes beyond targeting the Muslim community. In 2021, the World Evangelical Alliance wrote to the UN Human Rights Council to demand action against “ideological and identity-based disinformation promoted by Hindu nationalist groups in India and Nepal” with the aim of harming “religious minority groups, particularly local Christians” (Evangelical Focus, June 23, 2021). One incident related in the report is of a doctored document attributed to two Nepali Christian organizations, depicting them as promoting “ethnic divisions to gain converts.” Although the story was debunked, the government took no action against the perpetrators, or contacted the two organizations that had been falsely accused (Evangelical Focus, June 23, 2021).

POLITICAL

Where information disorder has a centralized source—such as a government—the objective is to both discredit (and thereby destabilize) democracy and strengthen authoritarianism. The aim is not to dismantle the democratic structure that brought the government to power but rather to emphasize the custodial role of the ruling party and its leadership in knowing what is best for citizens, repeatedly emphasize the official narrative and curtail freedom of expression to contain challenges to that narrative. This is particularly important in light of the fact that political elites are still interpreting Nepal’s Constitution, which was passed in 2015. Therefore, elites put forward interpretations that favor them, regardless of whether they match the intent of the Constituent Assembly. Chaulagain and Shrestha (2021) make such an argument with regard to Prime Minister Oli’s attempt to dissolve the House of Representatives in December 2020 and his comments that the Supreme Court does not have jurisdiction to determine the fate of the House. They contend, “Oli is simply engaging in a disinformation campaign when he claims that

²⁵ An Islamic proselytizing movement with a presence across the world and annual gatherings of members in various countries.

the constitutional practice in Nepal is that the court does not intervene in political matters,” suggesting that he used disinformation regarding constitutional articles to buttress his own position (Chaulagain and Shrestha 2021). It is important to note that this seems to have been an individual attempt by the then-Prime Minister to manipulate information for his own ends, without any apparent coordinated activity with the government or his own party to perpetuate his claims.

As a pawn trapped between two major powers, Nepal, through political leaders like Oli, have used disputes or alliances with neighboring countries to manage dissent within their parties and manipulate public opinion. For instance, in 2020 as relations with India slowly began to thaw, Indian intelligence head Samanant Goel made a surprise trip to Kathmandu, apparently with the intent to mend Indian-Nepali ties and “address the perception spread by India’s jingoistic media that Nepal is drifting into the Chinese orbit” (*Nepali Times* editorial, October 28, 2020). Prime Minister Oli used this incident to foster suspicion within his own party, refusing to clarify whether the visit was official or personal (*Nepali Times* editorial, October 28, 2020; Dixit 2020).

The lack of coordination or strategy in information manipulation can change quite rapidly. Over the past few years, Nepal’s political parties have set up local social media cells in addition to accounts for districts and for prominent party leaders (Sedhai 2021) that are used to attack and troll critics (Paudel, September 14, 2021; Jha and Ghimire 2019: 317). Sedhai (2021) notes the use of the Nepal Communist Party’s Cyber Sena Facebook account to spread disinformation about political opponents, including an accusation of misappropriation of party funds. Although such accounts exist on multiple platforms (Twitter, Facebook), they are underutilized, and there is no coherent strategy to build on this network. A journalist based in Nepal (key informant 1) sees this changing over the next few months, since the pandemic has brought more people online and changed how people interact. Online campaigning and voter outreach will be significant in the 2022 election campaign, and the Election Commission of Nepal needs to do more to be prepared for it (key Informant Interview 1).²⁶

DISASTERS

Information manipulation is a problem in disaster zones the world over. Nepal is particularly susceptible to natural disasters such as earthquakes and flooding. In emergency situations, false information is easily spread, often by well-meaning people. The 2015 earthquake led to extensive false information, images, and videos circulating online.²⁷ In 2021, following flooding in Sindhupalchowk district, photos and videos began circulating on social media purporting to show the devastation. *South Asia Check* (June 18, 2021) found that some images were from previous years and other districts. Similarly, some photos of wildfires posted in March 2021 were from other countries— the US, Canada, and Indonesia (*South Asia Check*, March 31, 2021).

Instances of violence are also ripe for information manipulation. Bhrikuti Rai (2015) notes that the race to be the first to report such news results in the sharing of misleading images and details. In August 2015, a

²⁶ For more on concerns in Nepal on the 2022 election, see the Consolidated Report on the World Press Freedom Day 2019—Media for Democracy and Peace—Journalism and Election in the Age of the Internet. <https://nepal.ec-undp-electoralassistance.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/16/2019/06/ec-undp-jtf-nepal-wpfd-final-report-20190613.pdf>

²⁷ Nettikkara collates instances of such misinformation on BBC Trending. <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-32493556>; Nimmo writes about an image of two children that went viral. <https://www.southasia.com.au/2015/05/11/the-deceptive-and-fake-picture-of-the-victims-of-nepal-earthquake/>

number of people were killed in an attack in Tikapur municipality in Kailali district. Reports on the number of victims ranged from 6 to 21 (O.A. Rai 2015). On social media, an image of a man on fire gained particular traction. However, *South Asia Check* found that the photo was taken from a US website (B. Rai 2015). Other graphic images were also shared on social media, many from other parts of the world, and some groups claimed hundreds of fatalities when the reality was quite different (B. Rai 2015).

COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic led to an exponential rise in misinformation online, particularly on Facebook, as more people turned to social media amid lockdowns. The exposure of Nepali internet users to disinformation seems quite high. In a survey on Twitter, the Centre for Media Research–Nepal found 95.5 percent of 542 respondents claimed to have received material that they considered disinformation—most through YouTube, followed by Facebook and Twitter (Rising Nepal, September 14, 2020). In addition to global misinformation about China creating the virus, Bill Gates implanting chips through vaccines, and other false narratives, Khatiwada (2020) notes that Facebook posts often exaggerated the number of infections and deaths. The Global State of Democracy Report 2020 (page 16) notes an increase in the intimidation of journalists in Nepal during the pandemic. In March 2020, a young man was arrested for spreading false information about COVID-19 (ANI 2020). In May 2020, the Nepal Press Council issued a press release stating that it had identified 136 instances of fake news on registered and unregistered media websites and had shut down 70 news sites (Subedi 2020). In April 2020, the council sought clarifications from 37 news sites for allegedly publishing disinformation regarding COVID-19 (Country Report on Human Rights Practices 2020).

From a governance standpoint, Nepal was struggling even before COVID-19 struck. However, the government’s management of the pandemic left much to be desired (Querenet 2020). Misinformation regarding COVID-19 came from the highest levels. In the face of widespread criticism of mismanagement of the pandemic response—including quarantine and testing protocols and the federal government’s refusal to take responsibility—the political leadership relied on nationalism, “denial, distraction, and blaming the marginalised” (Koirala and Ayers 2020) to cement its hold on power (Querenet 2020). In an address in May 2020, then Prime Minister Oli falsely claimed that the World Health Organization (WHO) had revised its risk assessment for Nepal. He also suggested that Nepal’s high number of cases was due to migrant workers returning from India, saying “the Indian virus looks more lethal than the Chinese or Italian virus” (Anil Giri, May 25, 2020). In another address, Oli” falsely credited the country’s efforts for testing and treatment with preventing a much larger epidemic” and claimed that some fatalities were only attributed to COVID-19 due to WHO protocols (Koirala and Ayers 2020).

GENDER AND LGBTQIA+

Women are a particular target of information disorder in Nepal and elsewhere in the world. An International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) report from 2021 notes that women journalists are vulnerable to “character assassination, body shaming, speculation about sexual links with prominent men” on social media. Women journalists face particular difficulties in doing their work in Nepal. Koirala (2020, 81) attributes this in part to the “social construction of ‘good women’ which pushes them to be ‘submissive and compromising’.” A woman journalist whom Koirala interviewed reported being threatened and stalked. Women journalists also reported that their bosses monitored their work more closely than that

of male reporters and often dismissed their ideas. Particularly at risk are women journalists from the Madhesi and Dalit communities, who face intersectional discrimination. Harassment forces women from online spaces even as the digital world expands. A 2019 Local interventions Group study of social media engagement during by-elections found that women's presence on social media platforms was just 10 percent of men's.

Nepal's LGBTQIA+ community has made considerable progress in winning rights and recognition from the state, and the community continues to advocate for additional legislation to cement and enhance its rights. Nonetheless, the community faces misconceptions and misinformation around issues such as gender identity and expression, AIDS transmission, and relationships (Bhandari 2017). Furthermore, many members of the community experience intersectional inequalities and harassment along caste or ethnic lines, exacerbated by the anonymity of online spaces.

3.2.5 CAUSES

A number of institutional, commercial, societal, and political factors make Nepal susceptible to information disorder.

INSTITUTIONAL

Years of turmoil have eroded citizens' trust in political parties or political elites. Since 2006, Nepal has seen significant instability as a result of elite infighting, further alienating citizens. Therefore, information disorder in its various forms is likely to have considerable traction among citizens. At the same time, the pursuit of power has led to considerable information manipulation by ruling elites and their challengers alike. This is particularly problematic considering the politicized nature of Nepal's media space.

COMMERCIAL

Information manipulation operations are not extensive in Nepal and therefore not particularly lucrative—yet. However, the growth and nature of the commercial media space has considerable influence on the potential for information disorder. Nepal's media liberalized in the 1990s following decades of rigid state control under the monarchy, becoming competitive with hundreds of newspapers and radio stations. Print journalism and radio expanded; Koirala (2020) notes that, by 2018, over 900 newspapers, over 1,000 online news sources, over 800 radio stations, and over 150 TV channels were operational. The liberalization of the media led to broadcasts and printing in an increasing number of languages, with different ethnic and caste groups represented (Greenland and Wilmore 2017; Hutt 2006).

However, in the absence of state protection for community initiatives, competition for scarce resources has been intense (including for international aid funding), and political patronage and interference has grown (Greenland and Wilmore 2017). Civil society groups, journalists, press unions, and media groups in Nepal are often closely affiliated with particular political parties, compromising their independence (Wild and Subedi 2010; Pradhan 2021; Acharya n.d.). The Federation of Nepali Journalists is divided along political lines as well; during elections to the body in 2021, members were divided along party lines reflecting national politics (Pradhan 2021). The politicization of the Nepali media is also due to the affiliation of journalist unions with political parties. In addition, corporate interests evidently influence the

reporting of media organizations and journalists. This is particularly the case when newspapers rely on advertising. Jha and Ghimire (2019) point out that there is considerable opacity as to media ownership, making it difficult to establish channels of accountability and trace political connections.

Furthermore, the state has a complex role with regard to the media in Nepal. It owns the Gorkhapatra Corporation, which in turn owns newspapers and magazines, mainstream television and radio channels, and the National News Agency. However, the state also regulates all media through the Press Council of Nepal. Furthermore, the government is the main funding source for the media, particularly for smaller media houses (Acharya n.d.). Funding through the Public Welfare Advertising scheme is determined by ratings assigned to media houses by the Press Council of Nepal, which also manages the Journalist Welfare Fund and funding for media outlets in rural parts of the country (Acharya n.d.).

Despite longstanding government controls on the media—for instance, through the Press Council—recent proposals have been made to further regulate speech in Nepal, and press freedom remains limited due to state censorship. The IFJ (2018–2019) notes, and Key Informant Interview 5 observed, that the previous government under Prime Minister Oli benefited from a two-thirds majority in Parliament and was thus able to sideline the freedom of the press. This majority also enabled Oli and his government to pass a number of laws curtailing freedom of expression in Nepal in 2018 and 2019 (see Section 3.2.6).

The growth of online news websites pairs with a growing proportion of the population going online and using social media, especially since the start of the pandemic. However, the increase in internet users is not matched by greater digital literacy; nor are users sufficiently able to distinguish fake news from the real thing. Rijal and Tacchi (2013) suggest that poor planning and business insight led to the mushrooming of media companies that join larger networks when they cannot cover operational costs. This leads to centralization of content, shutting out indigenous voices.

Subedi (2020) argues that the rise of social media and online news websites led to a race for content and relevance; as a result, in creating news content, many capitalize on existing biases, leading to the rapid spread of manipulated information. These news sites have proliferated, operating with little editorial oversight or other checks and balances. A study by Media Action Nepal (2021) of 49,051 news stories during the first three months of the COVID-19 lockdown in Nepal found that 3.90 percent were providing “false or misleading information” divided evenly between online news websites and daily newspapers. About one-third of this material was traced to just one website, Khabarhub.com. However, the study labeled the vast majority of these items as misleading not because of disinformation or misinformation, but misleading news sources (95.71 percent) with the majority not mentioning a source at all. The study labeled only 19 items as misinformation. Some were due to a misleading headline; in one case, the *Nagarik* daily newspaper published an item under the headline “Severe symptoms seen in infected people coming from abroad” without any evidence (Media Action Nepal 2021, 15). Disinformation was identified in 23 news items. However, the items that the study discusses were mainly mismatches between headlines and the content of the news item rather than the publication of fake news.

SOCIETAL

From a societal standpoint, there are three points of significance about information disorder in Nepal. These are citizens’ distrust in official narratives offered by the state, a pattern of deference to authority,

and the manipulation of information to exacerbate existing social cleavages along ethnic, linguistic, caste, religious, and gender lines.

DISTRUST IN OFFICIAL NARRATIVES

Information manipulation is sometimes rooted in rumors or conspiracy theories. Like misinformation, rumors occur when people lack knowledge or evidence but believe something because it fits their preconceived notions. If a narrative can be built from a collection of rumors, a conspiracy theory results. Rumors spread particularly at times of crisis—for example, earthquakes or the COVID-19 pandemic, while conspiracy theories are regarded as common where trust is low, and a sense of exclusion is widespread (Hutt 2017). Hutt uses the massacre of Nepal’s royal family on June 1, 2001, to explore rumors and conspiracy theories. Both Hutt (2017) and Hachhethu (2007) suggest that questions and alternative theories about what happened in the palace that night are rooted in the public’s mistrust of the official narrative. Aspects of information disorder that emerge from decentralized sources likely stem from a similar imperative—the desire to find an explanation where the official one is considered unsatisfactory or does not exist. This is particularly relevant to a country that experiences frequent natural disasters to which the government has failed to respond adequately. Perhaps the pandemic is the best example. In the absence of information and the government’s slow response, misinformation spreads quickly as citizens attempt to make sense of the situation.

DEFERENCE TO AUTHORITY

Koirala (2020) finds that none of the journalists she interviewed received orders from their organizations’ leadership as to what (or what not) to report. Journalists were also not clear on editorial policies, and Koirala (2020: 77) infers that they therefore relied on “their own judgement in ‘critical issues’.” However, journalists were well aware of “silent rules” that emerge partly from experience; one said, “I could quickly grasp how certain issues were handled. The placement of certain stories and omitting of certain words were some of the actions that made me familiar with the “norms” (Koirala 2020: 78), or instruction; another journalist alluded to vague instructions such as “to balance the news” (Koirala 2020: 78).

But rules around what can and cannot be written or spoken about are linked in part to Nepali attitudes about questioning authority. For instance, Hutt (2006) explores the media’s self-censorship following the massacre of the royal family and the declaration of a national emergency. He notes that many newspapers did not report on the massacre the following morning, quoting a media analyst citing “the dangers [involved in reporting it]” (Hutt 2006: 368), and a failure to properly “interrogate” the palace’s account of that night (Hutt 2006: 372). Likewise, Hutt (2006: 373) notes that the press did not ask probing questions about the Royal Nepali Army to avoid the appearance of challenging their loyalties. Journalists regularly self-censor in Nepal to survive intimidation, harassment, and violence (Jha and Ghimire 2019: 315).

SOCIAL CLEAVAGES

The tension between religious and ethnic identities has defined the Nepali political and social sphere since 1990 (Hachhethu 2007). The monarchy’s divine right to rule was linked to its Hindu identity; other groups responded by emphasizing their own ethnic identities and pushing for secular rule. Although the adoption of a secular constitution is conceivably a victory for secular forces, that victory remains both contentious

and fragile. With the rise of Hindutva forces in India and their influence in Nepal, the tension between religious and ethnic identities remains a major fault line. Jha (2021) writes that government mismanagement and political infighting have led to “people’s disenchantment with the present federal republican system,” with demands for a return to a Hindu state and a monarchy increasing.

GREAT POWER COMPETITION

As a small, landlocked country, Nepal often is caught between the attempts of India and China at informational diplomacy and control. Each power seeks to contain the others’ influence in Nepal, leaving it in a precarious position where it is difficult to determine which country to trust. With the increasing significance of the Indo-Pacific region, the United States seems to be seeking to expand its influence in the region.

THE UNITED STATES AND THE MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE COMPACT

Conceivably to counter China’s influence in the region, the United States signed the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) Compact with Nepal in 2017. The agreement committed \$500 million in grants for energy and infrastructure projects (Ghimire January 9, 2020) that had been under discussion since 2011 (Rana 2021). Implementation of the compact has been delayed due to questions from Nepal’s political parties regarding intellectual property rights, the compact’s connections to US security objectives through the Indo-Pacific Strategy²⁸ and concerns over the primacy of Nepal’s laws with regard to the planned projects. In response to concerns expressed by Nepal’s political leadership, MCC’s vice president claimed, “There is information, misinformation, and disinformation about the MCC Nepal Compact,” which has led to it becoming “hugely politicised” (Shrestha September 13, 2021). Tribhuvan University Professor Khadga KC commented, “The MCC actually has emerged as a political weapon for some parties” (Shrestha September 13, 2021). In the public imagination, the MCC has come to symbolize politicians’ sale of Nepal and an American takeover of the country (Rana 2021).

In turn, the Chinese are concerned about expanding US influence in Nepal—at China’s border—through the MCC. This is evident in a series of articles in Chinese that raise what they claim to be Nepali concerns about the MCC. The articles claim that the US is trying to take over Nepal and that Nepali civil society is resisting this takeover by protesting against the MCC.²⁹ Comments on these articles, also in Chinese, contrast China’s development activities in countries like Tanzania with the US’ role in the situation in Afghanistan to warn against involvement in the MCC.³⁰

3.2.6 CONSEQUENCES

While information disorder may be nascent in Nepal, alarm bells are already signaling its potential damage to an already fragile democratic republic. Civil society organizations (CSOs) working in this space—checking facts, analyzing media, conducting journalism—all note the growing pressure of misinformation and disinformation in the political and social spheres, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Political

²⁸ The US Embassy in Nepal refuted this charge and provided an explainer on the MCC. <https://np.usembassy.gov/mcc-in-nepal-top-ten-facts/>

²⁹ The articles are collated and translated in a Twitter thread by @r_rajbhandari and can be accessed at https://twitter.com/r_rajbhandari/status/1434349817954664448?s=20

³⁰ Ibid.

parties have begun to capitalize on citizens' expanded internet and social media access, slowly developing troll armies to buttress their support and harass opponents. Although these efforts remain relatively rudimentary, the government has weaponized information disorder in a different manner. The Oli government, with an absolute majority in Parliament, sought to suppress the kind of free expression enabled by the internet through a range of regulatory and legislative measures. These moves have slowed under Prime Minister Deuba, but the potential for governments to limit dissenting speech remains a cause for concern in the new secular federal democratic republic.

In 2018, as a consequence of the adoption of Nepal's new Constitution in 2015, the federal government replaced its Civil Code with a new Penal Code and Criminal Code, with legislators developing laws to interpret constitutional provisions (Gurubacharya 2018; IFJ 2018–2019). While the Constitution includes a provision guaranteeing citizens freedom of expression, the new codes on civil and criminal penalties are regarded as violating those rights by human rights organizations and journalists. For example, they criminalize the publication of information on public figures, such as government officials; recording or taking photographs without express official permission; satirical commentary; and criticism of the president or legislators. The codes also allow for 40 days detention while charges are investigated—a provision that can easily be used to intimidate journalists. Additionally, the penalties proposed by the codes are regarded as excessive—three years in prison and a \$260 fine for defamation or violations of the codes' privacy provisions (Gurubacharya 2018). Although the government agreed to review the codes in consultation with media rights organizations, it is under no obligation to implement any recommendations resulting from this process. In the meantime, the codes remain in effect (Gurubacharya 2018).

In 2019, supplementing the new codes, the federal government proposed the Advertisement (Regulation) Bill, IT Bill, Media Council Bill, and Public Service Broadcasting Bill. All include harsh fines and jail terms for anyone criticizing the government, and the Media Council Bill enhanced the government's grip on the media (IFJ 2018–2019). These proposed bills build on the Electronic Transaction Act (2008), which limits free expression in the name of combating cybercrime (Adhikari 2020) and targets journalists in particular (Jha and Ghimire 2019). The Freedom Forum (2019) reported that 38 journalists were detained or arrested under the act in 2019. The government's position is that the Electronic Transaction Act and the new proposed bills are essential because, as the Chairman of the Development and Technology Committee Kalyani Kumari Khadka put it, “our society is going out of control” (Adhikari 2020).

The IT bill would require all social media platforms to register with the government and agree to ban any material on their platforms that negatively impact the country's “national unity” (Ilkka 2020) or promote ridicule or hate (Adhikari 2020). The bill also specifies heavy penalties for those posting such material on social media: a fine of one million to 1.5 million rupees and/or up to five years in jail. These penalties would be determined by a system of government tribunals operating in parallel to the courts. In addition, the Communist Party government proposed a Special Service Bill, which would empower the National Investigation Department to conduct investigations and collect materials without requiring a court order or warrant (Adhikari 2020). The emphasis on an undefined “national unity” appears in the other bills as well. For example, the Public Service Broadcasting bill proposes setting up a broadcasting company with the aim of “promoting nationalist, national unity and territorial integrity” (Ilkka 2020).

The Advertisement (Regulation) Act, passed in 2019, is a somewhat diluted version of the original bill with reduced penalties (Himalayan News Service 2019). The act regulates advertisements related to banned goods, obscenity, gambling, and anything deemed to “disturb national sovereignty, territorial integrity and cordial relations among federal agencies; defame Nepal’s national flag and national anthem, national figures and coat of arms; instigate sedition, defamation, crime and contempt of court; encourage gender discrimination and untouchability; use trademark, and patent, design and other industrial property without approval or permission from concerned owner” (Himalayan News Service 2019). The act also establishes a government Advertisement Board to review and regulate advertisements and empowers local and provincial governments to regulate advertisements within their territories. The Freedom Forum’s Annual Report (2019) notes that government regulation of advertisements places commercial media enterprises in crisis due to the significant opportunity for misuse by putting pressure on media groups.

Furthermore, Nepal’s federal system, introduced under the 2015 Constitution, places the development of media regulations under the federal, provincial, and local governments. The Freedom Forum (2019) and IFJ (2018–2019) note that provincial and local government regulations are not protective of freedom of expression, and the various regulations complicate the media landscape.

Finally, information manipulation risks potentially damaging consequences to the role of foreign powers in the region. Events in India and China have serious political and social consequences in Nepal that influence the quality of democracy in this nascent republic.

3.2.7 MITIGATION STRATEGIES

Observers in Nepal fear that the 2022 election will be a flashpoint for politicized information disorder to take hold. To preempt the potential damage to Nepal’s nascent and fragile constitutional democracy, CSOs have responded by setting up fact-checking organizations (South Asia Fact Check, Nepal Fact Check). However, these organizations are strapped for funds and frequently depend on external donors and funding. Some organizations monitor the media and government censorship (Media Action Nepal, Centre for Media Research, Freedom Forum, Martin Chautari). Many produce comprehensive annual reports, collating incidents from across the country. However, this space remains small, with some overlap across organizations.

Although Nepal has a vibrant media space, editorial policies, transparency, independence, and accountability tend to be lax, allowing for poor sourcing, misinformation, and other issues. At the same time, although the pandemic has rapidly expanded digital reach in Nepal, digital literacy remains poor. Initiatives to address these issues tend to be concentrated in Kathmandu, bypassing more rural regions where internet access and media reach are growing. In rural areas, a major issue is the use of local languages and the paucity of organizations and materials using those languages that can support local populations. Addressing gaps in media policies and practices and digital literacy is essential to enabling citizens to identify false or misleading information. Funding and support in these areas would be crucial to counter the potential impact of information disorder in Nepal.

Nepal has seen considerable turmoil and change in recent decades. The new Constitution promises citizens greater inclusion and representation through its federal model. In a country that is still largely rural, local governance is key to identifying the needs of those underrepresented or excluded by parties,

commercial entities, the media, and CSOs. In theory, greater inclusion will help build trust. This is an area to watch, and investment should be directed to ensuring that local governments are responsive to citizens. A well-established local government network can do much in local communities to counter the potential effects of information disorder. Furthermore, longstanding demands for transitional justice and improved governance must be a priority at all levels of government if the state is to strengthen its ties to citizens.

3.3 PAPUA NEW GUINEA

3.3.1 INTRODUCTION

La calomnie, monsieur! vous ne savez guère ce que vous dédaignez; j'ai vu les plus honnêtes gens près d'en être accablés. Croyez qu'il n'y a pas de plate méchanceté, pas d'horreurs, pas de conte absurde, qu'on ne fasse adopter aux oisifs d'une grande ville...

Calumny, sir! You little know what you scorn; I have seen the most honest people close to being overwhelmed by it. Believe me there is no base wickedness, no horrors, no absurd tale, which one can't spread among the idle in a big city...

Beaumarchais, Le Barbier de Seville (English translation by the author)

There is nothing new about disinformation. Beaumarchais wrote over 100 years before German traders first settled in what is now Papua New Guinea (PNG), but Dom Basile's proposed disinformation campaign would be immediately recognizable to a present-day strategist at a reputation management consultancy.

As a spy for the French government, running guns for the young United States, Beaumarchais may have had particular insight into governments' ability to change perceptions through the use of untruths and semi-truths.

PNG is an artificial colonial construct with a resource curse in spades. Gold, copper, tropical hardwoods, and liquid natural gas are plentiful. The Highlands of the main island, New Guinea, and the archipelagoes of New Britain and New Ireland have different cultures and colonial histories. Bougainville, which is ethnically distinct, has voted to secede, although discussions between the national government and the Autonomous Bougainville Authority are likely to be protracted, not least because of the massive environmentally and politically toxic Panguna copper mine.

PNG's only land border is with West Papua, a contested region of Muslim-majority Indonesia whose indigenous people share a great deal ethnically with their island neighbors. Two decades ago, indigenous West Papuan insurgents showed few signs of interest in a united New Guinea. This year, one exiled leader marked PNG's Independence Day by saying of the border, "One day this artificial line will fall like the Berlin Wall, bringing our people together once more" (ARP 2021).

PNG is a dysfunctional state. Governance is poor and service delivery almost nonexistent. Beyond the capital, Port Moresby, government education and health services are almost completely absent, with the gap filled by churches and multinational resource companies with social responsibility agendas. State spending on education is 1.9 percent of GDP, putting PNG 180th of 189 countries in the global league

table (CIA 2021). UNESCO reports that only 25 countries (23 in Africa) have lower literacy rates than PNG's 64 percent (UNESCO 2021). Health spending is a little higher at 2.4 percent (CIA 2021).

The dysfunctional state does have some benefits; since no ethnic group has a plurality, none can dominate, so PNG has been spared from authoritarianism and large-scale ethnic conflict. However, low-intensity intercommunal conflict is endemic. The ethnic diversity is remarkable, with over 800 languages in a population of 7.4 million spread over an area just larger than California. And “spread” is accurate: Among the many international league tables with PNG at or near the bottom is how urbanized countries are: PNG ranks 194th of 194 countries, with just 13.5 percent of the population living in urban centers. Nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of the land are forest despite the best efforts of logging companies (CIA 2021).

Partly because of the mountainous terrain, and partly due to the archipelagic geography—and partly, Papuans like to joke, due to the theft of aid money for roadbuilding, the capital is not linked to any of the country's next 10 largest population centers.

Since the state cannot deliver local services, it gives each district and region money in the form of Service Improvement Programs, with spending decided by local committees run by local politicians. Those programs are widely derided as a gift to corrupt politicians: more than 2.5 billion kina budgeted every year, or roughly \$10 million per Member of Parliament. Scrutiny is minimal, partly because it is culturally difficult to challenge the so-called “big men” who dominate public life.

Weak infrastructure also plagues the telecommunications industry. The dominant, privately owned mobile network, Digicel, claims 80 percent coverage but, even when working, most is 2G. As this report was being written, the sale of Digicel's Pacific operations to Australian telecom Telstra was announced. This deal may itself be an interesting case study on information manipulation. The Australian government is underwriting a deal which, at 1.3 billion Australian dollars is roughly the same as Australia's annual aid program to the Pacific. Yet Telstra tells its shareholders the only motive is profit. Since China Mobile was reportedly interested in buying Digicel, is Australia simply trying to block China? Or was the Australian government suckered into underwriting a deal that was always going to happen? (Pryke and Sora, 2021).

As in many developing countries, “feature phones” are popular. These come loaded with a few apps, usually including Facebook. As Osao (2016) points out, even illiterate people know how to click on the Facebook icon, although they may be unable to type a URL. PNG's Information Minister claimed earlier this year that about 11 percent of the population now use Facebook (National 2021).

Figures for mobile internet access are unexpectedly high—about 1 million mobile unique subscribers (GSMA 2019). One reason is that users share handsets (and prepaid data). Many who describe themselves as internet users in fact use only one or two social apps such as Facebook. A strong limiting factor is the lack of access to electricity: Less than 25 percent of the population have a reliable supply.

The traditional media are also weak (Australian Broadcasting Corporation—ABCID—2020). Low literacy and high distribution costs hamper the print media. A Malaysian conglomerate owns one of the two national dailies, and Rupert Murdoch's News Corps owns the other. The national broadcaster, the National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC), lacks the funds to keep transmitters running particularly for

the short-wave service that has, since the early days of radio broadcasting, been the most reliable way to get information to remote areas. Most commercial broadcasters target urban rather than rural audiences.

PNG's mountainous terrain impedes communication in multiple ways. None of the centralizing effects of, for example, media in official languages work in PNG. Shortwave radio signals do get everywhere but transmitting them is expensive and therefore inconsistent.

3.3.2 ACTORS

INTERNAL

Who spreads disinformation? Given that much of PNG's population lives without much contact with either traditional or social media, how does information—whether accurate or not—spread?

The answer is, in part, through trusted community members returning from outside: church pastors and elders, students, and others. Thus community transmission of misinformation (and good information), is through a small number of “influencers.” Each time an aid agency runs a workshop in Port Moresby or another center, such as Lae, the flow of both good information and misinformation probably increases in rural areas as both social media materials and physical media are taken home and participants remain subscribed to circulation lists. As discussed below, health workers are both actors and influencers in this respect.

Politicians also link distant communities with Port Moresby. Particularly in a period when the election campaign is not yet legally underway, donations from Service Improvement Program funds are “weaponized” to create favorable media coverage which then finds its way into social media.³¹

Despite the difficulties of travel and communication, urban dwellers keep in close touch and return to their villages when they can. Particularly in the case of students, these people will have had access to the mainstream media which, despite poor resources, have mostly reported responsibly on COVID-19 issues. Thus, these urban dwellers will have been exposed to both pro- and anti-vaccination messaging.

PNG is an overwhelmingly Christian country. Figures from the 2011 census suggest that two-thirds of the population are Protestant and a quarter are Catholic. Church leaders can be considered as falling into two distinct categories, mainstream and alternative. Catholic, Lutheran, and Anglican leaders have come together to promote vaccination and other health messaging related to COVID-19. These churches provide much of the health care in rural areas that government services do not reach. However, as in many parts of the Pacific, there are a myriad of small Christian groups. Some consist of a single congregation, but some are linked with evangelical groups elsewhere, particularly in the United States. PNG is thus affected by US culture wars; if a US religious group puts out COVID-related disinformation, affiliated pastors will likely see this material and will naturally tend to accept the word of the mother church leaders even if the original posting has a clearly local (US) aim.

³¹ Anonymous interview

PNG is not alone in being affected by the anti-vaccination campaigns of US evangelical groups. Carroll et al. (2021) cite Australian indigenous leaders as one reason for the markedly lower uptake of vaccines among indigenous Australians.

“[T]here is very disturbing targeted misinformation from religious groups, emanating from the United States and spread by local people in Australia—white people getting into Aboriginal communities.”

This suggests that the effect in the Pacific may not be unplanned collateral damage as suggested in PNG and Fiji, where researchers also found a marked impact from US evangelical groups. Kant, Varea, and Titifanue (2021) place the blame very clearly on the influence of US groups in Fiji:

“United States-based churches and evangelical ministries with large online followings—as well as Christian influencers on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter and YouTube—have been making false claims that vaccines contain microchips that the world governments wished their citizens to have. Additionally, these evangelical influencers are construing associations between vaccine ingredients and demonic or paganistic potions. Insinuations were also made about how coronavirus vaccines and masks contained or herald the ‘mark of the beast.’ This is a reference to an apocalyptic passage (Chapter 13) from the Book of Revelation that suggests that the Antichrist will test Christians by making them accept a mark on their foreheads or right hand to buy or sell.”

Another group of local influencers spreading misinformation about vaccines is less predictable and more interesting—local health workers. This is counter-intuitive but illustrates the difficult situation of trained individuals operating with limited resources at a distance from their support network. Surveys of health workers, such as a set of longitudinal studies by the Burnet Institute and the Papua New Guinea Institute for Medical Research (PNGIMR) consistently find that many share hesitancy about vaccines that they are expected to counter. Although at first glance surprising, this is actually a fairly logical reaction to a complex situation. For years, visiting health professionals have explained that there are no vaccines for many of the major killers such as malaria or HIV because of the cost and time needed to develop them (Lisa Davidson, Burnet Institute, Zoom call, September 8, 2021). Many struggle to understand messages about the pandemic and vaccines. As a result, only about one in four health workers have been vaccinated (Wilson 2021). The lack of trust in a fast-tracked vaccine is fertile ground for conspiracy theories.

Much of the COVID-related misinformation that circulates in PNG comes from a surprisingly small number of accounts: ABCID research found that only 112 accounts could be identified as the originators for 20 percent of posts spreading misinformation. Whether these accounts are organized together in any way is harder to determine (Lowy Institute 2021).

EXTERNAL

There is little sign so far of PNG being targeted by large-scale targeted campaigns of the sort seen in other countries—especially around election campaigns—although of course many such posts may appear in the feeds of PNG web users. The Oxford University Internet Institute recently reported that its researchers had uncovered a network of 500 China-linked inauthentic accounts amplifying COVID misinformation.

However, there is a steady drumbeat of anti-West articles about PNG in, for example, the English language “jingoistic tabloid” (as *The Economist* describes it), *The Global Times*, an offshoot of the Chinese Communist Party's flagship *People's Daily* newspaper, which assert China's benevolence while usually attacking Australia. While not necessarily inaccurate, such articles (18 in 2021 through October 19) use biased language in a way that undermines any claim to serious journalism (see Section 3.3.3 Tools).

The involvement of overseas commercial entities such as logging companies in election campaigns has long predated social media. Many observers assume some political parties are thought to benefit from funding from such groups. To date, this does not seem to extend beyond vested interests in the extractive industries to state-backed actors. The most prominent outside government that takes a direct interest in PNG is Australia.

3.3.3 TOOLS

In the absence of evidence of concerted external disinformation campaigns targeting PNG (which does not equate to evidence of absence) it appears that, for the most part, attempts to mislead are *ad hoc* and opportunistic, whether over COVID, witchcraft, corruption, or other issues. Misleading posts on social media may have an immediate impact in urban areas, see 3.3.4 below, but take longer to arrive in rural areas.

Members of Parliament use Facebook rather amateurishly; they build followings through paid advertising and, in many cases, post irregularly. Politicians are so widely distrusted and derided that they seem not to be plausible influencers, for good or for ill.

A common method for undermining responsible online stories is to post responses, including abuse, in comments. The deliberate negativization of reported facts as a means of promoting information disorder is exemplified in the following:

“The Global Times has learned exclusively from sources that Australia has been racking its brain to undermine China's vaccine cooperation with Pacific Island countries. For example, it has planted several ‘consultants’ in the national epidemic prevention center in Papua New Guinea and manipulated the country's policies in the fight against COVID-19. Under Australia's colonial-style dominance, some of Papua New Guinea's new prevention policies target Chinese” (Xiaoling and Liu, 2021).

The statements are not necessarily wrong, but the tone is aggressive: “learned exclusively from sources” would be considered insufficient in most Anglosphere media; Australian advisers in several ministries are responsible for encouraging effective use of resources. And if PNG were not identifying the sizable Chinese community as a vulnerable group toward which information should be targeted, its advisers would be culpable. However, some Anglosphere coverage of China uses similar techniques—if usually slightly more subtly—to discredit China. It is also worth remembering that, in the current context, such articles are not aimed specifically at a PNG readership.

It is also worth asking whether the platforms used to disseminate equivocal material matter in a PNG context where Facebook is far and away the most commonly used. Although PNG was not part of their 17-country research, Theocharis et al. (2021) suggest a correlation between widespread use of Facebook

and belief in conspiracy theories around COVID-19. This may be because Facebook tends to be seen as a broadcast platform, at least in PNG. However, the authors point out this may be true only in countries with an existing culture of belief in conspiracy theories—in other words, they find no causality. Their model contrasts this finding with Twitter, which, they say, can slightly but significantly reduce belief in conspiracy theories, and with YouTube and WhatsApp, which tend to increase such beliefs. Given PNG's low levels of literacy, these more visual platforms may have increased impact, thus tending to reinforce such beliefs.

3.3.4 NARRATIVES

At a casual glance, PNG's online scene looks fairly similar to that in other developing countries. Recent memes include Miss PNG being criticized for posting a video of herself twerking (Post Courier 2021); and naturally there are politicians trying to demonstrate their effectiveness in winning funds for their constituents and/or denying allegations of corruption. However, dig deeper and things look rather less familiar.

It is all too easy to forget, in the relatively westernized capital, Port Moresby, that PNG includes areas inhabited by tribes who first encountered visitors from the outside world within the lifetimes of many people still alive in wealthier parts of the world. In a recent blog, an Australian doctor describes taking COVID-19 vaccines to the Biami people who live a week's walk from the provincial center and who remained uncontacted into the 1960s. It is possible that the last Biami who recalled that first encounter has now died, but most of the community will have heard about it directly from witnesses (McCall, 2021).

Over the last year plus, COVID-19 has dominated social media and thus explorations of information disorder, and we will explore these narratives below. But, first, no look at PNG can escape questions of gender and gender violence.

PNG's statistics and anecdotes are horrifying; 75 percent of women report having been physically attacked; 40 percent of men admit to having raped a woman who was not their wife. PNG is tied for last with two other countries for the number of women in the national Parliament—zero (out of 111 seats in PNG) (Interparliamentary Union 2021).

Accusations of witchcraft are common—not as a term of abuse but a popularly understood explanation for a calamity such as illness or death. Whether on social media or spoken aloud when a community is grieving and angry, such an accusation can all too often lead to violence. An accused person will often be someone marginalized whether through sexuality, age, or lifestyle. The violence is often lethal. One estimate is that 200 women are killed each year for suspicion of being witches (Campbell 2019). It is likely that this also affects LGBTQIA+ people in a country where male homosexual activity is still illegal.

Nor are outbreaks of violence based on barely credible hearsay found only in remote communities. Some three years ago, there was a particularly gruesome example in Port Moresby of the pernicious effect of spreading false information. Rumors circulated that a gang was abducting people and harvesting their organs for sale to foreigners. Then word went around that some gang members had been arrested. People gathered at the police station where they were supposedly being held, and a riot ensued (Transparency International 2021).

Of course, more familiar sorts of allegations are also common online and elsewhere. The easy opportunities for corruption in public life provide incentives to be elected or re-elected, and the mid-2022 parliamentary elections are likely to follow the usual pattern of accusation and counter-accusation. However, PNG politicians are avid litigants. In September 2021, State Enterprises Minister William Duma was awarded undisclosed damages and 250,000 Australian dollars in costs against the *Australian Financial Review* newspaper over corruption allegations it failed to prove. This will be a warning to temper accusations. And in Mr. Duma's view, PNG's reputation was also cleared: "It demonstrates that not all Papua New Guineans are corrupt, and that PNG is not a corruption-riddled country as it has been portrayed by the international media," he was quoted in the Malaysian conglomerate-owned newspaper (Zarriga 2021).

Transparency International's local chapter reports little sign of outright character assassination or "coordinated or strategic" use of social media to spread disinformation in the run-up to the election, despite speculative comment (Yuambari Haihui, Transparency International PNG, Zoom conversation, September 29, 2021).

The narratives around COVID-19 are mostly similar to those in other parts of the world – the safety of vaccines, the reality of the disease, the conspiracies about its origin and purpose, and so on. And much research effort has gone into tracking and understanding this. The ABCID International Development department has undertaken three exercises to track misinformation related to COVID-19 on social media. It reports that conspiracy theories linking the pandemic to the imposition by an elite of a new world order were circulating as early as May and June 2020. From January to April 2021, ABC looked at almost 37,000 social media posts, noting that the great majority are found in the comments section behind a post on a media website rather than in the original post. Thus, comments on stories in the mainstream media that aimed to correct misinformation were often "captured" by those that the original sought to correct (ABC Lowy).

ABCID found that one of the more widespread conspiracy theories was that foreign governments, WHO, and drug companies were testing vaccines on PNG people. Many of those posts referenced articles in established media that had debunked the theories. However, the conspiracists decontextualized the quotations. Another common theme was recommendations of unproven home remedies such as steam baths or garlic drinks.

As contentious postings became more common, the ABCID found that website moderation was becoming less interventionist. In PNG, the main channel used by mainstream media for engagement is Facebook, but even responsible media struggle to balance encouragement of discussion with the costs of moderation. The personalized tone of many comments can be off-putting even to experts, who often hesitate to draw fire by speaking out. This may be particularly true for women.

The research identified several common misconceptions about what vaccines are meant to do. Some declared that vaccines should have no side effects, others that vaccines should be used only on patients who have already had COVID-19. Previous vaccination campaigns have focused on children, so many regard an adult vaccine as suspicious. PNGIMR's research revealed an interesting gender divide in this regard. Men were more likely to believe vaccination is only for children, and that their immune systems were strong enough to fight off COVID-19. There was also frequent criticism of politicians who had been

vaccinated but continued to wear masks; respondents claimed this proved the vaccines were a hoax—confusing prevention and cure.

As in most countries, the pandemic has generated multiple narratives that have spread through social media. We have seen that the US “culture wars” have impacted PNG through posts targeting Americans but read by co-religionists. Church leaders who have been vaccinated have received particular criticism for supposedly betraying their values.

There is a unique angle to the narratives around COVID-19. Just before the onset of the pandemic, another devastating disease, African Swine Fever, caused havoc. In a country where elderly relations may be a costly burden and your pigs are your store of wealth, which is the more urgent issue? A single pig in the Highlands can be worth as much as \$6000 (Robinson-Drawbridge 2020) and pigs themselves are used as currency when it comes to paying dowries and compensation for settling tribal disputes. The contrast between international efforts for the two diseases may have exacerbated mistrust of outside messages. There is some evidence that Russian sites tried to portray the outbreak wherever it occurred (not in PNG in particular) as emanating from US research facilities—an interesting echo of the debate about the origins of COVID-19 (DFRLab 2018).

Because of its location just four miles from Australia, PNG is geo-strategically important, and China takes an interest with offers of a deep seaport for the northernmost island of Manus and new TV studios for the NBC, for example. The Malaysian-owned paper, *The National*, has published a recent stream of pro-China articles about Taiwan.

China is not shy about leveraging diaspora communities. As in other parts of Asia and the Pacific, there are long-standing tensions in PNG over Chinese immigrants who supposedly take jobs and business from local residents. They are often accused of illegal entry into the country.

PNG has two rather distinct Chinese communities. One is well-established and has been in the country for many years. A prominent example is a former Prime Minister, Sir Julius Chan. Many recent incomers allegedly come from Fujian province, which has a reputation for close-knit families. (Smith, 2013) This influx gets much comment, including from long-established Chinese residents. Some online comments include calls for violence, such as looting Chinese-owned shops. However, since 2009 there has been no major outbreak of anti-Chinese rioting. (Asia Sentinel 2009) The present author has seen footage of a Chinese man being tortured in Bougainville posted online.

3.3.5 CAUSES

What prompts people to spread disinformation, and what makes people accept it and pass it on uncritically—the causes—in many ways mirror the consequences. In a country where state institutions are viewed as untrustworthy in general, it is all too easy to paint them as untrustworthy in a particular instance. In the absence of any presumption of freedom of information in those institutions, the default posture is likely to be defensive, doubting the need to share information with a public that does not believe what they are told.

The ugly organ harvesting story mentioned in Section 3.3.3 is a good example of the harm that results from reluctance to trust the authorities. A typical explanation might be that “Everybody knows the police are venal, so why should we believe them when they deny they are holding a gang of organ harvesters?”

This mistrust of authority is exacerbated by several factors. These include the small social circles that most people occupy, along with poor education. Given the ease with which people in urban settings in the developed world accept misinformation as truth despite better education, constant media input, and a wide circle of contacts, it is difficult to break into circles of trust in smaller communities that focus on a handful of influencers seen regularly, such as church elders or teachers.

Individual ambition also plays a part. In a political system very much dependent on the “big man” and with disproportionate financial rewards available to elected officials, there is every incentive to spread semi-truths—if not lies. PNG elections have always had a difficult relationship with Western notions of electoral probity: In 2002, a foreign TV crew visiting Enga in the Highlands were able to film openly while the son of the governor standing for re-election filled in whole books of ballot papers (Journeyman 2002). However, there is little evidence of external or internal actors using misinformation for nefarious purposes.

3.3.5 CONSEQUENCES

The consequences of disinformation are often cruel and sometimes fatal. In an echo of prejudice against people with HIV, families with a COVID-19 sufferer have been shunned by their communities and tried to dissuade health workers from diagnosing the disease (Gware 2021a).

PNG has astonishingly low rates of vaccination against COVID-19. According to Oxford University’s *Our World in Data*, only 1.5 percent of the population have been fully vaccinated (Richie et al. 2021). The Prime Minister, James Marape, and other senior politicians were vaccinated in late March 2021 in a public ceremony at the launch of the vaccination campaign. Those vaccinated in the same session included two of Marape’s brothers, but a third sibling was clearly less enthusiastic:

“We were worried, we were concerned, what made it worse was that there were so many conspiracy theories and even some doctors ... posting in public forums and social media against the AstraZeneca vaccines ... a Papua New Guinean will stand by his brother, if it means to die with his brother, he will” (McClure 2021).

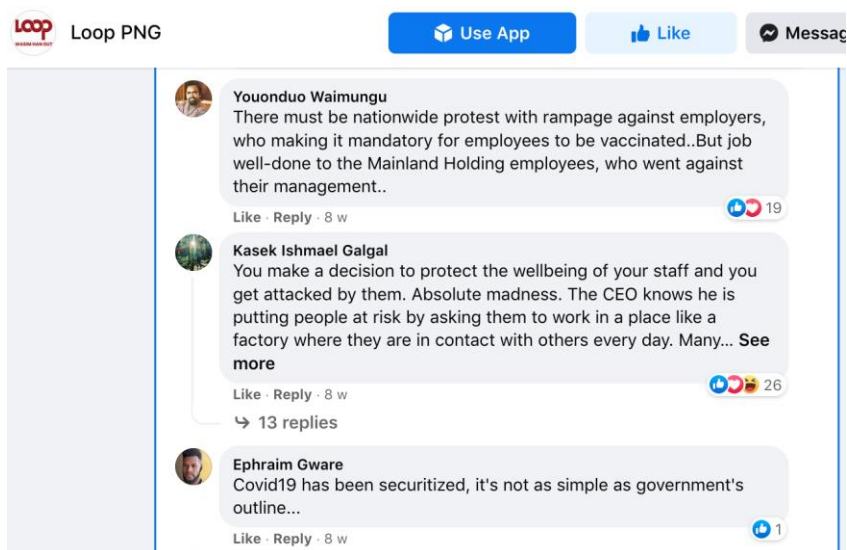
The same article quotes an ABCID estimate that no fewer than “62% of Facebook posts about COVID-19 vaccines in the region make unsubstantiated claims about vaccines, with popular falsehoods including that vaccines have been manufactured to track personal data, are counter to the foundations of the Christian faith, and impact fertility.”

Vaccination promoters are not helped by calls by opposition leader Belden Namah to halt the rollout. A statement on Twitter in March 2021 recycled many tropes of anti-vaxxers about the comparative risks of COVID-19 and vaccination (Chan, 2021). Since Papua New Guineans were not “dropping dead under trees and in marketplaces” they should not be used as guinea pigs by international pharmaceutical companies, said the opposition leader.

This may help explain the rural COVID-19 vaccination effort referred to earlier. Australian Doctors International volunteer Dr. Chris McCall undertook “a three-hour hiking trip to one village, crossing several rivers and climbing many steep and slippery slopes, carrying vaccines to offer” only to find “not one person was willing to be vaccinated” (McCall 2021).

News website LoopPNG has received a steady trickle of reports of violence against health workers engaged in vaccination campaigns and the CEOs of companies trying to implement “no jab, no job” policies (Gware 2021b, 2021c). Unfortunately, such responsible reporting is not helped by antagonistic comments such as those in Figure 3, in response to a LoopPNG article on workers attacking a CEO who made vaccination compulsory.

Figure 3: Comments in response to a LoopPNG article



Source: LoopPNG, Screenshot, October 30, 2021

Journalist Rowan Callick wrote:

“A reluctance to follow directions from the authorities may also be attributed in part to the steady decline in credibility of all statements from politicians or leading bureaucrats over the years. Papua New Guineans widely anticipate that many figures in power are corrupt and spinning yarns to pull the wool over their eyes.

“As a PNG friend told me last week: ‘The vaccine advocates are politicians, and who ever trusted what comes out of a politician’s mouth?’” (Callick 2021).

Callick notes that even educated people share vaccine hesitancy: When vaccination was provided at the Port Moresby head office of the Bank of PNG, only 30 of about 200 staff took up the offer. There have been recent reports of vaccination teams being verbally abused and even physically attacked (Gware 2021b).

However, PNG had low levels of vaccination before the pandemic; for several years it has had the lowest rates of any country in the world for the three common children's vaccines—measles, diphtheria/whooping cough/tetanus, and hepatitis B (Howes and Mambon 2021). It would appear that getting adults to agree to vaccination is even more difficult than persuading them to have their children receive the injection. It seems plausible that a failed COVID vaccination campaign will have an impact on child vaccination rates, which could lead to a second Pacific measles outbreak after Samoa's in 2019.

Mistrust breeds mistrust; this goes beyond vaccination issues into the wider political culture of PNG. The lack of popular support for a democratic framework makes it likely to buckle, and to reinforce the very factors that made people susceptible.

Even those in leadership positions feel the pressure; Dr Gary Nou of the National Control Centre stated during a recent Lowy Institute webinar that he was sometimes reluctant to counter misinformation because of the tenor of attacks on social media.

3.3.7 MITIGATION STRATEGIES

The problem with information disorder is less in the disorder itself than in the damage it can do if left unchecked. Solutions, if any, lie in the broader political and geo-political spheres. However, we can seek to mitigate the harms done.

Given the situation described in this case study, it is worth stressing that large-scale interventions seem like large gifts of untested vaccines—ineffective and liable to provoke conspiracy theorists. It is far better to look for what is working and find ways to support groups that implement the interventions. Many organizations, including traditional media in PNG, are well aware of the issues and are working to counter them, but they lack the necessary resources: time, money, and international links.

Many media websites and bloggers do their best to post accurate information, but many who post responses lack inhibition. So, helping to fund local monitoring—especially in local languages—can be a valuable input. Once material is flagged as inconsistent with fact or community norms (which should be clearly stated) then it is possible to make decisions as to whether the material in question should be flagged, deleted, reported, or face local sanction.

It would be naïve to think there is a magic wand to make disinformation vanish. It is too useful a tool for all concerned, whether we think of the actors involved as malign or benign, for it to disappear quickly (if at all). However, some short-term interventions may make a difference.

PNG general elections are chaotic, but they occur regularly and more or less peacefully. If China wishes to demonstrate the superiority of its authoritarian model for the Pacific, it will have an interest in amplifying that chaos. For next year's elections, one potential strategy might be to fund a small team of mainly local researchers to monitor and rebut falsehood and proactively fact-check some issues. The unit might be housed with the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) or an organization with a local chapter, like Transparency International. It could address attacks on the integrity of the electoral process as well as the accuracy of candidates' claims and proposals.

For this round of elections, it is too late for effective action, but PNG's election laws long predate the era of social media and require extensive revision.

A key factor in the election campaign will be getting information to and from remote communities. The "to" component is hampered by the cost of repairs and maintenance for the NBC transmission network. Repairing sufficient shortwave capacity would be challenging in the time available but could form part of longer-term support. In the immediate term, it is worth investigating whether the United States has the capacity to carry a few hours a day of shortwave, perhaps from Guam. This has been done before; the Australian government funded some NBC shortwave transmissions during the Commonwealth Games in 2014. Such a service could carry programming from commercial stations as well as NBC.

The "from" could be enhanced if reporters in rural areas were provided with simple equipment and the means to send data to Port Moresby. This may be an area for engagement with PNG's many church broadcasters.

In the longer run, connecting moderators and fact-checkers in PNG with counterparts in other parts of the world can help ensure timelier and more effective rebuttal. Those counterparts need not be solely connections with developed world organizations. There are many models, such as The Myth Detector in Georgia, which is supported by the Media Development Fund.

Around the world, the same disinformation is debunked repeatedly. If moderators barely have time to check the comments sections of their stories, they have even less time to check international websites' checks on the same disinformation. An easily searchable database that brings together key posts from reputable fact-checking organizations around the world could be a solution. In addition, funding to local and regional groups and organizations conducting periodic research into COVID-related disinformation, such as ABCID or PNGMRI, could enable more frequent and detailed reviews.

Government figures' lack of credibility is an increasing threat to democracy. Few experts in PNG have sufficient credibility for their statements to counter, for example, vaccine hesitancy. There is little point in tapping politicians, whose credibility is very low, for this role. But political leaders need to understand that the system is strengthened by public bodies with credible spokespeople who can be open and transparent. This requires lobbying, as Transparency International is doing, and training those expected to take on such roles.

Finally, following the example of organizations such as evangelical churches in the United States, it may be possible to initiate dialogue that respects speakers but also acknowledges the consequences of their statements. PNG's many church radio stations might provide a venue for this discussion since they are among the most trusted organizations in the country (ABCID 2021).

3.4 THAILAND

3.4.1 INTRODUCTION

Thailand is a Southeast Asian kingdom of 69 million that no western power has ever formally colonized. In fact, from the 19th to early 20th century the kingdom acted as a regional colonial power, trading parts

of Cambodia, Laos, and Malaysia that were its vassal states with France and Britain to avert western colonization (Winichakul, 1994). The country's modernization was overseen by feudal actors including the monarchy. Despite the 1932 overthrow of the absolute monarchy and the introduction of constitutional monarchy, political institutions remain influenced by feudal cultural codes that place the king at the top of a political order as the soul of the nation. These cultural codes have most of the time superseded written constitutional and legal frameworks especially regarding the monarchy's non-interference in politics and citizens' equality before the law (Ewseewong, 2003). The monarchy has preserved its political influence through interim organizations such as the Privy Council (McCargo, 2005), the Constitutional Court (Mérieau, 2016), and the military (Chambers & Waitookiat, 2016), while culturally reinforcing the notion of loyal Thai subjects in place of citizens with full rights. Despite occasional tensions, the Royal Thai Army has staged at least 13 coups, mostly in defense of the crown from internal threats. The latest coup, in 2014, dismantled what was left of democratic openings dating to the 1990s. To sustain the established order, actors such as the military and the palace have relied on a diverse array of tools, including ideological propaganda. In this context, information manipulation efforts in Thailand have been highly institutionalized, with regime actors deeply involved in orchestrating disinformation. The campaigns have intensified in the last decade as ruling elites have faced democratic threats, especially in a digital space that is rapidly expanding due to Thailand's 53 percent internet penetration and 74 percent social media penetration (as of 2020) (Feldstein, 2021: 104, 111). Information manipulation campaigns have so far contributed to undermining the systematic legitimacy of democratic political order (Linz & Stepan, 1996) by fostering narratives that justify authoritarian rule while vilifying pro-democracy efforts as unpatriotic.

3.4.2 ACTORS

Many of those who manipulate information for authoritarian ends in Thailand are institutional actors and agencies, particularly within the armed forces and the palace, who seek to uphold political dominance of established institutions and, generally, the established order. These actors possess extensive networks and resources necessary for proliferating and sustaining information manipulation campaigns. Challengers of the status quo (e.g. anti-establishment social movements, the media, and political parties) might share distorted information regarding government policies, economic recession, and the government's mismanagement of ongoing health and economic crises to incite national panic, possibly culminating in anti-government protests. However, they cannot match the institutional resources and networks of their opponents. Due to these vast resources, those in the private sector, including celebrity influencers and marketing companies, tend to join forces with institutional actors to buttress the "disinformation industry" (private conversation, Sarinee Achavanuntakul, October 13, 2021). These actors are categorized as 1) political and centralized; 2) political and decentralized; and 3) commercial and decentralized.

POLITICAL AND CENTRALIZED ACTORS

Key institutions, including the armed forces and the palace, rely on information manipulation campaigns to consolidate their grip on power. The campaigns' institutional roots developed in the 1960s alongside the emergence of the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC), the key architect of information manipulation campaigns. As the Thai Royal Army's political, intelligence and psychological arm, the ISOC created local networks and paramilitary units across all 76 provinces that work in tandem with the Interior Affairs Ministry on several civilian initiatives, including the eviction of people from forest reserve areas,

narcotic suppression, cybersurveillance and online content manipulation (dubbed psychological information operation, or IO). The ISOC regards the latter schemes as instruments for deterring internal threats to the status quo, including ideologies and values such as communism and social equality, and actors propagating these. At the same time, IOs are crucial for sustaining the legitimacy of the establishment (Pawakapan, 2017: 4-5; Sombatpoonsiri, 2020). The ISOC and related military agencies fundamentally believe in the power of narratives and ‘words’ that shape political realities and therefore popularity of the regime (Prachatai, 2011). As we shall see, in recent times, this framework remains influential in the ISOC’s information warfare against challengers of the status quo. The ISOC allegedly hosts around 40 IO units, comprising over 1,000 rank-and-file army personnel and possibly high school students in the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC).³² According to a student’s memoir, “[military] trainers guided us [students] how to respond and craft social media messages. Later ... [we were told] to post comments displaying loyalty toward the nation and the monarchy” (Lebnak 2019). Rank-and-file military officers operate in the capacity of cyber units. They are mostly affiliated with the Queen Guards (Pol Ror 2 Ror-or or Eastern Tigers) (Prachachat, 2020). Each unit comprises five personnel who spend at least one hour per day on posting, commenting, and clicking “like” or “angry” on social media. They reportedly received basic training workshops about social media content creation and a lump sum of 1,500 Thai Baht (around \$30) per month (Isranews, 2020). The budget for this operation is about 3.7 billion Thai Baht (about \$110 million) as of 2020 (ThaiPBS, 2021).

Civil servants also allegedly participate in IOs. One channel is through training sessions offered by the Institute of Security Psychology (ISP) under the National Defense Studies Institute. The ISP’s original objective was to build military officers’ technical capacities for socio-psychological warfare (ISP, 2021). However, according to an expert, civil servants from different ministries might have been encouraged to take IO courses at the ISP. “Some joined out of ideological preference because they wanted to volunteer to propagate royalist agendas online. But other [civil servants] might join because they sought professional networks” (Sarinee Achavanuntakul, October 13, 2021). In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Public Health Ministry increasingly relies on information manipulation tactics to dilute public frustration toward sluggish vaccination processes and repeated economic shutdowns (private conversation, Phansasiri Kularb, Worapoj Wongkitrungruang, and Orapin Yingyongpathana, September 25, 2021).

Organizations associated with the palace may also be involved in IO campaigns. In 2017, the Royal Thai Volunteer School (also known as Volunteer Spirit 904) was founded under the Royal Security Command, which is connected to both King Vajiralongkorn and the army. Volunteer 904 has allegedly been responsible for promoting royalism on social media (Buchanan, 2019). It remains unclear to what extent the group has engaged in disinformation campaigns against the opposition, but according to a Reuters report (Tostevin & Tanakasempipat, 2020), Twitter suspended one account linked to Volunteer 904 in late 2020 for “violating...rules on spam and platform manipulation.” The account was found to be unauthentic, with bot-like characteristics, seeking to spread royalist hashtags in the face of the anti-establishment protests (Tostevin & Tanakasempipat, 2020). It was also reported that the volunteers received training from private companies to make their online campaigns more effective (Sarinee Achavanuntakul, October 13, 2021), discussed further below.

³² The Territorial Defense Department of the Defense Ministry offers a military training course for high school students. Students would serve in a ROTC. Upon completion in three to five years, graduating students are exempted from annual military conscriptions.

POLITICAL AND DECENTRALIZED ACTORS

State-sponsored information manipulation campaigns often coincide with similar efforts orchestrated by royalist media outlets and civic groups. While the opposition's campaigns to distort online information are often clamped down, the regime tends to greenlight the efforts of pro-regime forces to spread messages favorable to it and unfavorable to the opposition, thus reaping the benefits of apparent grassroots discrediting of the opposition. Pro-regime civic groups prone to manipulating online information include royalist media such as the Thai-language T-News, TNN, The METTAD, Truth for You, Chaopraya News, and Deeps News. Online English-language outlets such as Alt Thai News Network and New Eastern Outlook³³ have engaged in smear campaigns against opposition figures by doctoring images and inserting captions for images that misleadingly show that the pictured figures work against the interests of their home country, thus reinforcing the image of *chang chart* (nation-hating) members of the opposition.

Numerous royalist civic groups, think tanks, and celebrity influencers have participated in the ecosystem of institutionalized information manipulation campaigns. Founded in 2019, as a hub for “defenders of the crown,” the ultra-royalist Thai Move Institute has published misleading information, if not outright disinformation, against opposition parties, pro-democracy and human rights activists, and, at times, western governments alleged to fund anti-establishment networks.

Other royalist groups include the Rubbish Collection Organization (RCO, in Thai, Ongkorn geb khaya phaendin), the Monitoring and Protecting Monarchy Network (in Thai Kreukai faorawang lae pongpok sathaban), Thai Bhakdi, and Uncle Too Fan Club (in Thai, Cheer lung too, Too being the nickname of the 2014 coup-maker and incumbent Prime Minister General Prayuth Chan-ocha). These groups combine vigilante activism with information manipulation campaigns. In 2014, the RCO, for instance, compiled a list of *lèse majesté* (insulting the monarchy) infractions and notified the police. When no legal action is taken, the group at times discloses offenders' addresses and encourages mobs to harass them at home. At times, the RCO also relies on false information to accuse opposition figures of desacralizing the monarchy.

Buddhist nationalist movements such as the Buddhist Federation of Thailand, the Buddhism Protection Centre of Thailand, and the Assembly of Buddhists for National Security have actively spread distorted information online, but their agenda is not necessarily aligned with ruling elites. The groups originated in Southern Thailand's conflicts, starting in 2004, in which local Buddhists have fallen victim to Malay Muslim insurgents. Some of the groups were formed and implicitly supported by the military, which has struggled to contain the armed insurgency. Accordingly, the army could greenlight, if not fully support, the Buddhist groups' information warfare against the insurgents. However, these campaigns have recently gotten out of hand, becoming increasingly decentralized and involving multiple actors. The establishment considers one group, Dharmmakaya Temple, to side with anti-establishment forces due to its tie with former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, a leading figure in the anti-establishment movements who was removed from power after the 2006 coup. The Dharmmakaya Temple has nationwide branches and disciples who have been active in Buddhist nationalist groups. As the regime has heavily suppressed the Dharmmakaya Temple since 2014, online rumors tarnishing the images of the king and the government have circulated. This

³³ Notably, Facebook recently took down the pages of some of these media outlets due to reports of disinformation. New Eastern Out is also accused of having linkages with Kremlin (@DFRLab, 2019).

string of disinformation links the plight of southern Buddhists with the incapability and unwillingness of ruling elites to protect Buddhist Thais (Sombatpoonsiri, forthcoming).

COMMERCIAL AND DECENTRALIZED ACTORS

Private companies allegedly aid military IO campaigns by providing platforms and capacity building workshops. One striking example is S-Planet. Its CEO, Prasit Jiewkok, often obtains contracts from the army to organize training on social media communication skills for military officers and members of Volunteer 904. As in the Philippines, where a troll farm industry is growing, public relations companies in Thailand increasingly receive lucrative contracts from government agencies to vilify opposition figures in particular and undermine the credibility of democracy in general. According to an online troll, private companies do a better job than official IO campaigns because they want to deliver quality work that will lead to renewed contracts (Khaosod, 2021). Disinformation experts confirm this assessment. Messages crafted by private public relations companies are more sophisticated than those of the army's cyber units. "[These companies] understand modern Thai society and design messages accordingly" (Phansasiri Kularb, Worapoj Wongkitrungruang, and Orapin Yingyongpathana, private conversation, September 25, 2021).

THE ROLE OF FOREIGN ACTORS

In recent years, Thailand has come under the economic and political influence of the People's Republic of China (PRC), especially through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In 2015, Thailand, as a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) signed a media and information cooperation agreement with China, which has since made the Thai infomedia landscape susceptible to Chinese content. For instance, China provides free content to Thai TV stations, party-controlled outlets Xinhua News Agency and China Central Television (Tang, 2021). In 2017, China hosted a conference for senior media staff from Thailand on "the Chinese Dream" and "the important role played by new media in domestic and international affairs" (Shahbaz, 2018).

In light of the 2020 pro-democracy protests in Thailand, young protesters perceived China as supportive of the military-palace-backed regime and endorsed pro-democracy and pro-independence movements in controversial territories such as Hong Kong and Taiwan. In April 2020, when a Thai pop star referred to Taiwan and Hong Kong as countries, state-organized and grassroots supporters of the PRC criticized the statement as insensitive, sparking virtual "warfare" between the Thai Twitter users and PRC cheerleaders. As a result, the transnational #Milktea Alliance online movement emerged and attracted anti-PRC sentiment across pro-democracy youth movements in Asia (Dedman & Lai 2021). In response, the PRC has spread narratives to undermine what it believes to be Western linkages with regional pro-democracy movements. In May 2021, a video depicting an attack against an apparently Asian person was shared widely on Line, the most popular chat application in Thailand, over the caption "American Blacks and Whites in California Killing Chinese." The actual subject of the video was a prison riot in Ecuador in early 2021, uploaded to Twitter by an official of the Ecuadorian Ministry of Justice. Regardless, the shared video effectively generated criticism of the United States among many Thais who attributed disorder and violence to democracy. In 2020, Chinese state media published stories alleging that the Thai pro-democracy movements were backed by Western powers, as occurred in Hong Kong in 2019. This narrative aligns with those generated by pro-establishment forces.

3.4.3 CAUSES

Two main drivers explain how information manipulation efforts take root in Thailand. These are the institutional entrenchment of disinformation infrastructures and ongoing conflicts over governance and ethno-religious identity.

INSTITUTIONAL ENTRENCHMENT OF INFORMATION MANIPULATION INFRASTRUCTURE

Thailand's established institutions have entrenched infrastructures that are conducive to extensive and systematic information manipulation campaigns. The royalist elites have survived colonization by partially endorsing modernization. For example, the monarchy played a crucial role in developing the country's bureaucracy, modern army, education and judiciary systems, and Buddhist Church (Sangha) in accordance with modern expectations. Most importantly, through state propaganda that mixes historical myths and Buddhist narratives, the monarchy became the symbol of the nation, sustaining its relevance in modern times. King Rama VI in particular played an important role in constructing the idea of the Thai national identity attached to the sacrosanctity of the monarchy, in other words royal nationalism (Ferrara, 2015).” Thus to be a Thai is to be a loyal subject. As such, feudal roots have penetrated, expanded, and deepened throughout organs of the Thai modern state and society. In 1932, however, a group of bureaucrats and military personnel inspired by the ideas of liberty and equality brought down the absolute monarchy. But, starting in the 1960s, the palace returned to dominate the political landscape. Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat (1958–1963), who led the coup against previous revolutionaries, revamped royal nationalism in the face of the Communist threat that swept across Southeast Asia. With extensive US support through the Cold War's containment policy, the Thai security apparatus was trained in psychological warfare, setting in motion the institutionalization of state propaganda campaigns against public enemies (Klare, 1977; Kislenko, 2004). The ascent of King Rama IX, Bhumibhol Aduladej (1927-2016), facilitated these campaigns by renewing moral images of the monarchy through royal development projects (Chaiching, 2020).

In this context, the Central Security Command was established in 1962; it was replaced in 1965 by the Communist Suppression Operations Command, which was renamed as the ISOC in 1974. With staff mostly drawn from the army, the ISOC carried out military and political offensive measures including economic development, mass organization, and psychological operations to win the hearts and minds of the population in communist strongholds. Through these civilian projects, the ISOC set up grassroots networks in remote areas that served as its eyes and ears and joined its indoctrination program targeting communist sympathizers (Pawakapan, 2017). The ISOC's IOs intensified after the 1973 democratic change that opened up political space for new social movements, including radicalized students with Marxist leanings and landless peasants. As the establishment came under fire, the ISOC ramped up propaganda campaigns on traditional media. Story books were written, and songs composed to counter Communist narratives. Meanwhile, monks were recruited to join royalist militant forces, especially the Ninth Power group (Nawaphon) (Kongkirati, 2008), and justify the killing of communists as a moral act (Dubus, 2017: 20-28; Ford 2017). Demonizing propaganda galvanized public support for the violent suppression of communist sympathizers, including a massacre of supposedly leftist students on October 6, 1976.

The ISOC's role waned as the Cold War ended, but it was reactivated at the outset of Southern Thailand's ethnic conflicts and the political struggle between pro- and anti-establishment forces. Leftover propaganda infrastructures boost the ISOC's contemporary operations, which oscillate between on- and offline spaces.

ONGOING CONFLICTS OVER GOVERNANCE AND ETHNO-RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

Ethno-religious conflicts in Thailand's Deep South served as an initial laboratory of renewed and reinvented military IOs. The three southernmost provinces, Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat—with predominantly Malay Muslim populations—were annexed to Buddhist Thailand in 1909 after the kingdom signed the Anglo-Siamese Treaty with Great Britain. Armed resistance by Malay Muslims emerged in the 1950s, subsided in the 1980s, but have recurred since 2004, with the insurgents increasingly borrowing Islamist extremist narratives and murdering civilians, including Buddhist monks (Jerryson, 2011). The Thai state responded with a mix of military counterinsurgency and socio-psychological operations to win over the Malay Muslims. IOs were useful in delegitimizing not only armed groups but also civil society movements advocating for minority rights. Images of beheaded monks and burned Buddhist temples were shared among southern Buddhists, first on DVDs and later YouTube clips. At times, these images were encapsulated with fear mongering conspiracy theories associating the attacks with Muslims attempting to take over the Deep South and, subsequently, Thailand (McCargo, 2008). This narrative has propelled the creation of self-defense civic associations such as the Ruam Thai group (Janjira & Sarosi, 2011), which aided the authorities in neighborhood watches and firearms training for Buddhists. Nonetheless, these conspiracy theories have expanded as multiple Buddhist organizations have added to and radicalized the narrative at the expense of ruling elites. Among others, the Dharmmakaya Temple and its allies allegedly distort information regarding the cordial relationship between the current military and palace-backed regime with Muslim elites to shape public perception that the elites approve of a Muslim takeover of Buddhist Thailand (Sombatpoonsiri, forthcoming).

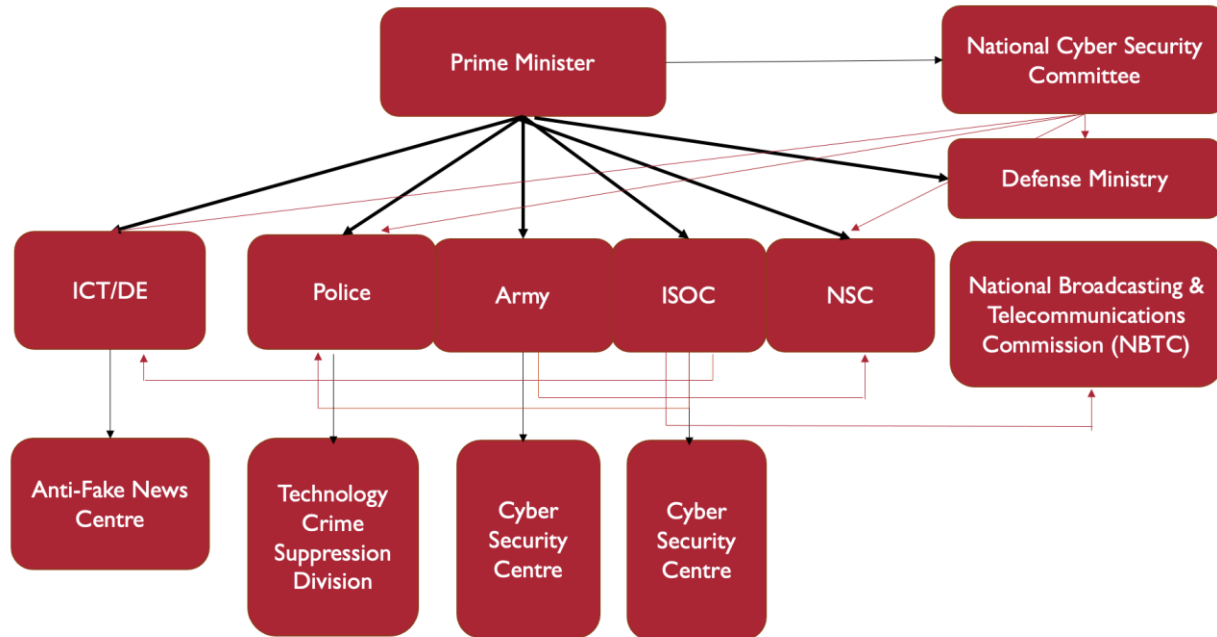
IO campaigns also became increasingly widespread and deepened in the wake of ongoing conflicts over governance that pit pro-establishment supporters against anti-establishment groups. The conflicts came to the fore when the media tycoon-turned politician Thaksin Shinawatra, founded the Thai Rak Thai Party (TRT). TRT won a landslide victory in the 2001 elections and became highly popular, especially among constituents in the most impoverished areas in the North and Northeast. The Thaksin "threat" prompted elite actors to support mass mobilization in 2005–2006, 2008, and 2013–2014 that laid the foundation for military coups in 2006 and 2014, and a judicial coup in 2008 (in which the constitutional court disbanded TRT, leading to a power shuffle within the government coalition). Anti-establishment supporters fought back with mass mobilization against governments representing elite interests in 2007, 2009, and 2010. Online insults of the palace accordingly increased, especially on Facebook (Ramasoota, 2012). As the conflicts moved from off- to online platforms, the ISOC has intensified online censorship and surveillance programs from 2006 onward. And since 2012, the ISOC and related security agencies such as the National Security Council have stepped up the curtailment of online dissent, thus systematizing and expanding IOs in digital space. Meanwhile, the ISOC has treated information alternative to official statements as "fake news," deemed as a national security threat. According to the former army chief, General Apirat Kongsompong, the army is combating "cyber warfare" that has no "open enemy like the old time [because] some political parties, had the platform of their propaganda that...indoctrinate young people with fake news" (Johnson et al, 2019).

The security establishment's conception of cyber warfare is crucial to understanding why the military and its bureaucratic allies have invested time, energy, and resources in manipulating online information. It is viewed as a legitimate weapon of choice, needed to wage the war against ideological challengers. This securitization lens has created enormous markets for private sector actors who supply the military with skills. A trend of government contracts awarded to public relations start-ups has recently been more prominent due to the COVID-19-induced economic recession that put companies under financial distress (private conversation, Sarinee Achavanuntakul, October 13, 2021). At the same time, the political struggle has created incentives for young social media users who fight for democracy to employ tactics such as doxing and digital mobbing in response to regime-backed IOs (private conversation, Phansasiri Kularb, Worapoj Wongkitrungruang, and Orapin Yingyongpathana, September 25, 2021).

3.4.4 TOOLS

Information manipulation operates in conjunction with other instruments to repress digital space and thus sustain the status quo. These other instruments are surveillance, censorship, and legal repression. Digital surveillance entails around-the-clock content monitoring (Feldstein, 2021: 113–118) by state agencies such as the Royal Thai Police Technology Crime Suppression Division, the Ministry of Digital Economy and Society (formerly the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology) that founded the Anti-Fake News Center in 2019, the army's Cyber Center, and the ISOC's Center of Digital Security. These agencies coordinate with other civilian and military units, including the National Security Council, the National Cyber Security Committee (founded in late 2019 after the passage of the National Cybersecurity Bill), the Defense Ministry, and the National Broadcast and Telecommunications Commission. Although these agencies are mandated to address "fake news" and cyber threats, as their names suggest, their main assignment is to monitor and censor subversive content online. The latter is defined as information that diverges from official claims (Sombatpoonsiri, 2020). Figure 4 below illustrates the ecosystem of state agencies responsible for surveillance and censorship.

Figure 4: State Agencies Responsible for Surveillance and Censorship³⁴



Source: Author, Janjira Sombatpoonsiri

Once these agencies flag subversive online content, lawsuits are filed against violators. Draconian laws serving this purpose are multiple, in addition to specific disinformation laws that many autocracies have recently enacted (Sombatpoonsiri & Mahapatra, 2021), including:

- Computer-Related Crime Act (enacted in 2007)
- Amended Computer Act (enacted in 2016)
- Article 112 (*lèse majesté*) (enacted in 1956)
- Orders of National Council for Peace and Order (implemented in 2014)
- Criminal Code, Sections 326 to 333 on defamation
- Article 116 of the Criminal Code on sedition
- Cybersecurity Act (enacted in 2019)
- Anti-fake news bill (proposed in May 2021)

Typically, violators face multiple charges that keep them in the courts and deter them from participating in political activities. This process is designed to generate a “chilling effect” that internalizes societal surveillance and self-censorship. At times, “good Samaritans,” loyal citizens, upset by anti-monarchy comments on social media report violations and even press charges. An iLaw database (2019) reveals that, of 108 charges related to Article 112, at least a dozen were filed by ordinary citizens such as a taxi

³⁴ This chart reflects the executive/Prime Ministerial control of civilian and military agencies that has persisted after the 2014 military coup. When then army chief, General Prayuth Chan-ocha had seized power from the civilian government, he assumed executive control over both civilian (the ICT and the NSC) and military (e.g. the ISOC) agencies. In fact many NSC civilian staff have been replaced by military officers, while the junta packed its loyalists, including generals in the NBCT. This militarization of civilian affairs remains unchanged as of this writing, as General Prayuth continued to be the Prime Minister despite the 2019 general elections. In the latter, his political party, Palang Prachangrat, received the most proportional votes, thanks to obscure electoral regulations drafted by the junta, and nominated him as the PM.

passenger displeased with the driver’s comments on the monarchy and a security guard disturbed by an anti-monarchy graffiti in a shopping mall. From November 24, 2020, to October 28, 2021, of 159 cases of Article 112 violation, 78 cases were filed by citizens (VoiceTV, 2021).

As the nexus of surveillance, censorship, and legal repression is sometimes insufficient to curtail information alternative to official narratives, content manipulation helps sow public doubt regarding the opposition’s information and reinforces official storylines. Institutionalized campaigns to manipulate online information proliferate in three social media platforms—the chat application LINE, Facebook, and Twitter. Official reliance on these platforms coincides with their popularity. As of 2021, Facebook is the most popular social networking platform in Thailand, while LINE is the most popular instant messaging application. The two platforms are reportedly prominent among baby boomers and Gen X. However, in recent years, Twitter has gained traction among millennials and Gen Z (Digital State, 2021).

Cyber troops manipulate online information by first creating such content as pseudo news reports, op-eds, and doctored images that are mostly based on their monitoring of news content or recent social media posts created by opposition. These items are then taken out of context and reinterpreted in ways that stoke public antagonism and disgust of the opposition. At times the manipulated content includes sexist and obscene language aimed at humiliating public figures who are female and members of the LGBTQIA+ community. This altered content is then shared via pro-regime outlets, including Facebook pages that serve as news outlets (e.g., The METTAD and Truth For You) and fan pages of the army, the prime minister, and conservative celebrities. Figure 5 provides a sample.

Figure 5: Example of Cyber Troops’ Activity



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/theMETTAD/>

The METTAD reshapes images apparently retrieved from the Twitter and Facebook accounts of a leading opposition figure, Thanathorn Jungrunreungkij (top left) whose face appears next to a feminist exhibition of paintings of vaginas; an LGBTQIA+ activist (middle left); and a student protester (bottom right, holding

a placard that reads “you can f*** me, I’m not a Salim [a derogatory term for regime supporters]). These images taken together, suggest that the opposition’s liberal leanings mean “free sex.” The METTAD inserts the caption “rape is normal among the three-finger salute people” (pro-democracy movements borrow the salute from a Hollywood blockbuster, The Hunger Games, to symbolize the resistance).

Publicly relevant content from cyber troops tends to be picked up by the royalist press allegedly funded by the regime (Sarinee Achavanuntakul, private conversation, October 13, 2021). Certain viral stories might be amplified by mainstream media and celebrities who, while not necessarily royalist, may be on the regime’s payroll (private conversation, Phansasiri Kularb, Worapoj Wongkitrungruang, and Orapin Yingyongpathana, September 25, 2021). Thus, the production and reproduction of distorted content have an embedded ecosystem that continuously amplifies regime agenda while discrediting opposition figures and their claims.

Beyond high-profile content providers, rank-and-file cyber troops reproduce content by creating ghost accounts to present themselves as ordinary social media users. These accounts tend to have a few followers (also suspected to be ghost accounts), but numerous people whom they follow are most likely critics of the regime. The ISOC has allegedly provided the list of critics’ Twitter accounts to these ghost account operators. The latter click “like” for pro-government posts on Facebook and Twitter, generate pro-government and anti-opposition hashtags on Twitter, and post comments to counter opposition supporters (ThaiPBS, 2020). Figure 6 is an example of a ghost account on Twitter. The account owner uses the image of an opposition politician’s spouse, a French national, but posts messages against that politician’s party.

Figure 6: Example of Ghost Account on Twitter



Source: Twitter (this account is no longer active).

Since 2020, the trend of manual IOs through cyber trooping has diversified. There is evidence of the use of bots—automated accounts—to generate messages favorable to the regime and unfavorable for the opposition. The Thai bureaucracy’s technical skills are believed to be outdated; advanced “digital capacity” is considered to come from the private sector (Sarinee Achavanuntakul, private conversation, 13 October

13, 2021). Recently, IOs have become increasingly sophisticated, using hacking tools and biometric data to surveil dissent (Marczak et al., 2020; Tatiyakaroonwong, 2020) and new tactics such as Zoom bombing—mob invasion of opposition Zoom meetings (Sarinee Achavanuntakul, private conversation, October 13, 2021).

Recent reports from Twitter and Facebook reveal the extent of IOs on social media sites. In December 2020, Twitter took down 926 accounts linked to the army. However, most accounts are inactive, (455 accounts produced 21,385 tweets, and 471 accounts did not tweet at all). Although some tweets spread propaganda through positive images of the army and did not necessarily contain disinformation, they dox by exposing the personal information of human rights activists, opposition politicians, and pro-democracy groups and distort these stories (Goldstein et al., 2020). During the 2020 anti-establishment protests, 17,562 Twitter accounts were “used in a large-scale information operation” (Thomas et al., 2020). In November 2020, as the protests and regime repression peaked, Twitter suspended a royalist account, @jitarsa, that was linked to the palace (Tostevin & Tanakasempipat, 2020). In March 2021, Facebook took down 185 accounts and groups with ties to the ISOC that exhibited “coordinated inauthentic behavior.” The accounts operated as a network, mainly active in 2020, by using “both fake accounts and authentic ones to manage groups and pages, including overt military pages and those that did not disclose their affiliation with the military” (Tanakasempipat, 2021).

3.4.5 NARRATIVES

IO campaigns spread narratives that portray both opposition figures and pro-democracy and human rights activists as disloyal and “un-Thai”—nation-haters who attempt to overthrow the monarchy. The notion of being un-Thai is linked selectively with liberal values. Meanwhile Western powers are accused of bankrolling anti-monarchy movements. Buddhist nationalist narratives overlap with these royalist storylines but share anti-elite sentiments with the opposition while portraying the Muslim minority as a threat to Buddhist supremacy.

UN-THAINESS AND NATION-HATING

Official campaigns to manipulate online information base their narratives primarily on royal nationalism. To be Thai is to be a subject, rather than a citizen, of the kingdom. A subject has a moral duty to render his or her loyalty to the head of the polity, the king. The polity’s survival depends on national harmony; there is little tolerance for disrespect toward higher authority and open disagreement (Connors, 2003; Reynolds, 2004). Pro-establishment IOs capitalize on this nationalist narrative. Warong Dejkijakam, a former politician from the Democrat party (a key regime ally) and a royalist activist, coined the term *chang chart* in 2019 to describe five unpatriotic traits: insulting the monarchy, making secular challenges to Buddhist teachings, denigrating one’s culture and traditions, encouraging foreign interference in domestic affairs, and dismissing court rulings (Post Today, 2019). These charges fit the profile of anti-establishment supporters in general and the Future Forward Party (FFP) in particular (it became known as the Move Forward Party after the FFP was disbanded in February 2020). Accordingly, the FFP and its youthful supporters have been subject to organized online smear campaigns. Figure 7, retrieved from a royalist page, shares a post by Piyabutr Saengkanokkul (then FFP secretary general) which reads, “I just came back from France. I want to go back there again. Anywhere else like Denmark or Singapore is also fine.” Piyabutr’s spouse is a French national whom he often visits in France. We do not know the context of the

post, but the repost inserts a caption suggesting that Piyabutr is a nation-hater because of his apparent appreciation for countries other than Thailand.

Figure 7: Example of a Royalist Page



Source: Monitoring and Protecting Monarchy Network
https://www.facebook.com/GDTCM/?fref=pb&hc_location=profile_browser.

Similarly, Figure 8 presents eclectic comments by opposition figures and journalists, posted on The METTAD. Some are critiques of Thai nationalism, but none explicitly expresses “hatred” of Thailand, their home country. However, the producer assembles the comments to suggest disparagement of Thailand as a “lousy, backward, and uncivilized” nation (the caption at bottom left).

Figure 8: Example of Un-Thainess Post



Source: The METTAD
<https://www.facebook.com/theMETTAD/photos/a.899002516915057.1073741828.869054723243170/994651157350192/?type=3&theater>

In this narrative, being un-Thai is connected to both a lack of loyalty and a call to overthrow the monarchy. Such framing can provide a dangerous pretext for the regime’s legal repression (e.g., through Article 112) and right-wing mob violence. Figure 9 reflects the assumption that Piyabutr and Thanathorn, former head of the disbanded FFP, harbor anti-monarchy sentiments despite both merely suggesting a constitutional monarchy with democratic oversight. The allegation is followed by a threat that the two will not have “a

good death.” Royalists have commonly issued such threats, which at times result in physical attacks of those accused of anti-monarchy (Buchanan, 2016).

Figure 9: Example of Un-Thainess Hinting at Overthrowing the Monarchy



Source: Facebook Page “Not yet confused until you speak” <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100023751078690> (this page is no longer online).

LIBERAL VALUES

Pertinent to the *chang chart* label is the association of anti-establishment movements and figures with “liberal extremism,” implying disrespect of Thai culture, Buddhism, and Thailand’s social hierarchy. The sexist imagery in Figure 5 is one example. Other online memes highlight the secular and egalitarian values of the FFP and youth activists by taking their statements out of context to imply un-Thai attitudes. Figure 10 was found on a royalist page. The first two quotations may come from interviews with Thanathorn and Piyabutr, respectively, reading 1) “We don’t have to give alms (to Buddhist monks), attend (Catholic) mass, or pray (at Islamic mosques). Stop state patronage of religions” and 2) “I don’t want to live in Thailand. If I have children, I don’t want them to grow up and study here.” This misquotation is from a student activist who, in the meme, says, “Whenever I sing our national anthem, I feel like vomiting.”³⁵

Figure 10: Example of Post Linking Un-Thainess with Liberal Extremism



Source: Facebook “Yud dadcharit prathej thai” <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=150467185803368&set=gm.1523048504488405&type=3&theater> (this post is no longer online).

³⁵ In Thailand, the national anthem is played in public spaces each morning and evening. Passersby are socially pressured to stop what they are doing and stand up while the anthem is played.

Other online memes revolve around similar themes of “terrible liberal progressives.” Thanathorn’s press interview regarding the Rohingya refugee crisis is presented as welcoming “all” refugees. A hired troll admitted to a journalist that he photoshopped an image of a 2020 anti-regime protestor to make it appear that the protestor disrespects authority by urinating on a police vehicle at a protest site (Khaosod, 2020).

WESTERN COLONIZERS

The *chang chart* concept aligns with a conspiracy-based plot that alleges collaboration between domestic pro-democracy movements and the United States to overthrow the country’s traditional pillars. This conspiracy theory links a series of popular protests against Russia-backed regimes in Eastern Europe – also known as color revolutions – with Western powers, insisting that foreign support for Thailand’s opposition movements is a CIA scheme for regime change with the goal of reviving Western hegemony in Southeast Asia. Figure 11, from the defunct New Eastern Outlook, amplifies this narrative by highlighting the funding that the National Endowment for Democracy provides to pro-democracy activists and how this might lead to regime change in Thailand.

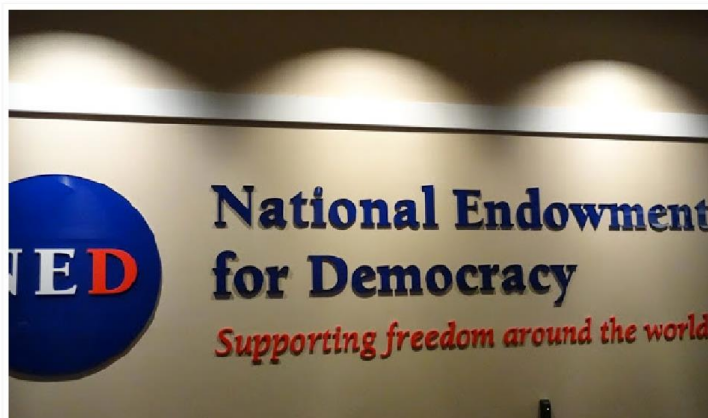
Figure 11: Example of Conspiracy-Based Narrative

US Regime Change: Who are Thailand's "Activists"

Foreign agents hiding behind rights advocacy are not "activists."

August 17, 2017 New Eastern Outlook

AFP recently published an article regarding Thailand's ongoing political conflict, portraying a so-called "student activist" the recent victim of what it calls, "*increased ferocity under Thailand's military rulers.*"



Source: News Atlas (<http://www.thenewatlas.org/2017/08/us-regime-change-who-are-thailands.html> | /4HomeThailandAsiaMiddleEastEuropeAmericasTechAboutUsContactUsUSRegimeChange:WhoareThailand's (now defunct).

This example corresponds with a conservative narrative prevalent among many Thais that NGOs and protest movements represent foreign powers that interfere in Thai domestic affairs, a point reinforced by Thailand’s historical resistance to Western colonial forces. It is unsurprising that Thai mainstream media sometimes amplifies distorted information on social media that reflects this bias. For instance, in August 2016, The Nation, a mainstream, English-language publication, published “Soros Leaks.” Citing the New

Atlas article, it showed that the Open Society Foundation and the National Endowment for Democracy had sponsored a number of dissidents in Thailand (The Nation, 2016). In light of the 2020 anti-establishment protests, the Thai Move Institute held an online seminar regarding recipients of funding from US sources (namely, the National Endowment for Democracy) to undermine the monarchy. Some of this presentation was factual; the public figures shown in Figure 12 are known to have applied for US-based grants, but their objectives for doing so are interpreted through a royalist lens. Following the seminar, an institute analyst posted that the US government had approved requests from several pro-democracy protesters, who at the time were on the street demanding socio-political change, to migrate to the country. The US embassy in Thailand and the Thai activists swiftly refuted this statement (Thai Move, 2020).

Figure 12: Public Seminar on US and Thailand’s Opposition



Translation: “To whom does the US pay 70 million a year? Anti-monarchy-liberation networks.”

Source: Thai Move Institute. <https://www.facebook.com/thaimoveinstitute/posts/349743986408921/>

Opposition parties such as the Future Forward Party are frequently attacked as western lackeys. The party leaderships’ visits to Europe and the United States are framed as collaboration with western powers to undermine Thailand. Figure 13 is from Thanathorn’s interview with the Voice of America on July 16, 2019, in which he describes the trip. The METTAD reshapes the clip and adds a caption that reads, “Thanathorn pleads with the US to democratize Thailand.”

Figure 13: Thanathorn’s Interview with the Voice of America



Source: The METTAD.

https://www.facebook.com/theMETTAD/?eid=ARCFqMTuoEEO_QBhYrDhKKF4RMJLjopZiNb93JDVMKKSsEI3_tDuLNxg-aV0vEecwumRI8fnwNv%E2%80%A6

As the 2020 pro-democracy movements forged solidarity with similar movements in Hong Kong, China's pro-regime media allegedly borrowed from the Thai IOs' storyline, labelling protesters as US lackeys seeking to bring down Thailand's political order. In the *Global Times*, a PRC mouthpiece, Yu Qun, Deputy Director of the Military Diplomacy Research Center at China's National University of Defense Technology, wrote, "The Thai young generation are currently being used as cannon fodder by the United States and its proxies, while accusing the US-based social media platforms to aid the protesters to "spread disinformation" against the Thai governments. Thai royalists reinforced this narrative by [accusing] the US government of meddling in the protests" (ThaiPBS 2020).

In contrast with increasing attacks of the US, the narrative that one-sidedly praises the PRC has not gained substantive traction. Official IO efforts target mainly the oppositional as internet threats and this set the tone for unofficial, decentralized IOs. At times, pro-regime media would post 'news' and memes on their Facebook Pages about ongoing repression in Hong Kong, explicitly sending a message to the regime that it should follow in the footsteps of the PRC. Limited traction of outright pro-PRC campaigns may reflect Thailand's uneasy history with the Communist Party partly shaped by Cold War experiences; and the regime's policy to favor both the US and China (Feldstein, 2021: 122).

MUSLIM DOMINATION

The fourth narrative touches on the increasing dominance of the Muslim minority in predominantly Buddhist Thailand. Mainly generated by Buddhist nationalist groups, this narrative attributes declining state patronage of Buddhism to Muslims' increasing power. The narratives explain the causes of Muslims' rising influence, including their more salient policymaking role, demographic dominance, violent traits, and economic and cultural encroachment on Buddhist communities. Evidence collected from scattered and unrelated sources are woven together to suggest that Thailand will become Islamized. For instance, members of Buddhist groups' Facebook pages and LINE chat rooms share reports that signal the upsetting retreat of the Buddhist majority, mentioning demolished temples and decreasing numbers of temples and temple goers. Comments under these posts generally blame the previous junta and royalist elites, including the army and the palace, for collaborating with Muslim leaders and bestowing privileges on Muslim communities. In particular, Bangkok's political and military elites are framed as conspiring with Muslim leaders by converting to Islam. Doctored images reinforce this narrative. For instance, the image in Figure 14 shows Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha, wearing an Islamic cap during a southern visit, stirring online rumor that he is a Muslim. The idea of elite conformity coincides with the narrative of politically and culturally dominant Muslims who use violence (as evident in Southern armed conflicts) in attempts to take over Thailand (Sombatpoonsiri, forthcoming).

Figure 14: Example of Doctored Image of Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha



Source: Facebook, Struggle for Buddhism and against Vicious Doctrine
<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=157845878456687&set=g.227018981351274&type=1&theater&ifg=1>

3.4.6 CONSEQUENCES

IO campaigns in Thailand have produced three main detrimental effects on democracy and civic space. First, the campaigns have contributed to consolidating autocracy by weakening opposition parties and civil society that should serve as checks and balances. A case in point was the Constitutional Court's disbanding of the FFP in 2020. IO campaigns had portrayed the party and its supporters as disloyal, anti-monarchy, and un-Thai. Based on some of these allegations, including that the FFP is an Illuminati proxy (Al Jazeera, 2020), several pro-establishment groups petitioned the Constitutional Court in 2019. In the aftermath of the March 2019 national elections, when the FFP's electoral success made it the second-largest opposition party, a representative of the pro-regime Constitutional Protection Organization reported to the Election Commission (an alleged regime ally) that the FFP had violated an electoral regulation. Taking the baton from the Election Commission, the Constitutional Court initially disqualified the FFP's leader as a Member of Parliament before dissolving the party (Tonsakulrungruang, 2020). As a result, the FFP lost some of its parliamentary foothold. Although it came back as the Move Forward Party, 16 party members who were also Members of Parliament were banned from elections for 10 years (Boonbandit, 2020). Along with other tactics of the ruling elites', such as constitutional manipulation and legal repression, the disbanding of an opposition party maintains an uneven playing field, a characteristic central to hybrid regimes or competitive authoritarianism. Information manipulation campaigns have made such practices justifiable in the eyes of the public.

Second, state-sanctioned IO campaigns that portray oppositional civil society actors as foreign agents have further shrunk civic space. Smear campaigns against CSOs not only shape negative public perception about civil society's watchdog role, but enable the government to justify legal restrictions on NGOs alleged to receive foreign funding. A good example is the website of Prachatai, which has received some external grants because its critical views toward the regime have made applying for domestic funding almost

impossible. IO campaigns associate Prachatai with George Soros and the Open Society Foundation. Security forces have raided its headquarters repeatedly, and its web content is sometimes banned (Sombatpoonsiri, 2018). Moreover, the narrative of NGOs as foreign lackeys underpins the recent enactment of so-called NGO laws to restrict foreign funding and intensify state monitoring of NGO activities, especially in the digital space (Cogan, 2021).

Lastly, IO campaigns, together with Buddhist nationalists' information manipulation efforts, potentially worsen protracted conflicts by narrowing dialogue across ideological and identity groups. State-sponsored IOs have exacerbated polarization in Thailand. Royalist groups have been radicalized after hearing continuous reports that the other side of the aisle consists of traitors. Some have threatened, in both on- and offline spaces, to attack pro-democracy activists. Amid the 2020 youth-led protests that demanded monarchy reform, a middle-aged resident of Ayutthaya province slapped a student on the street because she was sick and could not stand during the playing of the national anthem. The resident took the student's failure to stand as disrespect for the nation and the king without seeking an explanation (Bangkok Post, 2020). It is difficult to link such incidents with IO campaigns, but comments from ordinary citizens on cyber troops' Facebook pages reflect willingness to use violence against so-called "nation haters." In the Deep South, Buddhist groups had taken up arms in self-defense before online disinformation became widespread. Fear-mongering narratives regarding the Muslim minority could worsen ties between local Buddhist and Muslim communities, thereby justifying mutual violence. As anti-Muslim narratives spread to fervent Buddhists in the North and Northeast, tensions between Buddhists and Muslims have recently emerged. Buddhist nationalist groups have staged protests against the construction of mosques in their areas and rejected plans to develop halal industries even if they derived economic benefits. The growing mistrust pushes Muslim communities further away from Buddhists, reinforces religious rifts, and potentially drives religious extremism.

3.4.7 MITIGATING STRATEGIES

Thailand's information manipulation campaigns are institutionalized; addressing the problem requires de-institutionalizing them. Currently, responses to IOs are bottom-up and scattered. Activists created an ad hoc IO monitoring mechanism in the wake of the 2020 protests, but they lack substantive funding and skills. At times, this initiative engages in borderline vigilantism against the regime rather than addressing deep-rooted causes (Thomas et al. 2020). A more effective approach would be to consolidate current journalism projects to fact-check online statements, beyond the existing official channel, which has been criticized for censorship.

Support for such an effort requires two steps. The first is to create a national platform that coordinates independent fact-check systems such as Thailand's Agence France Presse (AFP) and ThaiPBS. The second is for civic education programs implemented by CSOs and supported by international organizations, to politicize their media literacy focus. Politicization implies exposing institutional powers that drive the disinformation industry—whether the armed forces or the private sector. Building awareness in this way could make message recipients think twice before sharing distorted information disseminated by IO efforts. Most importantly, a whole-of-society approach is needed to encourage citizens' active roles as digital watchdogs, flagging autocratic campaigns that manipulate online information in an attempt to divide and rule the population.

3.5 INFORMATION DISORDER IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

3.5.1 INTRODUCTION

This section compares the four case studies along the dimensions introduced at the start of this report, namely *who* spreads *what*, *why*, *how*, and to *what* effect? The goal of this comparative exercise is to identify similarities and differences across the case studies that may inform mitigation strategies to contain and counter information disorder beyond the four case studies (discussed in Section 4).

3.5.2 ACTORS

The literature on the drivers of information disorder across Asia and the Pacific often singles out the Chinese and Russian governments, although an in-depth analysis of the situation on the ground across the region reveals a more complex picture. The four case studies provide further evidence in support of this assessment.

In the Kyrgyz Republic, the Russian government seems involved in local troll factories and lent support to a 2010 disinformation campaign that eventually forced then-President Bakiyev out of office. Russian information management in the region is more subtle, however. For years, the Kremlin has been nudging state media in the Kyrgyz Republic toward support for pro-Russian governments as part of a long-term strategy to cultivate the post-Soviet media landscape in Central Asia. In Nepal, distorted information linked to the Chinese government does not figure prominently. Occasionally, the Chinese government tries to control information related to projects that are part of the Belt and Road Initiative. Since such projects are in their infancy in Nepal, however, those disinformation campaigns are largely absent in the country. In PNG, disinformation campaigns by foreign powers are largely absent. Any distorted information of foreign origin in Nepal and PNG is usually manipulated information originating from India and Australia, respectively. In Thailand, distorted information linked to the Chinese government appears regularly, reflecting efforts to discredit the US role in Thailand and the region.

In short, with the exception of the Kyrgyz Republic, it is mostly *domestic* actors that constitute and shape information disorder in the four case studies. This confirms previous findings in the literature cited early in this report, which found that information disorder has mainly domestic origins (Linville and Warren 2021: 2).

The four case studies show considerable variance regarding domestic actors' contributions to information disorder. Thailand stands out among the studies as the only country whose government systematically and consistently both creates and disseminates distorted information. There, the military, in collaboration with the monarchy, manipulates information to discredit and divide the political opposition. Efforts to destabilize regime critics in this way are often combined with surveillance strategies that the military-backed regime has rolled out both online and offline in recent years.

In-depth examinations of information disorder in the three other case studies did not find systematic or consistent government efforts to manipulate information for political ends. Sufficient state capacity and political cohesion does not appear to exist for government-led disinformation campaigns in the Kyrgyz Republic, Nepal, and PNG. It is important to point out, however, that individual politicians linked to both

governments and opposition groups create and disseminate disinformation to further their political agendas in all three countries.

The **case studies** also show that a full understanding of information disorder in Asia and the Pacific more broadly requires a look beyond foreign states and national governments.

Non-state actors in the Kyrgyz Republic, PNG, and Thailand play comparatively dominant roles in manipulating information for political ends. For instance, in the Kyrgyz Republic financially motivated actors have collaborated with politicians to establish and unleash troll armies to gain political leverage. In PNG, US evangelical churches—although they do not deliberately target the population with distorted information—play an important role in both creating and disseminating it. In Thailand, online vigilante groups and pro-regime media outlets are important nodal points in networks that disseminate distorted pro-government information. In Nepal, the media play an important role in disseminating disinformation outside the political arena. However, this is mainly driven by sloppy reporting and financial pressures to publish stories that will generate high online readership.

Overall, a comparison of the four case studies suggests that power dynamics in the broader political arena are reflected in information disorder. Thailand's information disorder is relatively centralized, while a multitude of actors in the comparatively more democratic Kyrgyz Republic, Nepal, and PNG contribute to information disorder.

3.5.3 TOOLS

The manipulation of information for political ends has a long history in all four case study countries. Current information manipulation is often rooted in these earlier experiences. Not only has censorship and the oppression of dissonant voices been common in all four countries; these legacies inform and shape information management today. Nevertheless, a comparison of how distorted information spreads reveals considerable variance in the vectors that define the extent of information disorder in the four countries. Arguably, networks through which distorted information spreads are most consolidated and stable in Thailand. There, cyber troops that are under the direct and indirect authority of the government join forces with traditional news outlets and social media to manipulate information for authoritarian ends. Such networks are much less developed in the Kyrgyz Republic, Nepal, and PNG. In the Kyrgyz Republic, for instance, fake social media accounts may be used in disinformation campaigns. However, this occurs largely in an *ad hoc* manner and without much coordination. In Nepal, social media do not play much of a role in information manipulation yet. In PNG, social media play a role primarily in urban areas. In rural areas, where the majority of the population lives, authority figures such as members of the clergy, tribal leaders, and development workers form the main nodal points in networks through which distorted information spreads. Overall, information disorder is not purely an online phenomenon in any of the four cases.

3.5.4 NARRATIVES

A comparison of the narratives contributing to information disorder in the four case studies shows that they are rarely explicitly pro-authoritarianism or anti-democratic. Rather, the goal of creating and disseminating distorted information is to widen societal rifts to take advantage of the political momentum

this generates. Thailand is arguably the only country studied where there is a coordinated and consistent effort to shrink the space available to dissenting voices by discrediting opposition groups and their agendas. Furthermore, all four case studies reveal that distorted narratives are highly context-specific, building on historical experiences, existing tensions in society, and cultural taboos and anxieties, ranging from anti-royalist sentiments in Thailand to witchcraft in PNG.

3.5.5 CAUSES

The reasons for the creation and dissemination of distorted information were similar across the four case studies—to gain and maintain political influence. Financial motives were often a function of political demand for information manipulation. In the Kyrgyz Republic and Thailand, for instance, governments often lack the technological know-how to conduct coordinated information campaigns and therefore rely on commercial entities for those services.

On the demand side, a great appetite for alternative news outlets was seen in all four case studies. When states have held a *de facto* monopoly over the media landscape for decades, people yearn for information sources that serve different fare. The liberalization of national media in most of the case study countries coincided with the rise of the internet in the 1990s, and there is no shortage of providers to satisfy demand. However, growing financial pressures often result in poor journalism and sloppy reporting, as seen in the Kyrgyz Republic, Nepal, and PNG. This has often facilitated the creation and dissemination of distorted information in the countries examined in this report.

3.5.6 CONSEQUENCES

The four case studies show that information disorder shapes politics in more complex and often more subtle ways than alarmist accounts about distorted information causing the breakdown of democracies across Asia and the Pacific claim.

In all four studies, information disorder amplifies existing societal and political rifts but also seems to depend on such rifts to become effective in the first place. Information disorder is as much a consequence as it is a cause of democratic decline in the four countries examined in this report. In the Kyrgyz Republic, information disorder helped politically motivated actors to drown out competing narratives in the political arena. In Nepal, distorted information threatened to undermine the multi-party coalition at the heart of the current political order. In PNG, information disorder weakened government policies in the health sector and the economy. In Thailand, manipulated information narrowed the space available for people to express their opposition to the political status quo. However, all these democratic deficits have a multitude of causes, with distorted information being only one of them.

However, the four case studies also show that information disorder may play a more dominant role in these countries' politics going forward. In Thailand, information disorder seems to affirm authoritarianism as it allows the authorities to create the narratives they need to set their broader authoritarian apparatus in motion. For instance, opposition groups are first falsely accused of being foreign agents before they subsequently get arrested. Information disorder and authoritarianism in Thailand seem to be mutually reinforcing.

This does not automatically mean, however, that information disorder will push the other three countries examined in this report towards authoritarianism. More likely, information disorder will prevent democratic consolidation and corrode existing democratic structures over time. In Nepal, for instance, information disorder may undermine the elite bargain at the heart of the relatively peaceful political situation since the 2015 constitution was adopted. In PNG, there is no evidence either that authoritarianism is advancing because of information disorder. However, distorted information may become a considerable obstacle to address many of the dysfunctionalities of PNG's democratic system in the years to come. In the Kyrgyz Republic, the creation and dissemination of distorted information may expedite a shift towards a more authoritarian political system that has been under way for a few years for reasons unrelated to information disorder.

In short, the case studies suggest that information disorder expedites and consolidates authoritarianism in countries that have already fairly authoritarian structures such as the Kyrgyz Republic and Thailand. Information disorder also seems to corrode poorly consolidated democracies further, as was the case in Nepal and PNG. However, information disorder does not inevitably lead towards authoritarianism.

3.5.7 MITIGATION STRATEGIES

Finally, all four case studies reveal a clear need for mitigation strategies tailored to the local contexts to contain and counter information disorder. This localization may effectively respond to the challenge put forward by USAID Administrator Samantha Power to find ways to work with small partner organizations in each country. The case studies all found that the most effective mitigation strategies will pursue holistic approaches that take into account the many interconnected dimensions of information disorder identified throughout this report.

4. MITIGATION STRATEGIES TO CONTAIN AND COUNTER INFORMATION DISORDER

This section situates the mitigation strategies proposed in the case studies in the broader literature and critically evaluates their feasibility for the Asia and Pacific context.

This report is based on the premise that the current information disorder in Asia and the Pacific has new and unique dimensions compared to previous information disorders. Simply regurgitating past approaches to information disorder is therefore unlikely to address the current situation in an effective manner while past “...disinformation mitigation tactics may provide aspirational frameworks for modern efforts, they are largely inapplicable in a modern disinformation battlefield. The birth of the internet, the removal of centralized and shared information sources, and the increase in the number of actors involved in information dissemination creates a landscape substantially different in nature” (Ward et al. 2019: 2).

The report also shows the historical and local contexts in which information disorder in Asia and the Pacific is embedded and the varied ways through which information disorder may destabilize democracies and strengthen authoritarianism as a result. The most sophisticated disinformation campaigns, the report finds, identify cleavages and rifts unique to a society through which they can insert themselves into a political arena and are constructed around local fears and anxieties.

Hence, the adage that “all politics is local” also applies to addressing the causes and consequences of information disorder in Asia and the Pacific despite the global prevalence of distorted information and the fact that many vectors through which it disseminates across the political arena are completely detached from any national context. There is no silver bullet to contain and counter information disorder. Approaches that are effective in one country may be ineffective in another (Linville and Warren 2021: 2).

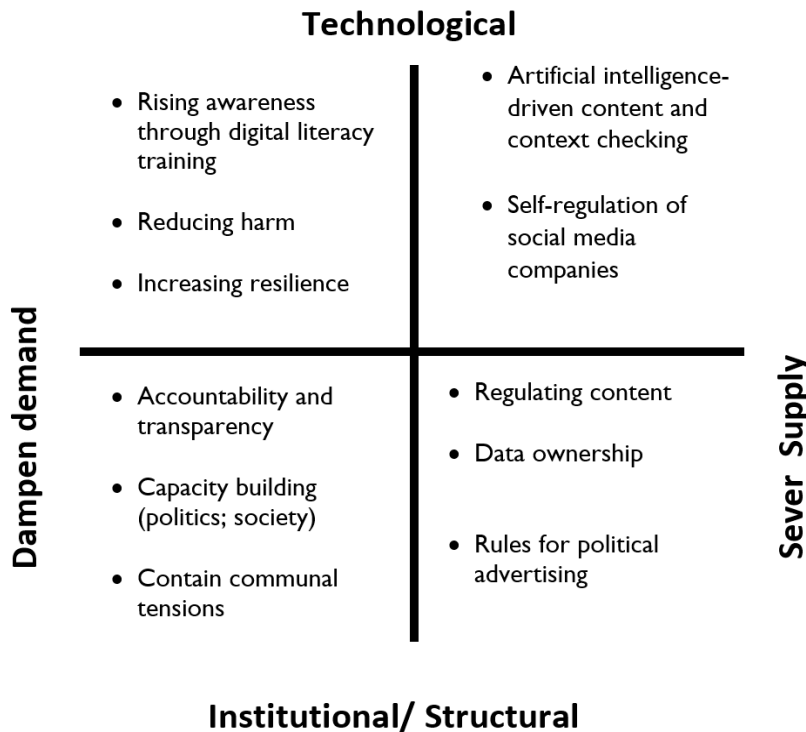
In light of the multi-faceted nature of information disorder and the complex ways in which it manifests itself politically, scholars emphasize that “[i]n taking measures to address the entire spectrum of disinformation responses, it is important to look at the actors involved, together with the typology of decisions and actions taken. Certain responses target the actors deemed responsible for disinformation, some target the disruptive techniques used, whilst others aim at improving citizens' resilience to disinformation” (Colomina 2021: 23). In other words, experts urge “policymakers to avoid looking at any one vector in isolation and to close vulnerabilities across their political systems, economies, and societies” (Brandt and Taussig 2019: 134). The literature that specifically looks at information disorder and its political manifestations in Asia and the Pacific also calls for whole-of-society solutions to tackle the problem (Ong 2021b: 32).

In short, the most effective mitigation strategies will take into account the many new aspects of the current information disorder with which societies in Asia and the Pacific are grappling, while being sensitive to the specific historical and local context in which the information disorder is embedded. The most effective

mitigation strategies will be those that address the interconnected nature of information disorder that spans the multiple dimensions examined throughout this report.

Potential mitigation strategies to contain and counter the effects of information disorder in Asia and the Pacific can be conceptualized along several dimensions (see Figure 15). Efforts can focus on reducing the supply of distorted information or dampening demand for it. Some approaches to achieve these goals focus on the technical aspects of the problem, while others concentrate on the broader institutional and structural dimensions that facilitate information disorder.

Figure 15: Mitigation Strategies to Sever Supply and Dampen Demand



Source: Author (based on Benkler et al. 2018:21-22)

REDUCE SUPPLY THROUGH TECHNOLOGICAL MEANS (UPPER RIGHT QUADRANT, FIGURE 15)

At present, many prominent initiatives that seek to contain and counter information disorder in Asia and the Pacific focus on reducing the supply of distorted information through technological means. This is because many analysts consider the internet in general and social media platforms in particular the most important factors for both the creation and dissemination of distorted information. Mitigation strategies therefore need to focus on this important aspect of information disorder, as many governments, advocacy groups, and scholars argue.

In this context, increasingly sophisticated methods are being developed to detect and eliminate distorted information on the internet. For instance, programs have been designed to examine patterns in the linguistic- and content-based characteristics of online texts that suggest a document contains distorted

information. This includes syntactic features as well as the number of nouns or ratio of positive and negative words (Abdali et al. 2020: 118). Great advances have also been made in identifying manipulated image files (Strick 2021: 29-30). Furthermore, research finds that interventions may contain the dissemination of distorted information to some degree (Christakis 2017). For instance, experiments indicate that “warning labels and pop-up boxes slow down the sharing of [distorted information]” (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017: 60). Similarly, a prompt to read an article before sharing it on social media, a rating of the quality of a website domain, or a critical assessment of words used in the comment sections of an article are also found to be somewhat effective in containing the spread of distorted information (Diresta and Rose-Stockwell 2021: 12).

Making use of such technological innovations, many social media companies have adopted seemingly more proactive approaches to reducing the supply of disinformation and malinformation via their platforms. They not only delete content flagged as manipulated; they also remove human and non-human accounts that have violated the terms and conditions of their platforms. For instance, in 2018, Facebook removed Ashin Wirathu, a Buddhist monk in Myanmar who incited violence against Muslim minorities (Barron 2018).

Some social media platforms have also adjusted their search algorithms for certain topics and adopted technologies aimed at containing misinformation. For example, WhatsApp, a messaging platform owned by Facebook that is considered one of the platforms “most polluted” with misinformation (Bradhsaw et al. 2019: 51), has made it more difficult to send and forward messages to large numbers of people (Ockenden 2020).

CHALLENGES TO TECHNOLOGY-CENTERED STRATEGIES TO REDUCE THE SUPPLY OF DISTORTED INFORMATION

Relying on such technology-focused mitigation strategies to reduce the supply of distorted information in Asia and the Pacific carries risks, as they suffer from several shortcomings. First, technology cannot detect certain types of disinformation. For instance, artificial intelligence software is much better at identifying manipulated text than audio or video files (Wardle 2019: 7; Zlatkova et al. 2019). This poses a challenge, as much of the material circulating in the information disorder consists of images and audio and video files—not text (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017: 39). Audio and video files also spread faster and more broadly than text because algorithms on social media platforms seem to prefer video over text, according to experts (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017: 39). In short, precisely the kind of disinformation that is most prevalent and that spreads most easily is also the most likely to go undetected by current technology.

It seems even more difficult to identify misinformation and malinformation through technological means, as it is context, not content, that unleashes the harmful potential of such types of distorted information. Symptomatic of the difficulties social media companies have in using technology to remove malinformation was a Facebook internal memo leaked to the media in October 2021. It showed that Facebook’s artificial intelligence software could identify and remove only 3 percent to 5 percent of all hate speech on the platform. Publicly, Facebook had claimed it was removing 90 percent (Giansiracusa 2021).

Second, technological solutions to reduce the supply of distorted information may also be ineffective because social media companies on which the implementation of solutions depends are fickle allies in the

fight against information disorder. Academics, activists, watchdog organizations, and governments continue to emphasize that social media companies are simply not doing enough to reduce the supply of distorted information (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017: 63).

This is because social media companies lack incentives to contain and counter distorted information. Any serious effort to do so would threaten the business models that generate billions in revenue each year. People’s attention has become the currency of the information age. This means that the ultimate driver behind everything that social media companies do is to attract as many people to their platform as possible, keep them there no matter what, and eventually “sell eyeballs” (Wu 2016: 93) for a profit. “As far as [Facebook founder] Mark Zuckerberg’s business interests are concerned, it doesn’t matter how absurd, stupid, dangerous or mendacious a post is, just so long as it takes place on Facebook” (Davies 2019: 2).

Technology is currently unable to identify many types of distorted information, and social media have no incentive to self-regulate. Due to the complexities of reducing the supply of distorted information through approaches that focus on the technological aspects of information disorder, the upper right quadrant in Figure 15 is arguably not a priority area for USAID and its local partners in their efforts to contain and counter information disorder in Asia and the Pacific.

DAMPEN DEMAND THROUGH TECHNOLOGICAL MEANS (UPPER LEFT QUADRANT, FIGURE 15)

The literature also suggests various mitigation strategies based on the assumption that recent technological innovations shape *demand* for distorted information. These strategies fall into two broad categories: those that focus on raising awareness, and those that concentrate on protecting people from information disorder and increasing their resilience to it.

RAISING AWARENESS

Experts often cite low levels of digital literacy as a main reason why distorted information spreads within communities (often in the form of misinformation). A recent report on how to effectively contain distorted information, for instance, concludes: “When it comes to fake news spread by ordinary citizens, the only strategy that appears effective is the long-term development of media literacy skills and competencies” (Turčilo and Obrenović: 2020: 26).

USAID, in collaboration with local partners, may therefore want to design training programs to increase digital literacy among target populations. Such programs ought to be specific enough to take local conditions into account and at the same time be easily scalable so they can be rolled out across multiple countries.

REDUCING HARM AND INCREASING RESILIENCE

Tactical Tech, an advocacy group, has created tools for women and LGBTQIA+ communities that teach them to protect themselves from information disorder campaigns. For instance, its comprehensive Gendersec Curricula “introduces a holistic, feminist perspective to privacy and digital security training...” (Tactical Tech n.y. 3: 1). USAID may adapt such content to specific contexts in partner countries across

Asia and the Pacific. It could collaborate with or draw on the expertise of CSOs or produce its own material to strengthen digital literacy in target countries. Training programs can focus on how people can protect themselves from information disorder. Creating and disseminating distorted information is often just one of many tactics used by authoritarian systems or actors trying to undermine democracies, this report finds. Since data collection through online (and offline) surveillance often feeds into disinformation and malinformation campaigns, USAID may want to provide trainings for citizens in general and democracy activists, human rights defenders, and vulnerable communities in particular on how to protect online data in the first place. In addition, trainings on how to minimize the risks of becoming a target of disinformation and malinformation campaigns, and how to react to being targeted are potential avenues for USAID and its local partners to explore.

CHALLENGES TO TECHNOLOGY-CENTERED STRATEGIES TO DAMPEN DEMAND FOR DISTORTED INFORMATION

There are various challenges to effectively implementing mitigation strategies that focus on dampening demand for distorted information through a focus on technology. But teaching citizens in general and vulnerable communities in particular how to protect themselves from disinformation and malinformation can only address the consequences, not the causes, of information disorder.

More importantly, mitigation strategies that center around raising citizens' awareness of how to identify such information may not be effective because such solutions are implicitly rooted in a "transmission view" of communication. People communicate to provide and receive information. The assumption seems to be that, if they learn to identify distorted information, they will stop sharing it. However, much distorted content is produced and shared to signal membership in a group and a desire to be validated by that group, as discussed above. This is in line with decades of research, showing that correcting false information does not change people's beliefs (Nyhan and Reifler 2010; Ward et al. 2019: 10). While "facts make an impression, they just don't matter for our decision-making" (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017: 47) and if distorted information is corrected "[t]hose who find the correction ideologically unpalatable will reason their way round it" (Economist 180407). Such findings cast doubt on the effectiveness of strategies that rely on raising awareness and digital literacy training to reduce the creation and dissemination of distorted information.

MOVING AWAY FROM TECHNOLOGY-CENTERED MITIGATION STRATEGIES

The empirically rich case studies show the varied ways in which information disorder and politics interact in Asia and the Pacific. While the studies demonstrate the complexity of the situations on the ground, that complexity means that this report could not establish a clear, unidirectional causal relationship between the technological innovations of recent years and the democratic rollback mentioned at the start of this report.

This is worth emphasizing, since "[i]t would be easier if we knew that the present crisis was caused by entrepreneurial teenagers running fake news sites on Facebook, Russian sockpuppet and bot accounts, targeted psychographics-informed advertising from Cambridge Analytica, or even technology induced symmetrically partisan echo chambers" (Benkler et al. 2019: 351).

In light of spurious evidence that technological innovations drive information disorder, thereby corroding democracies, a growing number of scholars suggest a move away from technology-centered mitigation strategies. Instead, it is important to address the institutional and structural variables that facilitate information disorder across the region.

REDUCE SUPPLY THROUGH INSTITUTIONAL AND STRUCTURAL REFORM (LOWER RIGHT QUADRANT, FIGURE 15)

As a reaction to the fact that technology cannot detect the entire range of distorted information and social media companies are unreliable partners in the fight against information disorder, a growing number of governments in Asia and the Pacific have taken matters into their own hands. They have established regulatory frameworks intended to define more clearly what content is permissible on social media platforms. Such approaches are often two-pronged: Governments first define the boundaries of acceptable content. Then, they introduce accountability mechanisms that hold social media companies liable if they allow content on their platforms that violates government-set boundaries of acceptable content. At the time of writing, at least 24 governments in Asia and the Pacific had adopted some kind of law regulating content on the internet (Neo 2021: 19).

In addition, observers have called for mitigation strategies that curb the tendency of the traditional news media to amplify distorted information on social media. While a free and vibrant press is usually seen as a bulwark against information manipulation, even a free press often contributes to information disorder. This is because traditional outlets often amplify distorted information from social media platforms through sloppy reporting. This may lead to “information laundering”—intentionally or unintentionally bringing information from dubious sources into the mainstream news cycle (Philips 2018). Research also shows that news media often cover fringe phenomena on social media platforms in a way that makes the issue appear larger or more important than it is in reality (Donovan and Boyd 2021; Philipps 2018; Jungherr and Schroeder 2021). Similarly, research shows that mainstream media uncritically report on “societal trends” based on social media data without asking whether such data is real, the result of an astroturfing operation, or concocted by the influence-for-hire industry (McGregor 2019).

Since it is not just the presence of a free press but the quality of its reporting that determines whether the fourth estate is an effective force against information disorder, media training is needed to contain and counter distorted information, as development agencies and scholars argue (Jungherr and Schroeder 2021; UNESCO 2018).

CHALLENGES TO INSTITUTION- AND STRUCTURE-CENTERED APPROACHES TO REDUCING THE SUPPLY OF DISTORTED INFORMATION

For several reasons, pressing for government regulation of online content is a strategy fraught with risks for development organizations such as USAID that operate in Asia and the Pacific. First, most such laws do not reliably single out content that may have negative consequences in the political arena. “Awful but lawful” content that violates neither the terms and conditions of social media platforms nor national laws remains online. For example, the video showing a mob killing a Guatemalan girl that has appeared in disinformation campaigns in India since 2015 was still available on YouTube at the time of writing.

Second, influence entrepreneurs frequently find ways to circumvent the more stringent (self-)regulatory frameworks that have emerged around large social media companies. Some influential entrepreneurs have adjusted their strategies to the new environment and increasingly replace disinformation with malinformation, which is harder to detect (Wardle 2019: 7). In addition, an influx of users to hitherto niche platforms such as 2channel, 4chan or 8chan (Aghazadeh et al. 2018: 192) is a reaction to increased (government-required) content regulation on large social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.

Third, pushing for government regulations may also be an ineffective strategy for development organizations such as USAID because social media companies go to great lengths to bypass such laws (Zuboff 2019: 138-155) and even influence their revocation.

Fourth, and perhaps most consequentially, a major shortcoming of calls for more government regulation to mitigate information disorder and its consequences is the fact that many governments in Asia and the Pacific have re-directed content laws away from social media companies to take aim at their own citizens. Across the region, laws seemingly intended to combat fake news shrink the space for dissent by harassing, intimidating, and incarcerating those government critics (Baker McKenzie 2020). It may even be a risk to support government regulations on internet content in consolidated democracies. A recent study showed that the German *Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz* called “[t]he most aggressive effort in a liberal democracy to respond to disinformation and hate speech on social media” (Benkler et al. 2018: 362) prompted governments in Singapore and the Philippines “to adopt copycat models that incorporate more speech repressive criminal provisions” (Benkler et al. 2018: 363).

In short, USAID and its local partners may want to carefully consider any strategy that relies on government regulation of on- and offline content.

Finally, the media training suggested as a mitigation strategy to address the creation and dissemination of distorted information also is likely to face challenges in light of realities on the ground in Asia and the Pacific. In addition to the fact that “Beltway bandits” frequently use development funds intended for journalism training across the region instead of such support going to local news outlets and journalists, such training is unlikely to be effective for several other reasons.

It may be challenging to improve the quality of information supplied by media through fact- and source-checking because the archives and statistical data needed to verify claims may be incomplete or nonexistent in Asia and the Pacific (Jalli 2020). The extreme language diversity across the region may pose an additional challenge to scaling fact-checking and, especially, source-checking in the region (Jalli 2020).

Additionally, journalists working in traditional news media across the region write clickbait articles with emotive headlines for the same reason Northern American and Western European journalists do—to attract readers. They do so not because they are unaware of how such tactics may create or amplify distorted information and thereby contribute to information disorder, but because of financial pressures resulting from the broader dynamics of the regions’ media landscape. The market for traditional news media collapsed across the region with the advent of the internet. While journalism across Asia and the Pacific has always been underfunded, there is even less money available now for the high-quality stories and investigative reporting based on thorough fact- and source-checking that some scholars argue may counter some of the distorted information in the public spheres of the region. In short, even the most

aware and trained journalists write emotive headlines and regurgitate social media stories if their salaries depend on click-driven advertisement revenues.

Anecdotal evidence throughout the report suggests that various institutional and structural variables facilitate demand for distorted information. Siloed media systems controlled by political elites with close links to the government have resulted in decades of biased news across the region. This has not only led to great distrust in traditional news media but also created an appetite for alternative sources of information. Working with local, independent information providers (whether traditional or social media or cultural groups such as theatre companies) that provide a broader selection of news media may be one immediate goal around which development agencies such as USAID, with a commitment to building local partnerships, could address demand for news independent from state-owned or -affiliated media.

One way to at least start to address the complex environment that media representatives and journalists face across the region would be by funding a network of dedicated news outlets to produce investigative pieces. Accompanying such an effort could be a collaboration with companies such as Newswhip, which helps the media predict which stories will go viral (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017: 9). Extending Newswhip's service to non-English-speaking media markets may create new opportunities for local journalists to counter the spread of distorted information preemptively by publishing news in local languages that provide accurate information *before* a story based on distorted information goes viral.

In addition, USAID and its local partner organizations could work toward the creation of fact- and source-checking websites in local languages that provide the kind of cross-media content and context verification that Snopes.com does for the United States.

In the long term, development organizations may want to support a financially sustainable and diverse media landscape both on- and offline (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017: 51). USAID programs could therefore focus on fostering diverse local news markets that provide counternarratives to stories propagated via disinformation campaigns.

This can be a delicate task that requires walking a fine line between supporting and influencing local media landscapes. Past efforts to force such diversification have often backfired due to the clandestine ways in which they were executed. For instance, the US government hired a US PR agency, The Lincoln Group, in 2006 to plant hundreds of news stories by US military personnel in local newspapers across Iraq that “portrayed events in Iraq in cheery terms” (Sunstein and Vermeule 2008: 27). Similarly, between 2009 and 2012, USAID set up and ran an alternative Twitter network in Cuba through intermediaries with the aim of providing a social media platform that was not under the control of the Cuban government. The Associated Press exposed the project in 2014 (Butler et al. 2014); it is featured in the 2020 annual report of Oxford University's Program on Democracy and Technology as an example of Western disinformation campaigns (Bradshaw et al. 2020b: 108). In both cases, the negative fallout was considerable, as it is precisely such clandestine activities that feed into conspiracy theories and fuel disinformation campaigns about the West.

Not only are transparency and full disclosure paramount in programs that aim to strengthen the independence of local independent media, but such efforts must be accompanied by programs that support reforms in other areas of the political system. For example, judicial reform, in combination with a robust

framework for whistleblowers, is an area for USAID engagement with the goal of containing and countering disinformation.

DAMPEN DEMAND THROUGH INSTITUTIONAL- AND STRUCTURAL REFORM (LOWER LEFT QUADRANT, FIGURE 15)

Finally, USAID may want to consider a developmentalist approach to containing and countering information disorder. Several studies argue that the epistemic crises at the heart of democratic decline around the world in general (Benkler et al. 2019: 351) and in Asia and the Pacific in particular are the result of “differing contextual trajectories” and “not an ‘online phenomenon’” (Radue 2019: 1).

Evidence presented throughout the case studies also raises the possibility that, rather than driving the democratic rollback across the region, the creation and dissemination of distorted information may be an expression of it. In other words, the confusion between cause and effect occurs because scholars, politicians, and the media believe the current democratic rollback must have current origins. “Something fundamental was happening to threaten democracy, and our collective eye fell on the novel and rapidly changing—technology” (Benkler et al. 2018: 4).

Rather than technological change, however, it is the deep societal rifts brought about by worsening socio-economic inequality and their political manifestations that have resulted in a democratic rollback in Asia and the Pacific and elsewhere, scholars argue (Chin 2021; LaRocco 2012). Mitigation strategies should therefore focus on narrowing societal rifts and the underlying causes that provide distorted information an entry point to the political arena.

If information disorder is a consequence rather than a cause of democratic decline, then the institutional and structural conditions that create supply and demand for distorted information need to be addressed. Hence, rather than “algorithm angst” driving solutions to contain and counter disinformation used for authoritarian ends, development agencies such as USAID can address disinformation more effectively in the long term if they focus on more traditional areas of development. Programs that aim to curb corruption, reform judiciaries, improve the accountability and transparency of the political process, and address the socio-economic conditions that create inequality along both horizontal and vertical lines may be the most effective long-term mitigation strategies to contain and counter information disorder in Asia and the Pacific.

CLOSING INSIGHTS

Several broad insights can be drawn from this report on information disorder in Asia and the Pacific. First, while information has been manipulated to achieve political goals across the region for centuries, there has been a democratization and decentralization of power in information disorder in recent years. Regional powers and even small states have become players in the information disorder in their own right. Second, the country case studies suggest that national contexts mediate the impact of information disorder. Not all distorted information is alike. There is also considerable temporal and spatial variance in the dissemination of distorted information. Third, since local conditions shape information disorder, mitigation strategies to contain and counter it need to be tailored to specific contexts. There is no silver bullet. Finally, information disorder may be as much a consequence as a cause of democratic decline. This report

provides evidence that socio-economic inequality and its political manifestations, such as societal rifts along both horizontal and vertical lines, facilitate the manipulation of information for political ends. Information disorder takes advantage of pre-existing political polarization, in other words. A focus on improving socio-economic conditions on which democracies in Asia and the Pacific rest—rather than on technological fixes—may therefore yield the most effective mitigation strategies to contain and counter information disorder in the long term.

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ANNEX I: GUIDING QUESTIONS

Research questions guiding the teams' research on ACTORS included, but were not limited to, the following:

- Is the country under examination the target of disinformation campaigns by foreign states?
- Does the government of the country use disinformation campaigns domestically?
- Are non-state actors spreading disinformation?
- Do threats come from centralized sources (states; big companies) or decentralized sources (grassroots mobilization; small businesses) (Benkler et al. 2018: 21-22)

Research questions guiding the teams' research on the CAUSES included, but were not limited to, the following:

- Economic gains?
- Because people can?
- Political and social reasons?
- What are the objectives of state-sponsored disinformation in the case study countries?
 - To discredit opponents?
 - To amplify political divisions/ polarization? (GCS 2019: 18).
 - Information influences operations? (GCS 2019: 18).
 - Gain control over (more) resources, win re-election?
- Political:
 - What factors contribute to a successful proliferation of disinformation? For example, do lack of freedom of expression and lack of freedom of press facilitate the spread of disinformation?" (SOW)
- Social/Cultural:
 - Do cultural, religious beliefs and/or historic political inclinations influence the way disinformation is spread?
- Institutional:

- “Does the lack of privacy protection and customer protection policies and laws prevent effective solutions from being deployed?” (SOW)
- Technological:
 - Are disinformation threats caused by technological change or institutional dynamics (laws, social norms) “that shape how we develop our beliefs about what’s going on and why”? (Benkler et al. 2018: 21-22).
 - Echo chambers (Shu et al. 2020)
- Commercial:
 - Collapse of traditional media landscape?
 - Are alternative media spaces facilitating the spread of disinformation? If so, how? Are they protecting against disinformation? If so, how?
 - Who is susceptible to disinformation? Who is not? Why not?

“Do demographics (age, education, background, ethnicity) of the population affect the development of disinformation?”

To identify building blocks in information manipulation aimed at destabilizing democracy and strengthening authoritarianism, the following research questions guided the teams’ research on TOOLS :

- How do political actors use disinformation across Asia and the Pacific?
- “Are there historical trends in the use of disinformation in the region?” (SOW)
- “What tactics of disinformation states and political actors are using to achieve authoritarian ends and discredit democracy?” (SOW)
 - Information manipulation (e.g. Russia) vs information control (e.g. China)?
- “What tools do malign actors use to amplify and spread disinformation?” (SOW)
 - Social media, including fake social media profiles to infiltrate civil society organizations?
 - Traditional media (TV, radio, etc.)?
 - Other means (e.g. street power, religious sights, etc.)?
- “Where does disinformation fit within the broader toolbox of advancing authoritarianism?” (SOW)

- “Are there similar patterns in the use of disinformation tools at the regional level by, for example, China and Russia, Iran and Saudi Arabia, to discredit democratic processes in the countries of inquiry?” (SOW)
- “Is there evidence of ‘authoritarian learning’ and evolution of disinformation tools by these actors?” (SOW)
- How do actors “combine techniques to achieve impact?”

Research questions guiding the teams’ research on *consequences* will include, but are not limited to, the following:

Structure

- Political?
 - “Are the spheres of influence [of China and Russia, Iran and Saudi Arabia?] expanding or contracting?” (SOW)
 - “Has disinformation proven to be an effective tool for expanding authoritarian influence? Everywhere or just some locations? –Why? Are they working at similar or cross purposes? How do national governments in the region amplify and/or react to these disinformation giants?” (SOW)
 - Cooptation and control of digital space?
- Social?
 - Ethnic/race/class/religious relations?
- “Include a section on how disinformation has impacted the status and movements of women and LGBTQIA+ people in the region”

Agency

- How has disinformation affected individual attitudes towards democracy?

Research questions guiding the teams’ research on MITIGATION STRATEGIES included, but were not limited to, the following:

- “What are the roles of the state, civil society, and the private sector in the fight against disinformation? Other actors?” (SOW)
- Government
 - Have governments tried to counter disinformation through internet shutdowns? If so, to what effect?

- What laws and regulations are in place to contain disinformation and what effects have they had?
- Civil Society
 - Are there examples of civil society organizations (CSO) or other players that have successfully addressed disinformation?
- Media
 - Is there a correlation between independent media outlets being present and disinformation levels?
- Research
 - “Are there successful approaches that countered disinformation and authoritarian tendencies involving artificial intelligence and other sophisticated technologies that we could learn from?” (SOW)
 - Have universities, think tanks, etc. suggested solutions specifically for the situation on the ground in the case study countries?
- Commercial/Private Sector
 - “What are international social media platforms doing to counter disinformation in the region (Facebook, Twitter, Google, etc.)? Are they successful in the local context, the regional level? Are there success stories of private sector engagement to counter disinformation?” (SOW). What strategies have led them to make changes in their operations? (i.e., advocacy by local actors, advocacy by US govt agencies, financial repercussions, etc.?)
 - Are there other commercial responses beyond the international social media platforms that are countering disinformation?

Cross-cutting issues:

- “Have any countries in Asia that are targeted with disinformation had success in their responses?” (SOW)
- Are there states where there has been a failure to act against disinformation? If so, what were the consequences? “What strategies have led to demonstrable resilience against disinformation?” (SOW) What strategies have failed to contain and counter disinformation?
- “How can countering disinformation efforts reach large audiences at scale? Could such solutions be used as a cross learning at the regional level?” (SOW)

ANNEX 2: BIOGRAPHIES OF THE TEAM

DR. MICHAEL BUEHLER, TEAM LEAD

Michael Buehler is an Associate Professor in Comparative Politics in the Department of Politics and International Studies at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). Dr. Buehler specializes in Southeast Asian politics with reference to state-society relations during democratization and decentralization. He published a book with Cambridge University Press titled *The Politics of Shari'a Law: Islamist Activists and the State in Democratizing Indonesia*; articles in disciplinary journals such as *Comparative Politics and Party Politics*; area studies journals such as *Third World Quarterly* and *South East Asia Research*; chapters in *Beyond Oligarchy, Problems of Democratization in Indonesia*, and *Deepening Democracy in Indonesia*; as well as on-line contributions to *Aljazeera*, *Inside Indonesia*, *The Diplomat*, *The Financial Times*, and *New Mandala*.

Over the past 15 years, Dr. Buehler has consulted on aid effectiveness, corruption eradication, party financing, procurement reform and other governance and political reform issues at the national and subnational level for, among others, the Asia Foundation, the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), the German Technical Cooperation (GTZ), the Natural Resource Governance Institute (NRGI), Transparency International, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the World Bank. Dr. Buehler has also provided political risk evaluations for private sector companies operating across Southeast Asia and is a regular contributor to briefs on political and economic developments in the region for Oxford Analytica, a business consultancy company.

His publications are available at <https://michaelbuehler.asia/>

MR. CHRISTOPHER GREENE, PAPUA NEW GUINEA EXPERT

Mr. Christopher Greene's expertise lies in the research, evaluation, and management of media in developing countries. In the past, he served as a Short-Term Adviser for URS/AECOM in Papua New Guinea, conducting an evaluation of the Media Development Initiative, researching and writing a situation analysis. He also served as the Team Lead on the Media Development Initiative in Papua New Guinea. He is currently working on a publication examining the media's role in public diplomacy across Asia.

DR. SAMEEN A. MOHSIN ALI, NEPAL EXPERT

Sameen A. Mohsin Ali is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the Mushtaq Gurmani School of Humanities and Social Sciences (MGSHSS) at the Lahore University of Management Sciences, Pakistan. She completed her PhD in Politics and International Studies from SOAS University of London in 2018 and holds an MSc in Comparative Politics from the London School of Economics and Political Science. Sameen's expertise lies in the fields of comparative politics and development studies, with a focus on South Asia. Her doctoral research focused on the politics of bureaucratic appointments in Pakistan and her wider

research interests include bureaucratic performance and state capacity, public health governance and communication (especially immunization), and the politics of donor engagement in South Asia. Dr Ali is currently a co-investigator for two projects: the Education, Justice and Memory Network (EdJAM), a project investigating the teaching and learning of the violent past in Uganda, Cambodia, Colombia, Pakistan, and the UK, and an FCDO funded project to develop technological tools for financial analytics for the Punjab Finance Department. She has worked as a political economy consultant for DFID and Bertlesmann Stiftung, and on projects for The Asia Foundation and UNICEF. Dr Ali's research has been published in *World Development*, *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, the *European Journal of Development Research*, and the *Journal of Behavioral Public Administration*.

DR. EDWARD SCHATZ, KYRGYZ REPUBLIC EXPERT

Edward Schatz is Professor of Political Science at the University of Toronto. He recently published *Slow Anti-Americanism: Social Movements and Symbolic Politics in Central Asia* with Stanford University Press. His previous books include *Paradox of Power: The Logics of State Weakness in Eurasia* (2017) and *Modern Clan Politics* (2004). He is currently writing a book about the politics of information management in Kyrgyzstan. He has conducted regular fieldwork in Kyrgyzstan since 1998. Schatz speaks fluent Russian and proficient Kyrgyz, Kazakh, and Uzbek.

DR. JANJIRA SOMBATPOONSIRI, THAILAND EXPERT

Janjira Sombatpoonsiri is currently a research-oriented assistant professor at the Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, and an associate at the German Institute for Global and Area Studies. She will also be a fellow at Singapore's Institute of Southeast Asian Studies exploring the interplay between digital mobilization and polarization. Her research has focused on nonviolent activism and social movements in the context of democratization and autocratization, and recently digital repression. Her dissertation-turned-book is *Humor and Nonviolent Struggle in Serbia* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2015). The modified Thai version of this book—published by Matichon Publishing—includes the case of the Thai pro-democracy group 'Red Sunday' and Poland's 'Orange Alternative.' In addition, she has published journal articles in academic journals, including *Global Change, Peace & Security*, *Journal of Peace & Policy*, *Journal of Resistance Studies*, *Asian Journal of Peace Building*, *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* and *Journal of Civil Society* (forthcoming), and several book chapters. She has published op-eds in several Thai and international press, including *101 World* (in Thai), *Opendemocracy.org*, *The Conversation Global*, and *International Politics and Society* (IPS).

She is currently a member of the Civic Research Network (CRN) of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and a board member for International Peace Research Foundation (IPRAF). In 2016, she was a research fellow at the Jawaharlal Nehru Institute of Advanced Study, and in 2017 a visiting fellow at the Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses in India. Between September and December 2020, she is an international visiting fellow at the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy.

SUPPORT PERSONNEL

As AEO is set-up as a demand-driven mechanism, core operations and administrative functions of the project are billed directly to the activity (i.e. development of the activity authorization, recruitment,

contracting and fielding consultants, organizing data collection, etc.). Ms. Ganyapak Thanasant, AEO Director of Operations, oversaw the activity from start to finish as well as all the activity's operations and finance. She is the primary point of contact with USAID. Dr. Deanna Gordon will serve as Quality Assurance Lead and will periodically review the team's progress and ensure that work is on track and of expected quality. AEO Senior Associate Ms. Liesl Kim served as research assistant to support the team in addition to providing administrative, logistical, and operational support.