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HOW INFORMATION DISORDER DESTABILIZES DEMOCRACY AND STRENGTHENS AUTHORITARIANISM:
EVIDENCE, TRENDS, AND ACTIONABLE MITIGATION STRATEGIES FROM ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

USAID Asia Emerging Opportunities Project (AEO)
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ABOUT AEO

- Asia Emerging Opportunities (AEO) is a five-year USAID contract awarded to Integra Government Services International (Integra)
- Designed to provide analytical services to USAID Asia Bureau and USAID Asia Missions to respond to development opportunities and challenges
- Currently in its fourth year, AEO has conducted 18 activities, with 7 on-going and 12 completed

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INTRODUCTIONS

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OUTLINE

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3. Nepal
4. Papua New Guinea
5. Thailand
6. Comparative Perspective
7. Key Takeaways and Areas for USAID Engagement
8. Questions
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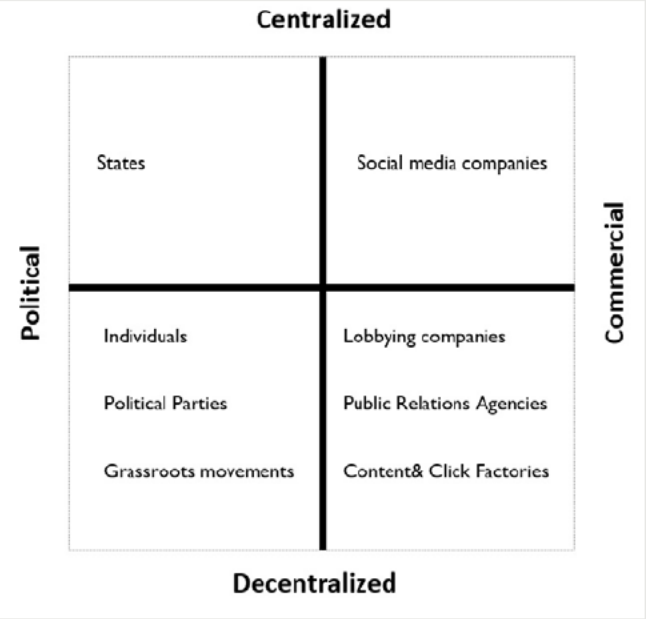
CONTEXT

- Situating information disorder in Asia and Pacific in its historical and global context
  - Information disorder a problem "going back to the ancients" (Dalton 2021)
  - Information disorder cannot be reduced to "good vs evil narrative" (Ong 2021)
  - Why information disorder continues to warrant our attention
- Long history of information disorder in Asia and Pacific Region
  - Colonial- and post-colonial powers have manipulated information for decades
  - Current information disorder rooted in historical experience

ACTORS AND NARRATIVES

- States one among many players
- "Democratization" and "decentralization" of information disorder
- An unruly place



- Countless forms of misinformation, disinformation and malinformation
- Metanarratives running through most of them
  - Democratic politics leads to chaos (-)
  - Democracies lack capacity (-)
  - "The West" cannot be trusted (-)
  - Exaggerating achievements (+)
  - Downplaying failures (+)
  - Status quo not perfect but at least reliable (+)

CAUSES AND VECTORS FOR DISSEMINATION

- To gain and maintain political influence
- To profit financially
- Because one can/to signal belonging to a group
- Transmission view vs Ritualistic view of communication

- Great appetite for news sources that provide alternative to official narrative
  - Rumors
  - Social media
- Manipulation of images and video more important than text?
- Social media often synonymous with internet

CONSEQUENCES

- Immediate impact
  - Narrowing of political arena
  - Lowering quality of public discourse
  - Exclusivist politics
- Medium- Long term impact
  - Decline in political participation
  - Low voter turnout
  - Corroding democracies
- Information disorder: Cause or consequence of democratic decline?

THE KYRGYZ REPUBLIC

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CONTEXT

Kyrgyz Republic's experience with information disorder cannot be separated from its:

- Weak state capacity
- Proximity to Russia
- Legacy of Soviet-style media
- Post-Soviet populist nationalism (with soft anti-Westernism)



Source: (AP Photo/Vladimir Voronin)

ACTORS AND NARRATIVES

Russia

- Long-term shaping of info space
- Real-time info interventions (contrast Bakiyev in 2010 with Jeenbekov in 2020)
- Narratives: anti-Westernism/Americanism, democracy destabilizes

China

- "Quiet" actor and late comer
- Narratives: China as reliable, stable alternative, promotes modernization

Domestic actors

- Regime (weak narrative: populism, anti-corruption)
- Rival cliques (narrative: corruption)

CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES

- Why is disinformation created & spread?
  - Looking at the demand and supply-side
- Techniques
  - Russian media
  - Troll mercenaries
- Consequences
  - Democratic backsliding
  - Human Rights
  - Gender

MITIGATION STRATEGIES

- Robust real-time fact-checking
- Enlist help of social media giants (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, WhatsApp)
- Ongoing support for professional journalism
- Robust support for media literacy
  - in schools, universities
  - simple public ad campaigns: (e.g., promoting reverse-image searches and link-checkers like Crowdtangle)

NEPAL

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CONTEXT

Nepal's experience with information disorder cannot be separated from its:

- turbulent political history
- democratic transition under a new constitution
- complex social structures and ethnic, religious, and linguistic cleavages
- great power competition in the region



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USAID Nepal. 2013. At a monthly workshop. https://www.flickr.com/photos/usaidnepal/19500036391/

ACTORS AND NARRATIVES

- **Domestic**
  - Info disorder lacks strategic organization and is individualized/decentralized
    - Political leadership
    - Political Parties
    - Media
  - Narratives lack consistency but are used to amplify already existing cleavages
    - Religion and community relations
    - Buttressing political elites
    - Attacking critics
    - Disasters and disaster response
- **Foreign**
  - India and China exercise considerable influence
  - Both seek to outmaneuver each other
  - US through MCC?

CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES

- Domestic
  - Institutional
  - Political (i.e., 2022 elections)
  - Commercial
- Societal
  - Mistrust
  - Multiple identities and fault lines
    - Gender
- Foreign
  - Great Power relations

Techniques remain rudimentary still, but with the potential to evolve rapidly:

- Legislation and regulation
- Party cadres, youth wings, intimidation and violence
- Posts on social media with false information
- Trolls to harass opponents and dissenters online
- Withholding information

MITIGATION STRATEGIES

- Fact checking and media watch organizations are cropping up
  - South Asia Fact Check; Nepal Fact Check
  - Center for Media Research; Media Action Nepal
  - Freedom Forum
  - Martin Chauthari (research)
- Digital reach is expanding but digital literacy is lacking
- Greater media independence, transparency, and human resource development
- Cementing local government, transitional justice and improved governance for greater inclusion
- Electoral Commission online code of conduct exists but need support with regulation

PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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CONTEXT

- Diverse, rural, fissiparous but wealthy
- Dysfunctional State
  - Poor Services
  - Corruption
- Weak Information Infrastructure
  - Mobile signal not 100%
  - No national print or broadcast coverage



Source: GSMA2019 Digital Transformation

ACTORS AND NARRATIVES

- Elections in 2022
- Corruption
- COVID
- Witchcraft
- Organ Harvesting
- Old and new Chinese diaspora communities

- Internal
  - Local Influencers
  - Politicians
  - Health Workers
  - Mischief-makers
- External
  - US Evangelical Churches
  - China

CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES

- Isolation
- Ignorance
- Ambition
- Greed
- Mistrust



- Violence
- Vaccine hesitancy
- Mistrust
- Democratic Deficit

MITIGATION STRATEGIES

Work with existing, local groups such as TPI, Media Council, IMR

Short-Term

- Election fact-checking
- Short Wave

Medium-Term

- Monitoring social media especially comments
- Support local lobbying on Telefol

International

- Engage US evangelical leadership
- Link PNG groups to international efforts

THAILAND

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CONTEXT

- Persistence of feudal political order
- Information manipulation campaigns help sustain this order
- Campaigns have intensified over the past years as ruling elites face democratic threats, especially in digital space that is rapidly expanding
- Thailand's internet penetration = 53 percent (2020)
- Thailand's social media penetration = 74 percent (2020)

ACTORS AND NARRATIVES

Domestic:

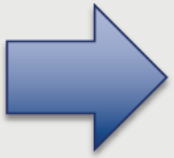
- *Political & centralized*: Internal Security Operations Command's (ISOC) & Royal Volunteer School
- *Political & decentralized*: Royalist civic groups
- *Commercial & decentralized*: Private companies, business allies of the regime

International: Chinese media



- Royalism, the military and Thai traditions as national pillars
- Democracy causes corruption and conflicts, undermining social order
- Western democracies pursue colonization

Political & decentralized: Buddhist nationalist groups



Muslim minority is taking over predominantly Buddhist Thailand

CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES

Causes:

- Institutional entrenchment of information manipulation campaigns
- Ongoing conflicts over ethno-religious identity and governance

Consequences:

- Undemocratic practices unhindered
- Legal repression of oppositional CSOs fostered & religious intolerance intensifying, thus further shrinking pluralistic civic space
- But official channels are not always effective





Source: https://www.facebook.com/themettad/ (image on the left) / https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1862849/future-forward-dissolved (image of the right)

MITIGATION STRATEGIES

- A 'whole of society' approach
- Technical: Supporting existing journalist efforts:
  - Media-based factcheck (AFP, ThaiPBS)
  - Grassroots/crowdsource-based factcheck (but avoid online vigilantism)
- Institutional: tackling the role of institutional actors, democratic oversight of the armed forces
- Political & societal: addressing polarization, conflict resolution



Source: https://www.aspi.org.au/report/whatshappeninginthailand-power-dynamics-thailands-digital-activism

COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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INFORMATION DISORDER IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Actors

- Mostly domestic actors, except in Kyrgyz Republic
- Government-led information most consolidated and consisted in Thailand
- Non-state actors play prominent role in all four case studies
- Information disorder reflection of broader power constellations

Narratives

- Rarely explicitly pro-authoritarianism or anti-democratic
- Main goal is to sow confusion and broaden existing societal rifts
- Narratives are highly context specific building on local anxieties and fears

INFORMATION DISORDER IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE (cont.)

Causes

- Political and financial objectives.
- Creating and sharing distorted information as a social lubricant/ signaling
- Great appetite for alternative news sources after decades of state control

Tools

- Considerable variance in ways distorted information spreads
- Information disorder ***not*** an online phenomenon in any of the cases

Consequences

- Information disorder amplifies societal rifts but also depends on them
- Information disorder does not automatically lead to authoritarianism

KEY TAKEAWAYS

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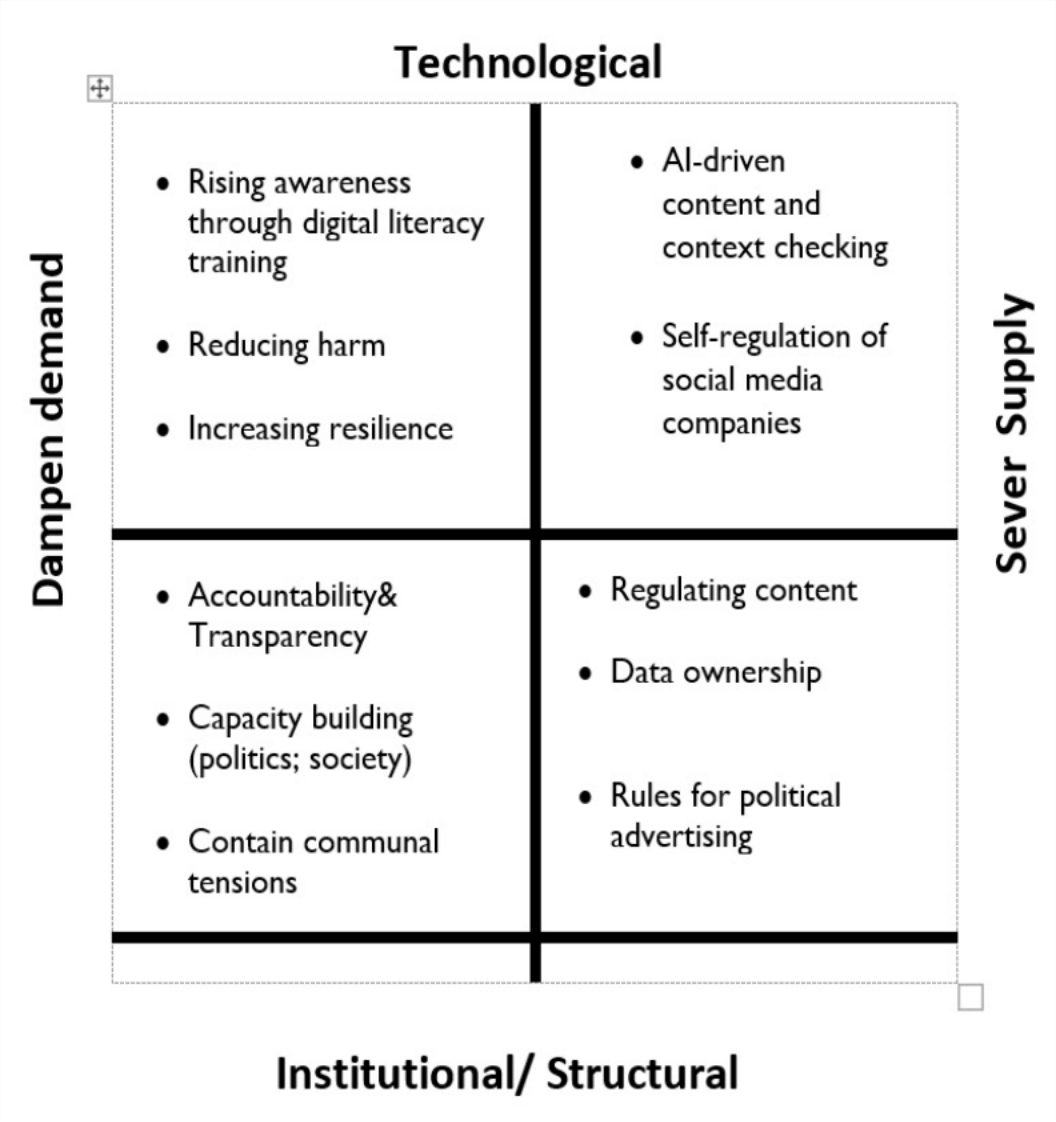
TAKE-AWAY POINTS AND AREAS FOR USAID ENGAGEMENT



QUESTIONS?

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NEXT STEPS

Draft Report – Week of November 12, 2021

Comments from USAID – Week of November 29, 2021

Final Report - Week of December 13, 2021

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