ACICE
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UPDATE ON
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INFORMATION DOMAIN

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Social Impacts of Disinformation on Public Opinion

Disinformation shapes individuals' perceptions and action

1.   In an era marked by rapid information flow and digital connectedness, disinformation has emerged as a powerful factor in influencing public opinion and group interactions. Disinformation refers to false information that is deliberately produced with the intent to mislead. Social impacts refer to the effects disinformation has on the behaviours, attitudes, and interactions within a society. As misleading information spreads, it can lead to the erosion of trust in public institutions. Examining the social consequences of disinformation reveals that it is more than just a problem of falsehoods, but can be a powerful force transforming the terrain of public debate and collective identity.

2.   Disinformation often exploits personal biases, making it especially appealing to audiences that share similar biases. This appeal is based on the psychological predisposition known as confirmation bias. Confirmation bias is the tendency for individuals to seek out, interpret, and remember information that confirms their pre-existing beliefs, hypotheses and values, while giving less consideration to alternative perspectives or contradicting evidence. When faced with disinformation that aligns with their preconceptions, it affirms and validates the prior beliefs and perspectives of individuals. This interplay between disinformation and personal biases emphasises the importance of developing critical thinking and media literacy skills, to

enable informed decision making, through a better understanding of how information is created and consumed.

Erosion of trust in public institutions due to spread of disinformation

3.   The erosion of trust in public institutions caused by disinformation has far-reaching social consequences, including its impact on public opinion and the activities individuals participate in their community. As misleading narratives spread on social media, the public may become more wary of public institutions.

4.   The 2019 Indonesian presidential election was a notable example where disinformation and distortion about candidates were spread through social media platforms. The Guardian reported that rumours had circulated about the existence of seven shipping containers filled with millions of ballot papers that were already marked ahead of the simultaneous presidential and legislative elections. During Indonesia's previous presidential elections in 2014, the credibility and standing of Presidential candidate Joko Widodo was affected by a smear campaign that alleged he was both a communist and Chinese.

5.   The widespread dissemination of disinformation can contribute to a decline in trust in election institutions. The impact of disinformation in the above example can undermine the integrity and legitimacy of elections. Disinformation can also alter voter perceptions and behaviours, prompting individuals to vote based on misleading narratives rather than accurate information. **This highlights the critical need for efforts to combat disinformation and improve the integrity of democratic institutions.**

Disinformation contributes to deepening societal divide

6.   Disinformation can impact social cohesion and influence public opinion in different ways. For instance, malicious actors disseminating disinformation frequently frames issues in divided terms, in an "us

versus them" manner. This can cover various subject matters, including political ideology, social issues, and cultural identity.

7.   Disinformation can also influence policy-making and civic participation by shaping public perception. Policymakers may be compelled to address public concerns fuelled by disinformation, leading them to prioritise and deal with immediate public sentiments over longer-term policy issues. This leads to reactionary responses and policy decisions that are not based on strong empirical evidence, undermining the effectiveness of public policies. For example, the dissemination of disinformation had shaped public perceptions, policy debates and political discourse around migration policies in Europe. It had influenced the way the public view migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, polarised communities, and brought about greater difficulties in having meaningful debates on migration issues.

8.   **Migration issue in Italy.** The subject of migration has dominated political discourse in Italy since the mid- 2010s. Political campaigns have linked migration to economic downturn and social problems. *BBC* reported that Italy's populists, who hold anti-immigrant views, are seeking to address issues related to the economy and EU's debt laws through the lens of migration issues. A news report has shown that Matteo Salvini, the League's leader, often took to social media to spread disinformation about migrants, portraying them as a drain on social services.[1] The same news article also mentioned that the immigration narrative resonated with the people and led to increased support for the League. This had led to further societal divisions, as people became more entrenched in their beliefs. **The politicised environment made it difficult for communities to have fact-based conversations about migration policies, as these debates frequently deteriorated into accusations and hostilities (Figure 1).**

> Figure 1: Migrants marched and demonstrators came from all around Campania, Italy, to demand improved rights and security for migrants.

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[1] The League is an Italian right-wing political party that was created in the early 1990s. Over time, it has shifted its platform to take a stronger nationalist and anti-immigrant posture.

9.   **Long-Term Effects on Society.** The long-term effects of disinformation on public opinion can have far-reaching consequences for society. Constant exposure to disinformation can lead to de-sensitisation, which occurs when people become indifferent to false narratives, and such information became "truth" for them. Over time, they start to feel less concerned and connected, even less tolerant, from those who hold different views. This could fragment trust within communities, with people preferring to associate themselves with like-minded groups. This reinforces their perspectives and opinions instead of encouraging inclusive debate.

Conclusion

10.   To combat disinformation and reduce its societal impact on public opinion, a multi-prong approach such as promoting open conversation and cultivating empathy are required. **Possible solutions include education initiatives, encouraging transparency in reporting, responsive governance, and global cooperation.** Education initiatives can include the implementation of comprehensive media literacy programs in schools and communities. This would enable individuals to critically analyse information sources and be more discerning with the information they receive. These programmes should teach students how to identify credible news sources, as well as how to think critically.

11.   Encouraging transparent reporting by media outlets is also crucial as it builds public trust. It is also important to ensure the information is verified independently before it is published to the public. One of the key strategies to strengthen institutional trust is to

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encourage governments to address public issues through evidence-based policy and open communication. This demonstrates accountability and responsiveness to citizens' needs.

12.   Disinformation is a worldwide issue; hence international cooperation is essential. Countries can share best practices and tactics for combatting disinformation on a larger scale. By implementing these tactics together, we may reduce the societal consequences of disinformation, re-establish trust, and foster constructive dialogue, thus resulting in a more educated and united community.

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CONTACT DETAILS

All reports can be retrieved from our website at www.acice-asean.org/resource/.

For any queries and/or clarifications, please contact ACICE at ACICE@defence.gov.sg.
Prepared by:
ADMM Cybersecurity and Information Centre of Excellence

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