

Senate Committee

Senate Standing Committees on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade 2020 - 2021

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QUESTION ON NOTICE /Written

002 – Senate Standing Committees on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade – 11 December 2020

Topic: SELECT COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN INTERFERENCE THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA:
Disinformation related activities

Senator Jenny McAllister

Question

Could you provide the committee with a list of the activities that were undertaken prior to this year, between the white paper identifying this as a challenge and the key achievements of the department between the publication of that white paper and the beginning of this year, in relation to this matter?

Answer

DFAT's approach to disinformation recognises that the best antidote to disinformation is ensuring there is reliable, credible information available to the general public. Strengthening electoral systems and media capacity is one way to tangibly increase transparency and build the credibility of institutions. Since the release of the Foreign Policy White Paper in 2017 and the beginning of 2020, DFAT has invested in programs to build resilience in the Indo-Pacific region.

Over that time period, four DFAT programs have specifically identified disinformation as a challenge and focused on strengthening the information environment in the Indo-Pacific:

- Australia Awards Short Course - Democratic Resilience: Digital and Media Literacy
- Democratic Resilience Journalist Capacity Building Activities
- Indonesia Democratic Governance Reform
- Supporting the rules-based order in Southeast Asia

The key achievements of these programs, in relation to disinformation, are as follows.

The *Australia Awards Short Course – Democratic Resilience: Digital and Media Literacy* program identified and supported 26 emerging leaders in Indonesia in the countering misinformation space including journalists, government, officials, and civil society actors. The program developed participants' ability to identify ways to improve digital and media literacy in their communities, taught practical skills and techniques for analysing the validity of data and countering disinformation, and helped participants plan and implement awareness-raising and skills-based projects to support digital and media literacy in the Indonesian context.

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Australia's *Democratic Resilience Journalist Capacity Building Activities* in Indonesia is improving professional practices and strengthening the capabilities of journalists to identify reputable and proper sources of information. Through support for competency training, Australia is helping Indonesian journalists develop a basic understanding of standards for producing public information and reducing the potential for 'fake news' to be unwittingly shared.

The *Indonesia Democratic Governance Reform (IDGR)* program has partnered with the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), local civil society organisations and electoral management bodies (EMBs) to improve the way elections are managed. Through these partnerships, Australia is promoting ethical and responsible campaigning in elections, increasing digital capability and address cybersecurity issues. Efforts to address dis/misinformation in elections have included training staff at Indonesia's EMBs to counter hoaxes and incitements to violence, developing a joint strategy with other government and civil society stakeholders on countering dis/misinformation, supporting civil society organisations to detect and report on incidents of dis/misinformation and supporting the establishment of the Civil Society Disinformation Centre ahead of the December 2020 regional elections (Pilkada). The Centre detected and reported on 46 election related hoaxes between April to November 2020.

The *Supporting the rules-based order in Southeast Asia (SEARBO)* program has included a focus on electoral dynamics in Indonesia and the Philippines. Notably, the program produced research on the use of social media for misinformation during the 2019 Philippines election and revealed social media manipulation was fully integrated in campaign strategies and targeted at hyper-local communities.ⁱ These insights were widely shared in the Philippines and Southeast Asia through policy roundtables in Manila and Kuala Lumpur - dialogues with technology platforms and international media coverage. The report was also presented to the Malaysian Minister for Communications. The research is now being expanded to Indonesia, Malaysia and Myanmar to examine the nature of disinformation in the context of Southeast Asian elections and the regulatory and technology responses.

ⁱ Ong, Jonathan, Tapsell, Ross & Curato, Nicole (2019). Tracking digital disinformation in the 2019 Philippine Midterm Election. Public report available at: www.newmandala.org/disinformation