

### Official Truths in a War on Fake News: Governmental Fact-Checking in Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand

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# Official Truths in a War on Fake News: Governmental Fact-Checking in Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand

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## Abstract

This article analyses the practice of state-operated fact-checking websites in Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand. It is the first empirical study of governmental news corrections in Southeast Asia and covers more than 2,700 official posts published by Malaysia's *Sebenarnya.my*, Singapore's *Factually*, and Thailand's *Anti-Fake News Center*. It finds that correction practices across the sites mainly function to sustain the salience of a supposedly constant and omnipresent fake news threat. Assuming an important role in strategic political communication, official fact checks accompany domestic fake news discourses that prepare the ground for restrictive legislation. At the same time, the analysis did not reveal any propagandistic abuse as the sites refrained from excessively defending governments and accusing political opponents. This finding is qualified regarding Singapore's *Factually* that recently changed its approach towards targeting government critics personally.

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## Keywords

Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, fake news, online falsehoods, governmental fact-checking, propaganda, discourse

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## Introduction

When Thailand's Ministry of Digital Economy and Society launched its Anti-Fake News Center on 1 November 2019, media reporting suggested that this was the first such institution in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations or ASEAN (Leesa-Nguansuk, 2019). Ironically, this reporting was false; fully state-operated fact-checking websites have existed in neighbouring Malaysia (Sebenarnya.my) since 2017 and in Singapore (Factually) since 2012. In addition, state-supported fact-check services have been in operation in Indonesia (StopHoax.id) since 2018 and in Thailand (SureAndShare) since 2015. Though a growing number of private independent fact-checking services can be found in parts of Southeast Asia,<sup>1</sup> the inauguration of Thailand's Anti-Fake News Center highlighted state-centred responses as an especially prevalent element of combating fake news in the region. This article is the first systematic study of governmental fact-checking in Southeast Asia. It analyses correction practices of Malaysia's *Sebenarnya.my*, Singapore's *Factually*, and Thailand's Anti-Fake News Center.<sup>2</sup> The article focuses on state-operated news corrections and thus distinguishes itself from scholarly work that has dealt with the fake news paradigm from other perspectives.

Over the past years, the literature on truth, facts, and fake has grown exponentially, with particularly high outputs after the 2016 US presidential election. Initial resistance against accepting fake news as an academic term due to its perceived imprecision (Habgood-Coote, 2019; Tandoc et al., 2018) appears to have given way to a certain normalisation (Egelhofer and Lecheler, 2019; Egelhofer et al., 2020; Pepp et al., 2019). In this article, the term fake news is understood broadly as false information, regardless of content categories, disseminators' intentions, or affected interests. The broad understanding corresponds with the vast scope of information addressed by the fact-checking sites.

One of the main themes in the literature has been the probable impact of deliberately false information on public discourse. It has been shown that the salience of fake news may carry significant agenda-setting power, spilling over to traditional media reporting (Vargo et al., 2018). Trust in institutions and in the media may be diminished (Egelhofer et al., 2020; Van Duyn and Collier, 2019). There is general agreement in the literature that the rise of social media has exacerbated the effects of selective information exposure through so-called filter bubbles that drive polarising tendencies in societies (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017; Humprecht, 2019; Spohr, 2017; Wasserman, 2020). In this perspective, some research has also evaluated traditional media's strategy to assign all blame to social media in an effort to defend the journalistic profession (Creech, 2020; Tandoc et al., 2019; Wasserman, 2020). A substantial amount of literature investigated how the fake news label has been politicised and used to discredit unfavourable reporting or political opponents (Al-Rawi, 2019; Brummette et al., 2018; Schulz et al., 2020; Smith, 2019; van der Linden et al., 2020). More fundamentally, some authors have advanced the argument that the truth is more than ever before a contested notion that lacks a shared epistemology (Waisbord, 2018). With a view to Southeast Asia, Tandoc et al. (2017) have described the occurrence of fake news in Singapore and analysed which techniques Singaporeans use to authenticate information they encountered in social media. In Thailand, the impact of fake news on public

opinion was the underlying subject of a study on social media literacy in Bangkok (Noosom and Suttisima, 2019).

Some publications related to the fake news phenomenon have focused on private fact-checking, most of it covering the USA and Europe. Several authors have analysed the institutional aspects and professional ethics of fact-checkers. Amazeen (2019) has argued that the decline in journalism, public disempowerment, technological change, social crises, and reform movements have been catalysts in the emergence of fact-checking. In this setting, non-journalistic fact-checkers have emerged from the periphery of news media to assume more important roles as data advocates and activists (Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill, 2018). According to Krause et al. (2020), fact-checkers attempt to define the risk of misinformation and establish themselves as trustworthy risk mitigators. Journalists, however, have advocated for clear boundaries between fact-checking and activism, emphasising that fact-checking should be non-partisan (Mena, 2019). Moreover, Graves (2017) has called for attention to the contested epistemology of fact-checking and the uncertain institutional realities in a less certain factual terrain. Graves (2018) and Humprecht (2020) also demonstrated that fact-checking organisations often differ in the understanding of their mission, target, and practices, which may affect the transparency of their work. However, Uscinski and Butler's (2013) broad and fundamental criticism of fact-checkers' "naïve political epistemology" based on a tacit presupposition that facts were unambiguous and not subject to interpretation has largely been rejected (Amazeen, 2015).

A great deal of scholarly attention has been devoted to the effects that different fact-checking settings and methods may have. Research by Nyhan et al. (2020) seems to suggest that journalistic fact checks can reduce misperceptions but often have minimal effects on candidate evaluations or vote choice. In addition, the ability to correct political misinformation with fact-checking appears to depend quite substantially on the audience's pre-existing beliefs, ideology and knowledge (Fridkin et al., 2015; Jarman, 2016; Walter et al., 2020) but possibly also on social connections and emotional attachment between fact-checkers and rumour spreaders (Margolin et al., 2018). Looking at factors for persuasiveness, Barker et al. (2019) have shown that aggregated fact checks had a bigger impact on perceptions about politicians than individual fact checks. Nonetheless, many uncertainties remain. For instance, the work of Carnahan and Garrett (2020) yielded the interesting result that two-sided messages, which repeated the inaccuracy before correcting it, performed better in corrections than one-sided ones. Moreover, though fact-checking may help individuals decide which aspects of a political issue are true, some research has suggested that it may actually lower their ability to perceive the reality surrounding political issues in general (York et al., 2020). Furthermore, fact-checking labels do not seem to have a beneficial effect on credibility perceptions of individual news posts but may merely increase judgements of a given site's overall quality (Oeldorf-Hirsch et al., 2020). Despite existing uncertainties, only few authors have advocated against the usefulness of fact-checking in social media altogether (Andersen and Obelitz Sørensen, 2020).

Official fact-checking has received much less scholarly attention, probably due to its suspected lack of independence. In Asia, however, official fact checks remain an important source of information as the Western trend to decentralised fact-checking is much less visible. Nonetheless, a study conducted in China has found that people accorded less credibility to official news corrections than to independent fact checks if these were available (Zeng et al., 2019). As Chinese state media or government organisations repeatedly tried to cover up scandals such as food safety issues (Yang, 2013) or under-reported casualties from crises, they were increasingly challenged as arbiters of truth. Zeng et al. (2019) conclude that state-controlled fact-checking on the Chinese social media site Weibo exposed a considerable potential for abuse. This becomes even more discernible when considering that authoritarian governments rely heavily on quelling rumours. In authoritarian settings, rumours can be particularly destructive due to the scarcity of independent media reporting. In this respect, Huang (2017) has demonstrated that simple denials from (quasi-)official sources were often not successful in reframing the issue and improving citizens' trust in the government. Rather, well-evidenced rebuttals that offered a persuasive alternative characterisation, or rebuttals from public figures widely viewed as independent of the government, were found to be more effective in recovering political trust and support. With a view to Southeast Asia, Goh and Soon (2019) have argued that a multi-stakeholder approach involving non-state actors would be more effective and sustainable in fighting political deceit than a top-down government-centric one. However, as elaborated below, constitutional and political realities continue to place Southeast Asian governments in dominant positions.

This article analyses governmental fact-checking in Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand. The main research problem is how official – as opposed to independent – fact checks contribute to the perception of fake news as a threat to public interests. The research questions are therefore focused on the implicit goals of governmental fact checking: How do fact checks frame the fake news problem, and are they a tool for propaganda?

Previous literature in the wider field of Southeast Asian internet governance has covered, in particular, the effects of improved internet access on political participation (Bui, 2016; Duong, 2017; Goh, 2015; Sinpeng, 2017; Tapsell, 2018) and issues of cyber repression (Deibert et al., 2012; Liu, 2014; Ong, 2021; Rodan, 1998; Sinpeng, 2013). Important aspects of the relation between discourse, law, and free speech have been studied with a view to Singapore (Lee and Lee, 2019; Rajah, 2012). But the function of state-operated fact-checking in governmental communication has so far not been addressed.

Besides adding a new perspective to existing literature on fake news and fact-checking, the article gains its significance from the underlying question as to whether and to what extent falsehoods need to be addressed by law. The depiction of fake news as a threat is expected to trigger further regulatory responses, including the expansion of relevant criminal laws (Helm and Nasu, 2021). ASEAN member states apparently favour strong governments in the fight against fake news (ASEAN, 2018). Indeed, recent legislative developments in Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand redefined the limits of constitutional free speech. These are outlined in the following section.

## **Legal Responses to the Fake News Threat**

Southeast Asia has become the world's most vibrant laboratory of anti-fake news laws since 2018. The Malaysian parliament enacted the Anti-Fake News Act in April 2018, about a month before the general election of 9 May, in an apparent attempt to quell reports about the 1MDB corruption scandal. Besides provisions enabling courts to order the removal of content from the internet, the Act criminalised the malicious creation and distribution of "any fake news or publication containing fake news." The term fake news was defined by the Act as "any news, information, data and reports, which is or are wholly or partly false." The Act thus adopted a broad scope as it did not require proof that such fake news had an impact on any public interest. In December 2019, however, the Anti-Fake News Act was repealed, delivering on a campaign promise of the Pakatan Harapan coalition led by Mahathir Mohamad. Nonetheless, functional equivalents such as section 8A(1) of the Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984, section 211(1) and 233(1)(a) of the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998, and section 505(b) of the Penal Code remained in place.

Neighbouring Singapore made global news when its parliament passed the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) in May 2019. Since the Act entered into force in October 2019, the government has used it on several occasions to order official corrections to be posted next to news or social media posts. Some websites and social media pages have been labelled as "declared online locations" after the government found falsehoods published there repeatedly.<sup>3</sup> Most governmental powers under POFMA are conditioned on evidence that the respective false statement negatively impacts at least one of several defined public interests, which include national security, public health, public safety, public tranquillity, public finances, international relations, elections or referenda, peaceful relations between different groups, and public confidence in the performance of state authorities (section 4). A broadly formulated definition states that "a statement is false if it is false or misleading, whether wholly or in part, and whether on its own or in the context in which it appears" (section 2(2)(b)). POFMA is a mere addition to existing anti-falsehood laws such as the Penal Code (section 505), the Telecommunications Act of 1999 (section 45(b)), the Internal Security Act of 1960 (section 26), the Sedition Act of 1948/64 (sections 3 and 4), and the Protection from Harassment Act of 2014 (sections 3, 4 and 15).

In Thailand, in 2017, the National Legislative Assembly refined the country's Computer Crime Act of 2007, which applies also to false information distributed online. The existing crime of spreading forged or false information on the internet was enhanced by an alternative ground that criminalises the spread of wholly or partially distorted information, on the condition that the act be perpetrated with ill or fraudulent intent and in a manner that is likely to cause damage to the public (section 14 para. 1(1)). Another section criminalising the spreading of false information, albeit without requiring the aforementioned specific intent, has been substantially expanded to cover not only cases where threats to national security or public anxiety are probable consequences but also scenarios where "public safety, national economic security or public infrastructure serving national public interest" are likely to be negatively affected (section 14 para. 1(2)).

These provisions have been the basis for criminal charges and convictions of dozens of people in recent years.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the Act contains the practically important powers for authorities to order access restrictions and content removals. Post-coup orders (97/2014 and 103/2014) published in 2014 by the National Council for Peace and Order that prohibited false media publications were revoked in July 2019, shortly before the government that had emerged from the March 2019 elections took office. However, when the Covid-19 pandemic triggered the declaration of a state of emergency in March 2020, the government, still partially composed of active and former military generals, issued a stipulation that prohibited spreading false news about the Covid-19 situation in Thailand.

Other Southeast Asian countries also upgraded their laws. The Philippines' parliament responded to Covid-19 with the enactment of the "Bayanihan to Heal As One Act" (Republic Act No. 11469) granting President Rodrigo Duterte extended powers to manage the crisis. The Act also criminalised spreading false information on social media and other platforms. Previously, however, the Duterte administration had itself been accused of being the source of false information (Ressa, 2016) while labelling accurate news as fake (Washington Post, 2018). The Vietnamese government recently enacted provisions stipulating fines for spreading fake, false or distorted information in social networks. Cambodia reacted to the Covid-19 pandemic with the enactment of an emergency law that prohibits the publication of news that could cause panic or chaos. The Indonesian government established a cybersecurity agency that, among other duties, has the task of monitoring the internet for fake news. In addition, weekly fake news briefings and announcements on StopHoax.id are part of the agency's responsibilities (Lamb, 2018). A proposed revision of the country's Penal Code aims to introduce criminal liability for anyone broadcasting fake news that results in riots or disturbances. During the Covid-19 pandemic, dozens of Indonesians have been arrested for spreading infection-related falsehoods.

In this legal environment, governmental fact checks add a discursive layer to the "war on fake news" that is expected to facilitate further legislative responses and increased law enforcement. The hypothesised functions of official news corrections are discussed in the following section.

## **Hypotheses on the Discursive Goals of Governmental Fact-Checking**

Fully state-operated fact-checking websites are governmental communication channels that can shape and support political and legal discourses. *Sebenarnya.my* was launched in March 2017. It is operated by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) under the Ministry of Communications and Multimedia. "Sebenarnya" means "in actuality" or "in reality." The website mostly gathers corrections of news items from other governmental agencies but also publishes public warnings and announcements. In March 2018, a *Sebenarnya* smartphone application was launched as well. In November 2019, the government announced that the website and application had received more than 70 million views since the portal's inception in 2017



(Carvalho et al., 2019). Singapore's Factually has been operated by the Ministry of Communication and Information since 2012. It publishes information on governmental policies and legal questions, corrections of news items, and public warnings. Other ministries and governmental agencies provide input for Factually's posts. The government has not released any data on the number of page views. Thailand started its Anti-Fake News Center in November 2019. The website, which publishes its content also on Facebook, Twitter, and Line, is operated by the Ministry of Digital Economy and Society. It focuses on corrections of news items and public warnings and occasionally explains recent state policies. At the end of April 2020, the website counted about 2.5 million views since its launch.

Sebenarnya.my and the Anti-Fake News Center provide dedicated online forms for communications from the public about suspected online falsehoods. How many people made use of this opportunity has not been disclosed. Factually has not opened a specific channel to report fake news. General governmental contacts can of course be used for this purpose.

The three sites operate in settings where most discursive power is in the hands of "sophisticated authoritarian" governments (Morgenbesser, 2020). Malaysia and Singapore are non-substantive democracies, adhering to a thin rule of law in which the judicial branches play marginal roles (Bell, 1997; Thio, 2010). Courts in both countries offer their parliaments wide discretion to establish the balance between competing interests. Moreover, contemporary speeches are taken into account in judicial decision-making,<sup>5</sup> and textbooks on Malaysian and Singaporean constitutional law cite statements of high-ranking government representatives as interpretative guidance (e.g. Tan and Thio, 2010). Malaysia's "regularised authoritarianism" (Lee, 2017: 166–181) and Singapore's "calibrated coercion" (George, 2007) are reflected in the enactment and enforcement of media regulations, internal security, and sedition laws. Singapore's press is subject to permanent oversight from authorities, which ensure that it serves the communitarian purposes of a dominant elite (Mauzy and Milne, 2002; Rajah, 2012: 117–160; Tan, 2018: 1–20). It is not allowed to assume a true watchdog position. Rather, the government maintains control over public discourse (Rodan, 1998).

In Thailand, political power resides with the bureaucracy, the military, the judiciary, and the monarchy (McCargo, 2005; Méribeau, 2016). Electoral democracy is constrained through a network of constitutional watchdog bodies (Glaser, 2015) and a permanent cycle of military coups (Ferrara, 2015). Thai courts also often defer to decisions and interpretations of executive and military authorities (Harding and Leyland, 2011: 189–215; Tonsakulrungruang, 2018). While the media has been subjected to differing levels of censorship (Lewis, 2006; Leyland, 2010), the internet is under increasing governmental surveillance (Laungaramsri, 2016; Sinpeng, 2013). Across Southeast Asia, traditional and social media face rising levels of control and censorship (Deibert et al., 2012; International Commission of Jurists, 2019; Ong, 2021; Rodan, 2004: 18–37).

In these discursive settings characterised by dominant governments, it is hypothesised that state-operated fact-checking serves two implicit goals, besides the explicit purpose of providing supposedly correct information to the public. First, governmental fact-checks may help to



frame fake news as a threat to public interests, which, in turn, would lend legitimacy to related restrictions of free speech. In this sense, fake news would be presented as a constant and omnipresent threat to public order. Indeed, from a legal perspective, Singapore's High Court ruled in 2005 that "false or inaccurate information or claims can harm and threaten public order."<sup>6</sup> Public order is of course a Laclaudian empty signifier that respective governments are called to fill with meaning (Laclau, 1994: 176). Thai law, too, accords public interests (ประโยชน์สาธารณะ, *prayot satharana*) a prominent position within the constitutional order, while the main objects of security (ความมั่นคง, *khwam mankhong*) are understood as the state and its territory, the economy, persons, and their property (Uwanno, 1995: 333; Wissarutphich, 1997: 21).

Fake news is increasingly perceived as a new security threat. Consequently, governmental fact checks could assist in preparing the ground for free speech restrictions that combat threats to public order and security. The hypothesis is that a large variety of news is subject to fact checks, which would support the claim of fake news' omnipresence. In addition, fact checks are expected to be performed regularly to confirm the continuous threat, accompanying legislative developments and speeches. In this sense, governmental fact checks would indeed themselves be truth-producing, fostering a particular perception of reality that is shaped in line with Foucauldian power-knowledge paradigms. The content of individual fake news, however, would only be of secondary importance.

The second hypothesis assumes that state-operated fact-checking is also used to bolster the government's reputation and approval rates or, in short, for propaganda. Propaganda is of course a shimmering term. In Donsbach's *The International Encyclopedia of Communication*, Wilke (2008) refers to classic definitions of propaganda from Lasswell and Bernays, dating back to the late 1920s. Whereas Lasswell defined propaganda as the "management of collective attitudes by the manipulation of significant symbols," Bernays referred to it as "a consistent, enduring effort to create or shape events to influence the relations of the public to the enterprise, idea or group." Wilke himself distinguishes between white, grey, and black propaganda, referring to truthful, doubtful, and deceptive governmental communication, respectively. More recently, Huang (2015) referred in his work on Chinese propaganda to several other approaches but emphasised Kenez's definition of propaganda as the "attempt to transmit social and political values in the hope of affecting people's thinking, emotions, and behaviour" Kenez (1985: 4). Huang (2017) defined propaganda generally as "inaccurate, exaggerated or purely fabricated claims and myths that favour the regime." At the same time (Huang, 2018), however, he separates hard from soft propaganda, equating hard with "crude and heavy-handed" and soft with "subtle and sleek": while "soft propaganda can influence people's political and social opinions, hard propaganda will not and may even backfire" (Huang, 2015).

Whether or not governmental fact-checking in Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand can be classified as propaganda thus depends on the understanding of the term. Whereas Huang's general definition appears to be too narrow as it limits itself to the communication of incorrect information, his concept of "soft propaganda," in turn, seems to be too broad as it covers all forms of political communication, which, inherently, pursues the

aim of affecting public opinion. Wilke's distinction between white, grey, and black propaganda, depending on the respective statements' level of truthfulness does not seem to fit, either: the purpose of fact-checking sites is precisely the correction of falsehoods with reference to actual facts. What is more, the present study did not reveal any cases where false information was spread for the benefit of the government, disguised as official fact checks. Moreover, propaganda published or communicated elsewhere was neither confirmed nor corrected by the sites under investigation.

Thus, for the analysis of governmental fact-checking, propaganda is understood in a narrower sense as *political communication that excessively defends the government against allegations of misconduct or accuses political opponents and critics*. This definition distinguishes propaganda from the more general activity of framing. In addition, it takes into account that governments have the right, and under some circumstances even the duty, to set the public record straight if false allegations have been made. What is considered as propaganda is thus only the *excessive* use of governmental fact-checking to address instances where the government has come under attack. An almost exclusive use of the respective sites for defensive purposes would therefore qualify as excessive. The definition's second alternative – accusations – tries to capture a politicised use of the platforms. Thus, attacks against political opponents and critics that go beyond the mere corrections of facts would also qualify as propaganda in the sense of this definition.

## Framing the Fake News Threat

This part of the article addresses the first hypothesis according to which regular and wide-ranging fact checks help to uphold the paradigm of a constant fake news threat. Data from *Sebenarnya.my*, *Factually*, and the Anti-Fake News Center have been collected and analysed for the time span since their respective launch until April 2020. While *Sebenarnya.my* posted 2,073 entries since March 2017 (Table 1), the Thai Anti-Fake News Center published 568 posts since its launch in November 2019 (Table 2). Thus, during the time span covered by this analysis, *Sebenarnya.my* posted on average about fifty-five items per month (almost two per day) and the Anti-Fake News Center in average about ninety-five (more than three per day). At the Anti-Fake News Center, more than half (346) of all posts were uploaded in March and April 2020 while a rising trend was already visible in January and February 2020. The Thai government has thus made increasing use of its fact-checking platform. *Sebenarnya.my* has seen particularly high frequencies of posts in the months before and after the general election of 9 May 2018, and in March and April 2020 due to extensive Covid-19-related fact-checking activities of Malaysian authorities. Both sites have therefore corrected falsehoods on a steady basis.

When collecting the data from Singapore's *Factually* in June 2020, the site displayed sixty-one entries since April 2013. In early 2018, however, the responsible Minister announced that *Factually* had published 186 articles since its 2012 launch (Kwang, 2018). Thus, most entries have been removed from the website and are no longer accessible. The Ministry's selection criteria for the removals are unknown to the author. The

**Table 1.** Monthly Posts at *Sebenarnya.my* (Overall: 2,073).

	2017	2018	2019	2020
January	–	117	24	40
February	–	89	13	29
March	38	88	18	169
April	34	99	14	168
May	54	63	16	–
June	42	91	13	–
July	36	118	14	–
August	55	101	14	–
September	70	67	15	–
October	60	57	10	–
November	79	40	11	–
December	84	12	11	–

analytical validity is consequently limited in this regard. The data have nonetheless been included in this study and were evaluated with this significant caveat. Based on the available data, almost half (30) of *Factually's* available posts appeared in 2019 and the first four months of 2020. Despite the uncertainties about the number of posts in previous years, it is safe to say that the average number of monthly posts is considerably lower on *Factually* than on the site's Malaysian and Thai counterparts. In the first months of 2020, however, the number of posts has gone up (Table 3).

All posts have been assigned one or more general topic categories by the author. When the Covid-19 pandemic started to appear in Southeast Asian news in January 2020, it quickly dominated governmental fact-checking across the three sites. As the posting frequency on *Sebenarnya.my* and the Anti-Fake News Center increased too, Covid-19 became the most prevalent topic of all posts since the sites' respective launch. Among the accessible posts on Singapore's *Factually*, taxes and public welfare have remained the most frequent topics since 2013, just slightly above Covid-19. As the global pandemic appears to be far from over at the time of writing, Covid-19 is likely to remain a frequent topic for some time. Two threats could thus be joined under the paradigm of an "infodemic" (Maslog, 2020), multiplying the communicative effect.

**Table 2.** Annual Posts at *Factually* (Overall: 61).

2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020*
3	3	2	2	5	16	10	20

Note: \* Jan–Apr 2020.

**Table 3.** Monthly Posts at the Anti-Fake News Center (Overall: 568).

Nov 2019	Dec 2019	Jan 2020	Feb 2020	Mar 2020	Apr 2020
13	22	76	111	193	153

When leaving Covid-19-related entries aside, posts across all three sites mainly cover issues of crimes and the criminal justice system, health and well-being, transport, travel and tourism, Islam and other religions, economy and employment, and public welfare and social security. On *Sebenarnya.my* and the Thai Anti-Fake News Center, posts about unproven or harmful product characteristics have been frequent as well. *Factly* and the Anti-Fake News Center also deal with questions related to taxes and public finance. Education features more prominently on *Sebenarnya.my* and *Factly* than at the Anti-Fake News Center. Topics with more limited coverage across all sites are the environment and pollution, privacy and data protection, or political parties and parliamentary politics. Overall, however, it could be shown that the range of topics has been wide across the three sites (Table 4). This confirms the expectation that an omnipresent fake news threat is communicated through governmental fact-checking.

Representative posts on the most frequent topics include<sup>7</sup>:

- COVID-19:
  - “Corona virus has spread to Putrajaya?” (*Sebenarnya.my*, February 2020)
  - “Corrections and clarifications regarding falsehoods that Woodlands MRT closed for disinfection” (*Factly*, 28 January 2020)

**Table 4.** Most Frequent Topics.

	<i>Sebenarnya</i>	<i>Factly</i>	AFNC
Covid-19	16%	21%	53%
Crimes and criminal justice	14%	13%	7%
Health and well-being	12%	12%	17%
Transport, travel, and tourism	8%	8%	6%
Product characteristics	8%	2%	4%
Islam and other religions	8%	3%	2%
Economy and employment	7%	18%	5%
Education	5%	5%	1%
Public welfare and social security	4%	10%	9%
Taxes and public finance	1%	26%	5%

Note: Percentage of all posts; rounded up to full numbers. Single posts could be assigned more than one topic category. Data from *Factly* based on posts accessible in June 2020.

- “Fake news, don’t share! Bang Bua Tong – Bang Yai has one case of COVID-19, but the news was covered up.” (AFNC, 5 March 2020)
- Crimes and criminal justice:
  - “Kidnapping case involving a student of religious school at Pasir Village, Johor Bahru?” (Sebenarnya.my, January 2018)
  - “Website spreads falsehoods about Singapore’s investigations into 1MDB-related funds flows” (Factually, 9 November 2018)
  - “The Central Investigation Bureau lets criminals enter a house to open tap water inside a home to cause crime; that is fake news designed to create public disturbance, do not share!!” (AFNC, 9 January 2020)
- Health and well-being:
  - “Medicine shortage, hospital patients were given one month of supply only?” (Sebenarnya.my, August 2017)
  - “Will I get Ebola in Singapore?” (Factually, 28 October 2014)
  - “Pinguecula and Pterygium are diseases that cannot be fully cured, is this true?” (AFNC, 18 January 2020)
- Transport, travel, and tourism:
  - “Road Transport Department (JPJ) enforces new rules on tinted windows starting from 2018?” (Sebenarnya.my, October 2017)
  - “Did the PTC change the fare formula to raise public transport fares?” (Factually, 18 May 2018)
  - “The Marine Department has measures to detect the speed of boats in order to catch those exceeding the speed limit, is this true?” (AFNC, 9 March 2020)
- Product characteristics:
  - “Beware of 4 cosmetics products detected to contain scheduled poison” (Sebenarnya.my, September 2019)
  - “Are melamine food wares safe to use?” (Factually, 11 April 2016)
  - “Joint medication ‘Pantoflex’ has never registered as a drug in Thailand, in addition to falsified claims. What you need to know about this.” (AFNC, 8 November 2019)
- Islam and other religions:
  - “A Member of the military held a banner stating ‘Do Not Insult our Prophet?’” (Sebenarnya.my, March 2019)
  - “Geylang Serai bazaar raid: A case of non-halal food or unlicensed food handlers?” (Factually, 1 June 2017)
  - “Fake news, don’t share! Rumours! Ministry of Interior forces Muslims on a pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia if they violate government orders” (AFNC, 10 April 2020)
- Economy and employment:
  - “Restaurants which are serving Malaysian food shall employ local cooks only?” (Sebenarnya.my, June 2018)

- “Are digital tokens such as cryptocurrencies a simple, safe, and sure-fire way of making money?” (Factually, 25 May 2018)
- “The Department of Employment providing work opportunities in Korea, Japan and overseas, easy and no hassle, ready to transfer money to reserve rights, is fake news, designed to deceive people, do not believe it!!!” (AFNC, 25 December 2019)
- Education:
  - “2018 Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM) Malay Language, Chinese Language and Mathematics Papers have been leaked?” (Sebenarnya.my, November 2018)
  - “Is it true our public universities reserve 20% of their places for foreign students?” (Factually, 27 January 2018)
  - “Ministry of Education forcing primary and secondary students to learn Islam is fake news. Such news only creates public disturbance. What you need to understand.” (AFNC, 3 November 2019)
- Public welfare and social security:
  - “A woman attempted to jump off a bridge because she did not receive her payment claim from the social security organization?” (Sebenarnya.my, July 2018)
  - “Did the CPF Board change the “retirement payout age” to 70 years old?” (Factually, 19 February 2019)
  - “Fake news, don’t share! Those who received the 5,000 remedial money from the government are a small number” (AFNC, 5 April 2020)
- Taxes and public finance:
  - “Government plans to increase the Goods & Services Tax (GST) after the 14th General Election?” (Sebenarnya.my, November 2017)
  - “Did the Government change its position on raising taxes during this term of Government?” (Factually, 22 November 2017)
  - “Government to impose taxation on wedding dowries is fake news, aimed to mislead, do not share.” (AFNC, 22 January 2020)

Omnipresence of fake news also needs to be understood in terms of its sources. On *Sebenarnya.my*, *Factually*, and the *Anti-Fake News Center*, the main source of news pieces has been domestic social media, with Facebook and WhatsApp in particular. This finding is in line with the fake news literature outlined above that ties the salience of fake news to the rise of social media, filter bubbles, and related phenomena. Domestic social media is understood here as social media accounts that are either operated in the local language or that deal with issues related to the country in question. Traditional news media, including websites of larger and smaller media outlets, is a more prevalent source in Singapore and Thailand. The *Anti-Fake News Center* also (appropriately) refers to news pieces originally published by government agencies. Additional sources are blogs, emails, and SMS (Table 5).

**Table 5.** Sources of Fake News.

	Sebenarnya	Factually	AFNC
Domestic social media	78%	61%	57%
Domestic traditional media	6%	37%	34%
International social media	0%	0%	1%
International traditional media	1%	3%	1%
Government agency	0%	0%	2%
Other	5%	0%	1%
Not indicated	10%	0%	4%

Abbreviation: AFNC: Anti-Fake News Center.

Note: Sources of news referred to in fact-checking posts. Percentage of posts related to individual news pieces; rounded up to full numbers. Data from Factually based on posts accessible in June 2020.

While *Sebenarnya.my* and the Anti-Fake News Center were established as dedicated fact-checking sites, Singapore's Factually started off in 2012 as a general platform for the government to spread what it considered useful information. Thus, while *Sebenarnya.my* and the Anti-Fake News Center have clearly focused on responding to news (Table 6), Factually's character apparently changed over time as corrections and clarifications of news became more frequent (Table 7). This development coincided with the drafting and enactment of POFMA in 2018 and 2019 that is outlined below. Based on the accessible posts, Factually was seemingly integrated into the government's toolbox for opposing fake news on the internet and thereby developed a clearer fact-checking profile.

The communication of a threat is most effective if the threat is presented in an intuitively understandable form. While *Sebenarnya.my* and the Anti-Fake News Center use eye-catching labels to categorise individual news pieces that have been fact-checked, Factually evaluates each news piece's veracity without affixing explicit labels. *Sebenarnya.my* distinguishes between *palsu* ("fake"), *penjelasan* ("explanation"), and *waspada* ("beware"). The latter label is mostly used for general warnings and only rarely for individual news. "Fake" is affixed to posts correcting falsehoods. "Explanation" has been used rather broadly for posts containing explanatory information where the news referred to is described as essentially true but possibly incomplete. For instance, a post

**Table 6.** Fact-Checking News.

	Sebenarnya	Factually	AFNC
Checked concrete news piece	88%	60%	99%
Provided general information	12%	40%	1%

Abbreviation: AFNC: Anti-Fake News Center.

Note: Posts that fact-check individual news pieces. Percentage of all posts; rounded up to full numbers. Data from Factually based on posts accessible in June 2020.



**Table 7.** Fact-Checking Trend on Factually.

	2013–2017	2018	2019	2020*
Checked concrete news piece	33%	56%	70%	80%
Provided general information	67%	44%	30%	20%

Note: Posts that fact-check individual news pieces at Factually. Data based on posts accessible in June 2020. Percentage of all accessible posts in the respective time frame (\* Jan–Apr 2020); rounded up to full numbers.

in July 2018 confirmed that a lorry driver was beaten up in an industrial park but emphasised that the police were still investigating the case.

Thailand’s Anti-Fake News Center distinguishes between “fake news” (ข่าวปลอม, *khao plom*), “distorted news” (ข่าวบิดเบือน, *khao bitbuean*), and “true news” (ข่าวจริง, *khao jing*). The “distorted” label has been used for news that was partially true but false with respect to a significant fact. For instance, a post of 19 February 2020 confirmed that state welfare card holders would receive three months of extra benefits but described as distorted that this would apply to everyone. Rather, the amount to be paid depended on an assessment of a person’s salary. Labelled as “true” was, for example, a warning that snorers are at risk of cardiac arrest (3 November 2019) or news according to which the Commander-in-Chief confirmed that a curfew was not in place yet but that the Covid-19 pandemic was not over (31 March 2020).

Overall, the posts accessible on Factually exhibited the highest falsehood rate. A much smaller number described news as misleading. True news have not been referred to on the platform. In contrast, *Sebenarnya.my* labelled only slightly more than half of the investigated news as “fake.” The rest were categorised as essentially or partly correct. The Anti-Fake News Center labelled slightly over two-thirds of news as “fake,” the rest as either “distorted” or “true” (Table 8). When looking at these results from the question to what extent fake news have been communicated as a threat, Factually has been most consistent as it selected almost exclusively such news that needed corrections. *Sebenarnya.my* and the Anti-Fake News Center also confirm or explain information, probably after considering that there is elevated interest in the issue at hand.

**Table 8.** Fact-Checking Results and Labels.

Sebenarnya		Factually		AFNC	
Fake	53%	False	95%	Fake	68%
Explanation	45%	Misleading	5%	Distorted	14%
Beware	2%			True	18%

Abbreviation: AFNC: Anti-Fake News Center.

Note: Labels (*Sebenarnya* & AFNC) and descriptions (Factually). Percentage of posts that fact-checked individual news pieces; rounded up to full numbers. Data from Factually based on posts accessible in June 2020.

As posts on *Sebenarnya.my* and the Anti-Fake News Center are published in Bahasa Malaysia and Thai, respectively, the data have been collected with the support from native-speaking research assistants who provided translations of all post titles into English. They were also asked to evaluate the tone and language throughout the posts. According to this evaluation, all three sites use formal and neutral language except for double or triple exclamation marks in some post titles. *Factually's* posts are on average considerably longer (two to three pages) than the entries on *Sebenarnya.my* and posts by the Anti-Fake News Center (both, four to five sentences). Posts on *Sebenarnya.my* routinely include a weblink to corresponding information provided by the competent authority. *Factually's* practice varies between adding an exact weblink to further information, a link to the relevant agency, or giving no additional reference. The Anti-Fake News Center does not provide weblinks to concrete related information but usually includes a weblink and phone number of a responsible agency. Based on previous findings on the effectiveness of corrections (Huang, 2017), the comparably elaborate correction practice in Singapore is probably most effective in terms of affecting beliefs and attitudes of the site's visitors. However, the successful framing of the fake news threat also depends on surrounding political communication. The following part therefore joins key elements of governmental fake news discourses in Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand, mapping out the discursive environment in which official fact checks occur.

## Surrounding Anti-Fake News Discourse

Governmental discourse mainly consists of laws (Rajah, 2012) and official statements. While legislative developments were laid out above, this section focuses on governmental speech published in the media. In Malaysia, the Anti-Fake News Act was eventually repealed. The perception and presentation of fake news as a significant danger to society, however, remained unchanged. The discursive continuity from Najib Razak's administration over to Mahathir's Alliance of Hope is striking. In 2017, then Malaysian Prime Minister Najib referred to fake news as a new plague, describing the internet as the "Wild West" where the media have the duty to "fight to the last this tide of fake and false news" (Naidu, 2017). Shortly after *Pakatan Harapan's* historic victory in May 2018, the new Prime Minister Mahathir suddenly spoke of only redefining, not revoking the Anti-Fake News Act. In an encounter with his Singaporean counterpart Lee Hsien Loong in 2019, Mahathir emphasised that "social media can be abused quite seriously" (TODAY Online, 2019). Other members of his administration also aimed to focus the public's attention on the "alarming stage" that fake news had reached in threatening democracy (Fong, 2019) and referred to the problem of fake news as one that is "taking over humankind [...] somehow we must be able to fight this battle" (Malay Mail, 2019). In the early stages of the Covid-19 epidemic in January 2020, then Minister for Home Affairs, later Prime Minister, Muhyiddin Yassin, announced that he would make use of various laws to combat misinformation on the internet (Chin, 2020). He specifically referred to the Penal Code (section 505(b)) and the Communications and Multimedia Act of 1998 (sections 211(1) and 233(1)(a)).

The passage of POFMA in neighbouring Singapore was prepared by a parliamentary select committee that had been established in early 2018. The committee report described deliberate online falsehoods as “a real and serious problem for the world, and Singapore” (Parliament of Singapore, 2018: para. 239). During the committee hearings, Law and Home Affairs Minister K Shanmugam asserted that circulating “absolute falsehoods [...] contradicts the very fundamentals of democracy and corrodes democracy” (Mokhtar, 2018). Before the Act was passed, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong emphasised how fake news could sow social discord and radicalise people. At the same time, he described Singapore as particularly vulnerable due to its multi-ethnic society (Prime Minister’s Office Singapore, 2019a). On another occasion, he warned of hate speech and fake news spreading “like wildfire” (Prime Minister’s Office Singapore, 2019b). Other ministers referred to the fight against fake news as non-conventional warfare, a “battle within all our societies” (Channel News Asia, 2019) that was allegedly necessary to “stamp out the scourge of online fake news” (Prime Minister’s Office Singapore, 2019c).

Like in the cases of Malaysia and Singapore, legislative moves in Thailand have been accompanied with governmental discourse describing falsehoods on the internet as being “embedded within every aspect of our society” (Khaosod English, 2019) and a “critical threat that could harmfully affect people’s lives and the economy” (Leesa-Nguansuk, 2019). The Thai army chief referred to the fight against fake news as cyber warfare where there is “not just an open enemy like in the old times” (Bangkok Post, 2019).

Governmental fact-checking capacities have thus been created at a time when governments in Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand focused substantial political attention on the fake news threat. *Sebenarnya.my*, *Factually*, and the Anti-Fake News Centre contributed to this discourse through regular and wide-reaching news corrections. Governmental fact checks were thus part of wider efforts to frame the fake news problem, catalysing respective state discourses. The first hypothesis can therefore be confirmed.

## **Fact Checks as Propaganda?**

This part addresses the second hypothesis, which assumes that state-operated fact-checking in Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand is used for propaganda understood as political communication that excessively defends the government against allegations of misconduct or accuses political opponents and critics.

In a first step, it is examined to what extent *Sebenarnya.my*, *Factually*, and the Anti-Fake News Center have published posts related to governmental action or policies or responding to public demands for governmental action, explaining recently introduced government policies or being generally related to governmental duties and functions. In this respect, the Covid-19 pandemic triggered higher numbers of posts on the spread of the coronavirus and the characteristics of the disease. Arguably, these posts could have been categorised as related to governmental action or policies as it is the government’s duty to keep the population well-informed about threats to public health. Nonetheless, such posts have been classified as unrelated to governmental action or policies because

they do not refer to any particular – past or future – governmental conduct. In contrast, posts defending governmental authorities against charges of having covered up Covid-19 cases have of course been classified as related to governmental action or policies. Representative examples of posts with relation to governmental action or policies include:

- **Sebenarnya.my:**
  - “No staff was on duty at the emergency unit of Yan Hospital?” (October 2017)
  - “Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (SPRM) does not take any action on solar panel project for schools in Sarawak?” (June 2018)
  - “Selangor and Johor Sultans will attend the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination’s (ICERD) Assembly?” (December 2018)
  - “Courts postpone the enforcement of the prohibition from smoking at restaurants?” (February 2019)
  - “Infographic on the COVID-19 checklist by the Ministry of Health Malaysia is False” (March 2020)
- **Factually:**
  - “Is it true that I have to pay GST on items purchased overseas?” (4 September 2014)
  - “Do Ministers get free healthcare?” (7 June 2016)
  - “Quality vs Value: How does Government evaluate tenders?” (22 July 2017)
  - “Did the PTC change the fare formula to raise public transport fares?” (18 May 2018)
  - “Corrections and clarifications regarding falsehoods about the Resilience Budget” (1 April 2020)
- **Anti-Fake News Center:**
  - “Army Commander-in-Chief ‘Big Red’ ready to fight the BRN (Barisan Revolusi Nasional) by himself. Stating that we cannot live on the same land together. This is fake news! don’t share.” (15 November 2019)
  - “The government uses their budget to solve the drought, 3 billion baht for 500 wells, 6 million baht per well, is distorted news. You should not reshare it.” (17 January 2020)
  - “Fake news, don’t share! State welfare card’s benefit increased to 800 baht per month.” (16 February 2020)
  - “Government orders the Royal Thai Air Force to use helicopters to spray water, to lower the PM2.5 level in the North, is this true?” (19 March 2020)
  - “Distorted news, don’t share! Chonburi will return back to normal by May 1st.” (21 April 2020)
- In contrast, representative examples of posts unrelated to governmental action across the three sites include:

- “Why does it look so hazy even when the PSI reading is low?” (Factually, 23 September 2015)
- “Heat waves will hit Malaysia during the equinox phenomenon?” (Sebenarnya.my, March 2017)
- “Beware of fraudulent syndicate that claims to be customs officers regarding the payment of Goods & Services Tax (GST) for mobile phones” (Sebenarnya.my, May 2018)
- “There are food premises using fake Halal logo?” (Sebenarnya.my, September 2019)
- “8 facial mask formulas to reduce acne, brighten your skin, and clear your blemishes is fake news. They are exaggerated claims, do not fall for them!” (Anti-Fake News Center, 3 November 2019)
- “Chinese patient infected with coronavirus admitted for treatment at Rajthanee Hospital in Phra Nakhon Si Ayutthaya Province is fake news aiming to create disorder, stop sharing!” (Anti-Fake News Center, 27 January 2020)
- “False rumour about COVID-19 virus being spread through postal articles” (Factually, 28 March 2020)
- “Fake news, don’t share! Formula using lemon juice mixed with vinegar and soda can kill COVID-19” (Anti-Fake News Center, 9 April 2020)

The results show that posts on Factually very frequently (87%) related to governmental action or policies. On *Sebenarnya.my*, about two-thirds fell into this category, while slightly less than half of the posts of the Anti-Fake News Center were classified in this way. On all three sites, no trend towards higher or lower numbers of posts related to governmental action or policies could be recognised over time, notwithstanding slight variations (Table 9).

Thailand’s Anti-Fake News Center exhibited a comparably high percentage of non-government-related posts. The site has been used more for general consumer information than for explaining actions or policies of the government. Early worries that the website would become a tool for state propaganda (Peter, 2019) have apparently not materialised. At the other end of the spectrum, Singapore’s Factually has been a platform mainly for governmental information; the remaining few accessible posts could mostly be classified as general consumer information. *Sebenarnya.my* clearly focuses on issues related to governmental actions and policies while secondarily using the site also for

**Table 9.** Posts Addressing Governmental Action or Policies.

	Sebenarnya	Factually	AFNC
Addressing government action or policies	64%	87%	46%
Providing other information	36%	13%	54%

Abbreviation: AFNC: Anti-Fake News Center.

Note: Percentage of all posts; rounded up to full numbers. Data from Factually based on posts accessible in June 2020.

more general information. Factually and *Sebenarnya.my* therefore merit particular scrutiny as to possible propagandistic use.

The next question is therefore to what extent the three sites defended governmental agencies and state institutions against false allegations. To this end, posts related to governmental action or policies have been further sub-categorised according to the question “assuming the news was accurate, to whom would it be unfavourable?” Thus, it was asked whether the respective news pointed to any alleged wrongful action or inaction on the part of state authorities. The category focuses particularly on reputational damage. It also includes cases where no specific authority was blamed, but where circumstances provoked the assumption that the situation in question may not have occurred had the competent authorities acted in accordance with their duties. However, warning messages about dangerous products or deceptive advertisements have not been classified as “defensive,” though one could argue that authorities should have ensured that the respective products did not enter the domestic market in the first place. This was considered too distant from governmental duties.

Representative examples of posts defending governmental or state institutions include:

- *Sebenarnya.my*:
  - “Royal Malaysian Air Force’s aircraft crashed in Butterworth?” (March 2017)
  - “Malaysia abandoned the environment in the cultivation of oil palms?” (February 2018)
  - “Sultan of Selangor interfered in the appointment of the Prime Minister?” (May 2018)
  - “No action taken by the police in a kidnapping case involving a 16 years old teenager in Kelantan?” (August 2018)
  - “1MDB case will be in the Malaysian history syllabus?” (December 2018)
  - “Malaysian Flag was raised inversely at Seremban district police headquarter?” (August 2019)
  - “Picture of Members of Parliament not wearing face masks during the Movement Control Order (PKP) of COVID-19 is false” (March 2020)
  - “The allegation by a doctor that the Johor police did not do its job is false” (April 2020)
- Factually:
  - “What are the facts of the rioting incident at Little India on 8 Dec?” (13 December 2013)
  - “MOM clarifies inaccuracies in TWC2’s articles on foreign workers’ employment issues” (6 July 2018)
  - “Does our Prime Minister get paid up to \$4.5 million a year?” (16 September 2018)
  - “Corrections and clarifications regarding falsehoods that dinner event at SAFRA Jurong was organised by People’s Association” (18 March 2020)

- “Clarification regarding falsehood published by Singapore States Times on quarantine of foreign workers” (6 April 2020)
- Anti-Fake News Center:
  - “‘Big ‘Tu’ prepares to resign as Prime Minister’ is fake news. Stop sharing.” (3 November 2019)
  - “Fake news! ‘Somkid’ warns Thais to save money because the treasury is running out of funds. Please do not believe this.” (14 November 2019)
  - “‘Big Bom’ stated ‘The Public does not have the right to investigate or criticise the army’ is fake news. Do not share.” (3 December 2019)
  - “Collecting water taxes for farmers, stated to be the Prime Minister’s idea, is fake news, aimed to mislead the public, do not share.” (16 January 2020)
  - “Fake news, don’t share! Officials seized phones belonging to Thai nationals coming from Wuhan.” (7 February 2020)
  - “Fake news, don’t share! Government blocks news on increasing numbers of infected coronavirus persons in Thailand in fear of economic impact.” (18 February 2020)
  - “Fake news, don’t share! 250 senators visit events, using 69 million baht from the budget.” (12 March 2020)

The overall percentage of posts defending governmental authorities or state institutions in relation to all posts has been on a comparable level on *Sebenarnya.my* and the Thai Anti-Fake News Center, where about one-third could be classified as such. Almost half of the accessible posts on Singapore’s *Factually* fell into this category (Table 10). When looking at the number of defensive posts among those previously classified as related to governmental action or policies, however, *Sebenarnya.my* and *Factually* defended governmental or state institutions in slightly more than half of the cases while four out of five such posts of the Anti-Fake News Center were defensive (Table 11). Thus, though the Anti-Fake News Center published the lowest number of government-related posts, it used such posts about 1.5 times more often to defend governmental action or policies.

It is worthwhile looking at some selected posts in more detail as they reveal correction practices across the sites in political matters. When social media rumours spread in May 2018 that the Sultan of Selangor had interfered in the royal appointment of the Malaysian Prime Minister, *Sebenarnya.my* published a short summary of the Sultan’s

**Table 10.** Posts Defending the Government (of All Posts).

	Sebenarnya	Factually	AFNC
Defending the government/state	35%	46%	37%
No defensive character	65%	54%	63%

Abbreviation: AFNC: Anti-Fake News Center.

Note: Percentage of all posts; rounded up to full numbers. Data from *Factually* based on posts accessible in June 2020.



**Table 11.** Posts Defending the Government (of Government-Related Posts).

	Sebenarnya	Factually	AFNC
Defending the government/state	55%	53%	80%
No defensive character	45%	47%	20%

Abbreviation: AFNC: Anti-Fake News Center.

Note: Percentage of posts related to governmental action or policies; rounded up to full numbers. Data from Factually based on posts accessible in June 2020.

statement in which he “regretted the contagious report on social media,” adding that he was not involved in any interference in the appointment. Moreover, “he once again reminded the people not to easily believe fake news on the internet or social media which aims to create tension between the palace and the state or federal government.” Thus, the four-sentence post limited itself in the publication of a denial combined with a general call for vigilance. Weblinks to an English and a Bahasa media report reproducing the Sultan’s statement were appended.<sup>8</sup> A similarly brief approach was chosen when news circulated in December 2018 according to which the Minister of Education wanted to include the 1MDB case in the Malaysian history subject syllabus. *Sebenarnya.my* published the Minister’s denial, emphasising that the question whether the topic would be included in the syllabus was up to the Ministry’s curriculum review committee. A weblink to a Malaysian news outlet that reported the denial completed the post.<sup>9</sup>

In comparison, *Factually*’s posts were usually longer and included more information. This was visible, for instance, in September 2018 when websites and social media alleged that the Prime Minister’s salary amounted to \$4.5 million a year. In response, *Factually* refuted these claims and posted an infographic setting out how Ministers’ salaries were calculated. In addition, the post included a link to a fifty-page White Paper that functioned as the basis of the calculation method.<sup>10</sup> In Thailand, that had been governed by a military government from May 2014 to July 2019, a quote allegedly attributable to the Deputy Prime Minister circulated in social media in November 2019. The quote read, “the public does not have the right to investigate or criticise the army.” The underlying topic was related to military expenditure. The Anti-Fake News Center responded in early December, insisting that the Deputy Prime Minister had not made the said statement. In addition, the post provided weblinks to relevant legislation on the Budget Bureau’s website and to online information on government spending provided by the Digital Government Development Agency.<sup>11</sup> The post reflects quite accurately the average length and scope of posts published by the Anti-Fake News Center.

Overall, governmental responses to different types of allegations consisted of brief matter-of-fact posts presenting the official version of the issue. Polemic or impertinent content could not be found. However, politicisation was apparently also averted by refraining from news corrections in highly political or socially sensitive matters. During the time span analysed here, several issues that gripped public and (social) media attention remained unaddressed by governmental fact checks. For instance, in Malaysia, news surrounding the political upheaval in late February 2020 that led to the formation

of a new governing coalition and the resignation of Mohamad Mahathir as Prime Minister were absent from *Sebenarnya.my*.<sup>12</sup> The socially sensitive preferential treatment of the country's Bumiputera population did not figure on *Sebenarnya.my* either, with one exception where the site clarified that a vacant position in the Department of Information was open for applications from anybody, not only Bumiputera (May 2019). Moreover, allegedly false news about the federal country's Sultans rarely appeared on the site except for some instances, for example when news about the purportedly bad health of the Sultans of Kedah (April 2017) and Pahang (May 2017, January 2018) were refuted.

A similar approach was followed in Thailand. The controversial dissolution of the main opposition party Future Forward (พรรคอนาคตใหม่, *phak anakhot mai*) in late February 2020 and subsequent student protests were non-issues for the Anti-Fake News Center. Keeping with the general practice of other state authorities, the Center also refrained from correcting or affirming any news involving the Thai King or the royal family. In Singapore, an alleged feud in the family of the Prime Minister remained unaddressed by official fact checks as well.

A marked difference between the sites, however, relates to the practice of disclosing the names of social media account or website operators. While *Sebenarnya.my* and the Anti-Fake News Center routinely blurred or anonymised names, Singapore's Factually started disclosing names of social media account or website operators since October 2019, apparently coinciding with the entry into force of POFMA. Factually subsequently published posts that accompanied POFMA office press releases on correction orders issued under the new Act. The site thus published "corrections and clarifications" on news that had been subjected to POFMA measures. These posts explicitly referred to the names of the respective social media account or website operators, which included – in chronological order up until the end of April 2020 – *The Online Citizen* (6 October 2019 & 19 April 2020), *Brad Bowyer* (25 November 2019), *States Times Review* (28 November 2019, 30 January & 14 February 2020), the *Singapore Democratic Party* (14 December 2019), *Mr. Lim Tean* (16 December 2019), *Lawyers for Liberty* (22 January 2020), *HardwareZone Forum* (27 January & 19 April 2020), *AB-TC City News* (30 January 2020), *Gilbert Goh and The Independent Singapore* (26 February 2020), 超静/*tifanny-tara* (1 April 2020), *Singapore States Times* (6 & 18 April 2020), and *The Temasek Review* (17 April 2020).

The non-anonymous posts stand out because Factually otherwise refers to "Facebook users," "several messages circulating via text messaging platforms" or similar formulations. The named social media or website operators are all well known for frequently publishing critical comments about the People's Action Party (PAP) government. Critics and political opponents have thus been singled out while the identities of others have remained undisclosed. This reflects an apparently politicised enforcement of POFMA. Corrections under the Act have been ordered especially where alleged falsehoods could be traced to government critics. The trend continued during the campaign for the Singaporean general election in July 2020, when the government issued almost daily correction directions addressing government critics and opposition parties in the

immediate run-up to the election. The directions responded to allegedly false statements of fact covering issues that were discussed by different political parties and the public. After the election, no further correction directions have been issued for several weeks, which appears to confirm the politicised use of the law. This stands in stark contrast to *Sebenarnya.my*, where even corrective posts on behalf of authorities from states that were governed by the respective opposition were published. This included, for example, posts submitted from the Barisan Nasional-governed states of Pahang and Perlis during the Pakatan Harapan federal coalition, and posts from the Pakatan Harapan-governed states of Negeri Sembilan, Penang, and Selangor after the new Perikatan Nasional coalition had been formed in late February 2020.

In sum, the results show that the defence of governments' actions or policies has not been the main activity of any site. Though about two-thirds of *Sebenarnya.my*'s content was related to governmental affairs, only a bit more than half of these defended the government. In Singapore, the Ministry of Communication and Information apparently considers *Factually* a site where the government explains its actions and policies as almost nine out of ten posts there were government related. Again, however, only about half of these posts defended the government. The majority of Anti-Fake News Center posts were unrelated to state affairs. Out of these, in turn, four out of five were classified as defensive. As posts defending governments against allegations of misconduct thus accounted for less than half of all posts on the respective sites, an *excessive* defence of governments could not be found.

At the same time, however, Singapore's recent turn to expose government critics on *Factually* satisfies the second alternative of the propaganda definition adopted here. Opponents and critics of the PAP government have been subject to what could be called a naming and shaming approach. Since the entry into force of POFMA in late 2019, *Factually* did not limit itself to mere corrections of falsehoods but expanded its initial mandate. This politicised use is qualified as propaganda in the sense adopted for this article. As a result, while propaganda was absent from *Sebenarnya.my* and the Anti-Fake News Center, *Factually* took a propagandistic turn in late 2019.

## **Conclusion: Official Truths to Sustain the Fake News Threat**

In response to the perceived fake news challenge, new laws have been created and enforced in Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand while state representatives have repeatedly referred to a war on fake news and battles on all levels of society. The continuous publication of fact-checked information has maintained the salience of the topic. In Malaysia and Thailand, in average only few days have passed without a post on *Sebenarnya.my* and the Anti-Fake News Center. Though *Factually*'s posting frequency was lower, the platform nonetheless has become a partner in the enforcement of POFMA, making corrections under the Act more widely known.

On the one hand, governmental fact checks were not abused for propagandistic purposes as they neither excessively defended governments nor accused political opponents. The sites did not become mouthpieces of "Ministries of Truth" campaigning for

incumbent governments. For the most part, they were operated restrainedly, largely focused on providing matter-of-fact information. These findings are qualified by Factually's more politicised approach recently. Such politicisation may indeed destroy a fact-checking site's credibility and undermine public trust in institutional performance, which would be particularly problematic for performance-dependent governments of an authoritarian kind.

On the other hand, it was argued that official fact checks in Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand function as strategic political communication, providing sophisticated governments (Morgenbesser, 2020) with opportunities to entrench a particular perception of reality. An emerging fake news consensus – conspicuously uniting liberal democracies and authoritarian regimes around the world – provides an additional source of legitimacy for the fight against online falsehoods. As dominant governments emphasise the dangers from allegedly ubiquitous fake news, interests such as public order, national security, or the prevention of public anxiety are expected to gain weight, with new grounds to restrict free speech being created. Ironically, what is said to be the primary goal of fact-checking – reducing factual misunderstandings – might be achieved in a limited way only, as existing literature on the effects of fact-checking suggests (Nyhan et al., 2020). Aggregated fact checks might produce better results in this regard (Barker et al., 2019) but would substantially reduce the number of weekly or daily posts, thereby also reducing the salience of the fake news threat.

Fact-checking sites shape the meta-discourse on the problem: Topics and issues addressed by individual posts are less relevant in comparison to the implied message that fake news is an omnipresent problem requiring constant vigilance. As an increasing range of online falsehoods is considered dangerous, the truth may gradually emancipate itself from other protected interests. It is reserved to future research to observe whether governments can expand their role as arbiters of truth. Southeast Asian countries are expected to maintain their trend-setting position in this development.

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## Notes

1. Indonesia: Cekfakta, Mafindo's TurnBackHoax; Myanmar: FactCrescendo, Real Or Not Mynmar; the Philippines: FactRakers, Rappler Fact Check, VERA Files Fact Check; see also the AFP Fact Check for Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand.
2. Malaysian Communications and Media Commission, *Sebenarnya.my*, <https://sebenarnya.my>; Government of Singapore, *Factually*, <https://www.gov.sg/factually>; Ministry of Digital Economy and Society of Thailand, *Anti-Fake News Center Thailand* (ศูนย์ต่อต้านข่าวปลอม ประเทศไทย), <https://www.antifakenewscenter.com> (all accessed 11 March 2021).
3. Declared online locations can be labelled as such for a period of up to two years and must make users aware of this fact. In addition, soliciting or receiving any financial or other material benefit from the operation of a declared online location is prohibited (see Sec. 36, 37 POFMA). This includes advertisements. All actions taken under POFMA are documented in the POFMA Office's media centre: <https://www.pofmaoffice.gov.sg/media-centre> (accessed 11 March 2021).
4. See the cases gathered by iLaw at: <https://freedom.ilaw.or.th/en/case> (accessed 11 March 2021).
5. High Court of Singapore, *Chee Siok Chin v Minister for Home Affairs* (2005) 1 SLR 582 [49], [132] SGHC; see also Supreme Court of Malaysia, *Public Prosecutor v Pung Chen Choon* (1994) 1 MLJ 566 SC, extracts reprinted in Tan and Thio (2010: 993–998)
6. High Court of Singapore (note 5) [135].
7. Original (translated) post titles. Posts on *Sebenarnya.my* do not indicate the exact date of publication but only the month.
8. *Sebenarnya.my*, “Sultan Selangor Campur Tangan Dalam Pelantikan Perdana Menteri?” [“Sultan of Selangor interfered in the appointment of the Prime Minister?”], May 2018. Available at <https://sebenarnya.my/sultan-selangor-campur-tangan-dalam-pelantikan-perdana-menteri> (accessed 11 March 2021).
9. *Sebenarnya.my*, “Kes 1MDB Dalam Silibus Sejarah Malaysia?” [“1MDB case will be in the Malaysian history syllabus?”], December 2018. Available at <https://sebenarnya.my/kes-1mdb-dalam-silibus-sejarah-malaysia> (accessed 11 March 2021).
10. *Factually*, “Does our Prime Minister get paid up to \$4.5 million a year?”, 16 September 2018. Available at <https://www.gov.sg/article/does-our-prime-minister-get-paid-up-to-45-million-a-year> (accessed 11 March 2021).
11. *Anti-Fake News Centre*, “‘บิ๊กป้อม’ ลั่น ‘ประชาชนไม่มีสิทธิ์ตรวจสอบ หรือวิจารณ์เป็นเรื่องของกองทัพ’ ข่าวปลอม!! อย่าแชร์” [“‘Big Bom’ stated ‘The Public does not have the right to investigate or criticise the army’ is fake news. Do not share”], 3 December 2019. Available at: <https://www.antifakenewscenter.com/บิ๊กป้อม-ลั่นประชาชนไม่/> (accessed 11 March 2021).
12. The only post somewhat related to these developments was titled “JPM: Pengisytiharan Cuti Umum Sempena Pelantikan YAB PM Ke-8 Adalah Palsu” [“Prime Minister's Department: Declaration of Public Holiday in Conjunction with the Appointment of the 8th Prime Minister is Fake”], *Maslog* (2020) Available at <https://sebenarnya.my/cuti-umum-2-mac-2020-bersempena-pelantikan-yab-pm-ke-8> (accessed 11 March 2021).

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