ACICE Monthly Digest

A monthly roundup of significant news around the world

Information

Election Meddling by Foreign Entities

- In February 2023, a consortium of international journalists, including those from *The Guardian* and *Forbidden Stories*, reportedly exposed a team of Israeli contractors, dubbed "Team Jorge". Team Jorge was alleged to have interfered in more than 30 elections around the world. According to the journalists, Team Jorge was led by Tal Hanan, a 50-year-old former Israeli special forces operative.

- One of Team Jorge's key services was a sophisticated software package, Advanced Impact Media Solutions, or Aims. This software controls and amplifies content using thousands of fake online profiles on platforms such as Twitter, LinkedIn and Gmail. Some of these profiles are even linked to Amazon and Airbnb accounts with credit cards and bitcoins. For instance, Team Jorge was reported to have the capability to hack into, and use the compromised Telegram and Gmail accounts to obtain sensitive information and propagate messages, including disinformation, to undermine or support an election candidate. While their *modus operandi* is not new in the disinformation-for-hire industry, where private entities are paid by malicious actors to spread false information and manipulate opinion, the exposure of Team Jorge's activities was a rare detailed example of a private entity providing services such as covertly meddling in an elections for profit.

- A global market that profits from perpetuating disinformation is a threat to any nation state. However, these services are particularly dangerous for democratic societies as these allow threat actors to undermine the integrity of elections and politically divide the people. Governments could consider working together to share information, and cooperate to tackle cross-border threats as well as develop norms and principles to delegitimise such activities.

Cybersecurity

Recent Reforms in Cyber Legislation

- In the presence of emerging threats in the digital domain, several countries are reviewing their cybersecurity strategies, including amending their legislations and regulations to keep abreast with the changing environment and evolving technology applications.

- The UK is in the process of reviewing its Computer Misuse Act (CMA), which has been in place for 30 years. The proposed changes would allow (a) law enforcement agencies to take control of online domains that are used for a variety of crimes, including mimicking existing agencies; (b) law enforcement agencies to require the preservation of data to assist in investigations; and (c) actions to be taken against individuals processing or using data acquired through violating the CMA. As part of the review, the government has sought opinions from the public on these changes; the public consultation window is between 7 Feb and 6 Apr 2023.

- Likewise, in Australia, the government has moved to update its existing regulation, which it said was not keeping pace with the evolving cyber threats. In February 2023, the Australian government announced plans to overhaul its cybersecurity rules, and set up an agency to oversee investments in cybersecurity as well as coordinate inter-government responses to hacker attacks. This move followed reported increases in cyberattacks since 2022, including on the health insurer Medibank Private Limited, and telco Optus, owned by Singapore Telecoms Limited.

- In September 2022, the Cyberspace Administration of China proposed a set of amendments to cybersecurity legislation. One of the suggested changes was to introduce stiffer penalties for violations and infractions of these laws. For example, internet operators who do not take sufficient steps to prevent cyberattacks may face a new maximum fine of 1 million yuan, up from the previous cap of 100,000 yuan.

- These examples of cyber legislation reforms reflect the growing concerns with increasingly sophisticated cyberattacks and the need for appropriate instruments to deter and take actions against such infringements. Stricter law enforcements, higher penalties for perpetrators, and greater coordination among agencies to tackle cyberattacks are just some of these new measures. It would therefore be beneficial for countries and regions to learn from one another's best practices in cyber regulations in their efforts to counter cyber threats.

Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief

Reducing Risks from Natural Disasters

- In February 2023, the International Science Council (ISC), based in France, published a mid-term review report that identified the achievements and implementation gaps in disaster risk reduction. The report also provided guidance to policymakers, researchers and other stakeholders. Some of the recommendations included adopting a preventive approach to disaster management instead of a "reactive and compensatory" one, as well as integrating natural disaster considerations into urban planning.

- While the report did not specify disinformation and misinformation as an area of concern in disaster risk management, the availability of timely and accurate information is critical during a crisis. Unfortunately, misinformation and rumours can often spread quickly through social media and word of mouth right after disasters strike. In their state of panic, some may end up relying on any information they find, regardless of its accuracy and the credibility of its source. This could cause massive confusion to civilians, such as the latest updates about the disaster, where to evacuate to safety, and places to find food and supplies. As a disaster situation is always evolving, online falsehoods can undermine trust in the authorities, such as the militaries or civil defence forces, and cause delays in the delivery of humanitarian aid.

- For example, a 2021 article by Al Jazeera assessed misinformation as one of the reasons that undermined public trust in the Japanese government's management of nuclear energy in the wake of the 2011 Fukushima disaster. In another episode in 2017, a number of viral hoaxes surfaced on the internet in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Irma in the United States. One of them showed downtown Miami hit by major flooding and submerged in water. Another wrongly claimed that the voice communication application Zello could be used without internet service, potentially creating false impressions on its use as a last-resort communication tool since Zello actually needed access to the internet or a data network to function. *The*

Washington Post had reported on a running list of viral hoaxes shared on social media to keep the public informed.

- In view of the informational risks during disasters, some countries have initiated efforts to overcome communication difficulties. Japan has implemented an emergency announcement system using drones that can alert people of an imminent natural disaster, helping to facilitate evacuations. As the system uses a private wireless communication network, it will not be disrupted by the tsunamis and other natural disasters. The drones are also equipped with cameras that can capture live footage safely, giving the authorities information more quickly, which in turn helps them to pump out information to civilians in an accurate, relevant and timely manner.

- The Canadian Red Cross has also introduced guidelines to the public to raise awareness about informational risks during disasters, especially when the necessary information has yet been announced through official sources. These guidelines encourage the public to (a) verify the publication date; (b) ensure the source is credible; (c) share up-to-date information; and (d) question information that seems unlikely. Enhancing media literacy among the populace would be instrumental in combating misinformation and disinformation during disasters.
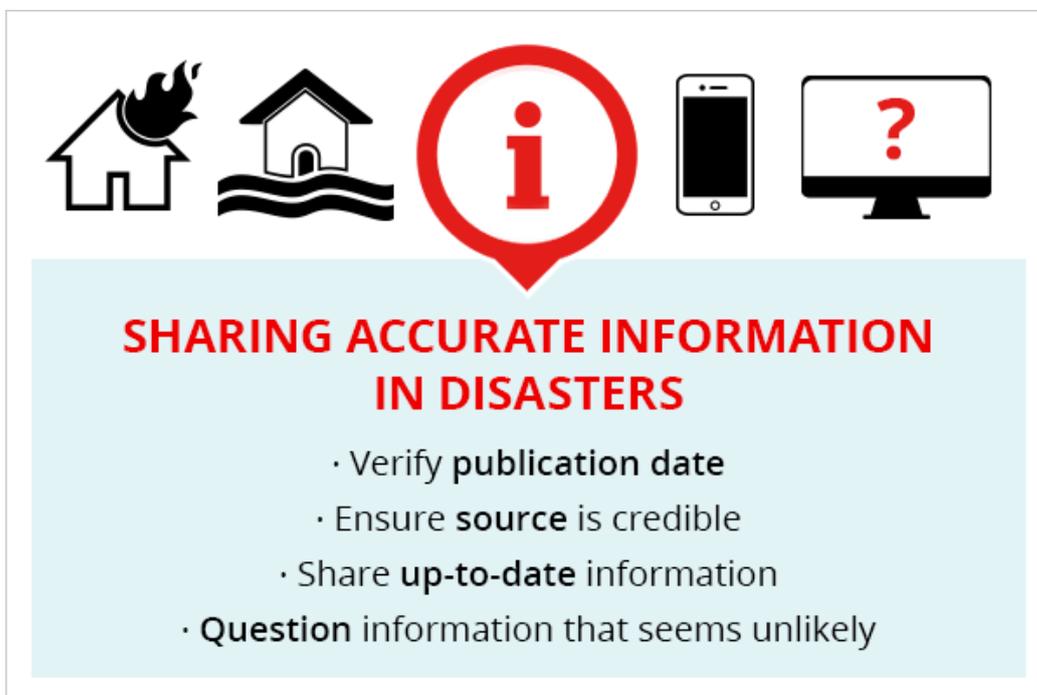
SHARING ACCURATE INFORMATION IN DISASTERS
· Verify **publication date**
· Ensure **source** is credible
· Share **up-to-date** information
· **Question** information that seems unlikely

Terrorism

Malaysian Police Monitoring Possible Emergence of Pro-ISIS Malay Media Unit

- The Nordic Counter-Terrorism Network (NCTN), a think-tank headquartered in Finland, recently identified the Al Malaka Media Centre's role in disseminating terror propaganda in Malay on social media. The Centre is a pro-Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) media outlet. According to NCTN, the media outlet's focus is on Malaysia, and it targets Malay-speaking individuals.

- On 5 Mar 2023, Malaysian news outlet *The Vibes* reported that Al Malaka Media Centre produced an image featuring the Petronas Twin Towers with ISIS flags flying at the top, and a plane heading towards one of the buildings beside the Petronas Towers. The caption of the poster translated as "The day of conquest is soon upon us".

- In response to NCTN's findings, Malaysia's Inspector-General of Police Acryl Sani Abdullah Sani and Home Minister Saifuddin Nasution Ismail assured the public that the police was aware of the media outlet's existence,

and that they were on alert for any activities propagating pro-ISIS ideologies. This is made possible with the ongoing collaborations with regional security agencies, and coordination among local authorities to deter ISIS activities.

Extremist Supporters' Attempts at Establishing Islamic Territories

- Pro-ISIS elements in Southeast Asia have tried to claim territories as their own for years. They are frequently referred to as a "province", or "wilayah".

- For example, supporters were trying to popularise the term "Wilayah al-Filibin" online, referring to efforts to establish an Islamic territory in the Philippines.

- In Indonesia, social media account users created "Pekanbaru Wilayah" and other new wilayahs. They also attempted to invite others to establish more wilayahs.

- In February 2023, a 16-year-old Singaporean youth was reportedly self-radicalised by pro-ISIS propaganda and supported using armed violence to create a wilayah. He had participated in several ISIS-themed servers on the online game Roblox, taking on the roles of "spokesperson" and "chief propagandist" for his in-game ISIS faction. The youth also uploaded his self-created pro-ISIS videos on social media between late 2021 and early 2022, using his Roblox game footage. The youth was issued a Restriction Order (RO) under the Internal Security Act in January 2023, under which he cannot change his residence or travel out of Singapore without prior approval, and can only access social media and issue any public statement with permission from the Internal Security Department.

Annex

Sources

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Terrorism

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Contact Details

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