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Harmful Disinformation in Southeast Asia: "Negative Campaigning", "Information Operations" and "Racist Propaganda" – Three Forms of Manipulative Political Communication in Malaysia, Myanmar, and Thailand

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When comparing media freedom in Malaysia, Myanmar, and Thailand, so-called "fake news" appears as threats to a deliberative (online) public sphere in these three diverse contexts. However, "racist propaganda", "information operations" and "negative campaigning" might be more accurate terms that explain these forms of systematic manipulative political communication. The three cases show forms of disinformation in under-researched contexts and thereby expand the often Western focused discourses on hate speech and fake news. Additionally, the analysis shows that harmful disinformation disseminated online originates from differing contextual trajectories and is not an "online phenomenon".

Drawing on an analysis of connotative context factors, this explorative comparative study enables an understanding of different forms of harmful disinformation in Malaysia, Myanmar, and Thailand. The connotative context factors were inductively inferred from 32 expert interviews providing explanations for the formation of political communication (control) mechanisms.

Keywords: disinformation, hate speech, qualitative comparative contextualization, media freedom, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand

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Introduction

When comparing media freedom[2] in Malaysia, Myanmar, and Thailand, so-called "fake news" and "hate speech" appear as threats to deliberative (online) public spheres in these three contexts. However, "negative campaigning" in Malaysia, "information operations" in Thailand and "racist propaganda" in Myanmar are more precise terms to capture these forms of systematic manipulative political communication (disinformation) [3].

Although new forms of communication on the Internet add new dimensions to harmful disinformation, this paper argues that manipulative political communication practices do neither originate from online communication platforms nor are they limited to online public spheres. Rather contextual trajectories lead to harmful speech which is then disseminated online. In the three contexts in question harmful manipulative political communication routinely takes place on the Internet but is by far not limited to online communicative spaces, and does not originate from the structures, processes and agents of online communication technologies in particular. The three examples from Southeast Asia underscore that contextual conditions determine how and why harmful disinformation occurs and make clear the need for legal discourses about online regulations to be strongly contextualized and to go beyond a universal conceptualization of online hate speech as simply in opposition to tolerable speech.

Since online communication has become mainstream, even in most technologically least developed countries, the cyber utopian discourse of the liberal potential of the Internet is now widely considered as a debate on the necessity to restrict (online) free speeches to tackle online and offline communicative violence and related human rights violations. From the beginning of the discourse on the liberating potential of the Internet there were critical voices, including Morozov (2011), who condemned an implied "cyber-utopianism" and emphasized the context-dependency of the potential of the Internet for liberalization and democratization processes. The potential of the Internet to share information cheaply, quickly, and effectively facilitates the spread of civil and uncivil speech in the same manner and is highly context-dependent. To understand how context impacts the trajectories of extreme forms of speech[4], particular histories of speech

[2] I conceive of media freedom rather an analytical question: "how and why is media controlled in a specific context?" than a normative concept, because media and public speeches are controlled to a certain extent by different (f)actors in all contexts, in liberal democracies as well as in autocracies, totalitarian/authoritarian systems or other contexts.

[3] In recent debates the terms "hate speech" and "fake news" are so broadly used that they fail to capture actual phenomenon of disinformation and harmful speeches in differing contexts. In this paper I use the term disinformation to capture types of systematic manipulative political communication which uses false information or vitriol in an uncivil manner to manipulate the public discourse towards ones own purpose. Those forms of disinformation are deemed harmful for a free and peaceful society and therefore can be considered an opponent of civil free speech in their respective context.

[4] In order to capture harmful speech (online and offline) I refer to Pohjonen´s and Udupa´s (2017) "concept of extreme speech [that] has thus been an attempt to move the debate beyond a normative understanding of vitriolic online speech practices as hate speech" (p. 1186). "[Their] proposed concept of extreme speech (…) which bring[s] to the fore contextual differences as the majority of the world's populations becomes connected to the Internet and begins to communicate in ways we may have not even anticipated" (p. 1187).

cultures "need to be understood" (Pohjonen & Udupa, 2017, p. 1173). Analysis of media freedom in Malaysia, Myanmar, and Thailand reveals that disinformation in the three media contexts plays a significant role in all (media) public spheres. Therefore, this research does not focus on the analysis of specific forms of online disinformation but rather analyses the contextual trajectories of their (online and offline) formations within the discourse of media freedom.

The leading question of this comparative study is: "how do the trajectories of the connotative contexts impact the differing harmful disinformation in Malaysia, Myanmar, and Thailand as threats to media freedom?" By analysing existing fault lines in the three countries, [5] this article broadens the current discourses on hate speech and fake news and demonstrates how historical, political, and cultural contexts affect particular forms of disinformation.

The Southeast Asia region is highly under-researched and the results of this research can, therefore, enhance our understanding and handling of different forms of disinformation. More specifically, the study of three contexts in question will analyse the scope and magnitude of disinformation in the region and illuminate the diversity of factors that enable a qualitative heuristic analysis that highlights the cultural trajectories of the harmful speech formation in the region. For such an analysis, variations in the impacting factors are the foundation for the maximized structural perspectival changes towards the research object of `harmful disinformation` (Kleining, 1994, pp. 28-31).

The three cases represent a wide range of political, economic, developmental, and cultural facets. Post-colonial Malaysia has reached relatively high socio-economic and technological standards and represents a contradictory example of the transition paradigm (Nissen, 2016), which is fundamentally called into question by scholars such as Carothers (2002) and Sparks (2008). Despite liberal economic development in the country, it practices discriminatory Malay supremacy and Islamization policy, does not respect human rights, and the same autocratic government controlled the country from its independence in 1957 until 2018. Hence, while liberalization of the market brought about relative economic wealth, formal democratization only led to "electoral authoritarianism" (Tapsell, 2013, p. 614). Malaysia´s heterogeneous society, fragmented along ethnic and religious conflict lines, is the basis for polarization in political communication, and negative campaigning is often used to discredit opponents, leading to on- and offline violence.

By contrast, post-colonial Myanmar is one of the poorest countries in the region and until recently was one of the poorest in the world. Additionally, until 2010, it was one of the most closed economic, political, social and media systems in the world, ruled by the Tadmadaw (a military junta) for nearly half a century; a dubious accolade shared with countries such as North Korea and Cuba. Myanmar's transition process, starting with top-down democratization through the "roadmap to democracy" initiated by the Tadmadaw in 2003, has followed a similar pattern of elite continuity that Sparks detected for the comparison of China, Russia, and Poland (Sparks, 2008). Elite continuity is a significant characteristic to assist in our understanding of the

[5] Although the conflicts cannot be considered as confined by national borders and the reference to the nation states implies a methodological nationalism, it is useful to refer to nation states because analysis of media freedom situations, with specific laws, distribution channels and political policies, is widely impacted by national governments.

functioning of Myanmar´s social systems, such as the media system and its restrictions. An instrumentalized Buddhist supremacy maintains long-lasting racism that has been propagated by the ruling elites for decades and led to the horrifying human rights abuses in the Rohingya refugee crisis.

Although postcolonial Malaysia and Myanmar are both multilingual and multi-ethnic, diverging historical developments, social constellations, and cultural contexts call for different explanations for the formations of power in political communication control mechanisms. Thailand and Myanmar both uphold Buddhist supremacy and face persistent violent conflicts in their borderlands, in contrast to Malaysia where Muslim Malay supremacy characterizes every level of political and social action.

Thailand, known around the world as a tourist destination, is situated as a mid-range income level country in Southeast Asia and is socially and politically shaped by a deep divide between Bangkok's progressive middle-class elites and traditional rural Thailand. Thailand's Bangkok-centric media system accentuates a deep social and political divide of the country, accompanied by conflicting transformative dynamics in divergent value sets (Horstmann, 2001) between progressive political middle-class elites ("yellow shirts") and the traditional rural Thailand ("red shirts").

In contrast to relative political stability in both Malaysia, with the ruling of the coalition government of the Barisan Nasional (BN, which means national front) until 2018, and Myanmar, ruled by the Tadmadaw between 1962 and 2015, Thailand has experienced 12 coups[6] since the end of absolute monarchy in 1932. Being marked by a persistently discontinuous political landscape and the continuing dominance of the military and monarchy as political powers, it has never been under foreign control by colonial or other powers.

Although the three countries present a wide range of contextual factors and social, cultural, and political formations, all three countries do not currently provide sufficient conditions for free media reporting or free speech, either online or offline. Nevertheless, the historical and cultural processes which impact the three forms of disinformation differ significantly and originate from the unique formations of their contexts. Therefore, the analysis of the historical and cultural formation of the conditions for these forms of disinformation in their connotative contexts is the focus of this comparison. As a result, this study has the potential to provide new knowledge about the contextual foundations and underlying concepts.

In the following section I will briefly introduce the difficulties of applying media freedom measurements in non-Western contexts. This clarifies the necessity of contextualization in order to understand the peculiarities of disinformation which curtail a free public sphere and the methodological implementation of this in-depth case study comparison.

[6] The number of the coups varies depending on whether you count failed coups.

Methodology

Whether we consider extreme speech or disinformation components, or opponents of a free and plural media landscape, this is initially irrelevant for the research question: how and why have differing forms of harmful disinformation emerged in Malaysia, Myanmar, and Thailand. The analysis of components or opponents of media freedom, most notably in under-researched regions, requires consideration of culture-specific characteristics without the assumption of an exceptional uniqueness or otherness of their context. Therefore, contextualization is used to detect and explain the underlying factors which have impacted the media environments.

Various research often (only) uses media freedom rankings published by organizations such as Freedom House (FH) and Reporters Without Borders (RWB), which, as Roudakova notes, are not "particularly insightful" when analysing impacts on specific media freedom or media control mechanisms (Roudakova, 2012, p. 262). Hence, research relying on those rankings is exposed to a strong Western bias, a lack of transparency, and unclearly defined concepts because these rankings lack an academic methodology to measure and compare media freedom. The strong Western bias in these rankings is derived from the structure, measurement instruments, and financial dependencies of these organizations (Brooten, 2013; Giannone & de Frutos, 2016; McCurdy, Power, & Godfrey, 2011; Sapiezynska & Lagos, 2016). Academic engagement with standardized assessments of media freedom such as FH and RWB rankings is ambivalent at best.

For the use of quantitative data in the evaluation of media freedom, Goldstein (1986, p. 620) states, in reference to the FH methodology: "Even more disturbing than the deficiencies of these data resources is the fact that social scientists have treated them as though they are methodologically sound quantitative data." He concludes that "[n]o quantitative calculation can really measure the most significant impact of human rights abuses [alone]". Such data must always be interpreted within their historical and political contexts in combination with good qualitative data (Goldstein, 1986, p. 624; Gurevitch & Blumler, 1990). Therefore, this comparison of threats to media freedom, particularly harmful disinformation, is based on qualitative in-depth case studies. Case study analysis has comparative merit because inductive methods can identify the complexity of political communication control and their causal mechanisms (George & Bennet, 2005; Chakravartty & Roy, 2013).

The basis for comparing the *connotative contexts* is data from field research trips[7] to Malaysia, Myanmar, and Thailand in 2017, including 32 in-depth expert interviews with local and exile journalists, media owners, NGO workers, artists, members of journalists' associations and the press council, civil society organization workers, researchers, and government personnel. The expert interviews were conducted by the author in Malaysia, Myanmar, and Thailand between February 13 and April 20 in 2017. Experts were not selected randomly; rather different media sectors and different political and "ideological" perspectives were considered by a selection

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[7] This field research trip was financially supported with a travel grant by the FAZIT foundation.

process which included as many perspectives as possible: e.g. oppositional, state/government, mainstream, alternative, local, and international. Thirty-two of altogether forty-four conducted interviews were selected for category-driven analysis: thirteen for Myanmar, ten for Malaysia, and nine for Thailand.

The interview questionnaire was constructed deductively and inductively based on topics and problems in media systems/media freedom research, and adapted to country specifics. The interviews were as openly constructed as possible. This means that the interviewer started the interview with an opening question and then guided the respondent into a particular aspect of the topic necessary to answer research questions. After introducing the topic of the interview: “the comparison of media systems in Southeast Asia”, the interviewer asked the expert(s) for an assessment of the media situation in the country. This procedure led to a situation where the interviewed experts set the agenda for the interview, and the interviewer served as neutral discussant (to the greatest possible extent) and guided the interviewee through significant topics. The comparability between the three countries was maintained by the use of a similar interview guide for all three contexts, and contained the following sections for questions:

Table 1

Questionnaire topics for in-depth expert interviews

Media freedom	**Specific characteristics**	**Working conditions of journalists**	**Most influential context factors on media policy and practices**	**Relationship of the media to different actors**	**Other Factors**
- Freedom of Information/ Right to information - Freedom of Assembly, speech and opinion - Laws and regulations (state agents and self-control) - Media independence - Digital freedom - Safety and Security - Access to media - specific freedoms/restrictions - Harassments of journalists/media institutions	- Differences to other Southeast Asian media systems - Market structures: media providers, ownership, financing of the media (state, private, public-service, subsidies), key media - Journalists/media role in society/ politics - Reputation of media and journalism in society - Society's expectations	- Payment and resources - Education - The typical journalist - Role perception (aims, conception of the audience, routines, criteria for “good journalism“) - entry conditions/restrictions for professional journalists - news room structures	- socio-economic factors - cultural context - style of governance - technology - history	- Politics -Civil society (organizations) - Economy - Elites (other than political elites) - Military - Other	- Nation building - Persisting conflicts - National security -Multi-ethnic, -lingual, -religious - Modernisation - Technological Standard - Religion - Alternative communication Structures - Media concentration (economic/editorial) - Commercialization - Concepts like face loyalty, community etc. - (De)Centralisation

The evaluation of the interview data was carried out both deductively and inductively from the interview materials after transcription. Then, the text was condensed to central variables of interpretation patterns using paraphrasing. This resulted in attribution with the *connotative context* factors (see Table 2) for analysis of the three contexts with their respective data.

The comparison produces insights by using an inductive approach which facilitates the detection, interpretation, and understanding of processes and mechanisms which lead to different or similar forms of harmful disinformation as impacts on free media discourses. By analyzing the *connotative contexts*, I exemplify the most significant inductively inferred factors affecting the media systems, and the three forms of extreme speech in Malaysia, Myanmar, and Thailand.

Media Freedom and Harmful Disinformation in Malaysia, Myanmar, and Thailand

The following table comprises exclusively *connotative context* factors which have been inductively inferred from the qualitative interview data. The table provides an overview of all factors that allow us to understand and explain the formation of the three media environments. The most significant factors to the overall analysis, including an understanding of the formation of media control mechanisms in all three countries, are shown in the left upper part (in black) of the table. The left lower part (in grey) lists connotative context factors which are relevant to understanding the specifics in the media control mechanisms; but these bear different significance for the explanations in every context (this also depends on the focus of the research question). The right column highlights the relevance of the factors for the explanation of the three forms of disinformation and extreme speech in the following analysis.

Table 2

Connotative context factors, inductively inferred from 32 in-depth expert interviews in Malaysia, Myanmar, and Thailand. Left column: connotative context factors relevant to understanding media control mechanisms; right column: relevant factors to explain the three forms of disinformation.

OVERALL SIGNIFICANT FACTORS	**FACTORS EXPLAINING DISINFORMATION**
(De)centrality Social stratifications/polarizations Supremacy of (religious) norms and values Persisting conflicts National security Seniority Culture of (dis)agreement Multiethnicity Multilingual societies Ownership/financial structure Mechanisms of intimidation[8] Rule of law vs. Rule by law **OTHER RELEVANT FACTORS** Alternative (communication) structures Censorship/self-censorship Civil society Commercialization Education system Freedom of information Ideology of powerful elites Journalism culture (tradition)/role perception Nation-building/national identity Partisanship/clientelism/patronage Political regime and structures Racism Societies expectations/media role Socio-economic structures Technological standard/development Transformative dynamics Trust	Social stratifications/polarizations Supremacy of (religious) norms and values Persisting conflicts Seniority Culture of (dis)agreement Multiethnicity Multilingual societies Education system Nation-building/national identity Racism Technological standard/development Transformative dynamics Trust

We can see that there are well-known factors for the analysis of media systems and media freedom like *ownership structures* or *de*(*centrality*), but also less common factors which bear a lot of

[8] *Mechanisms of intimidation* are manifold, and some listed factors can be subordinated here, but since they have specific analytical power, the list also contains other specific mechanisms of intimidation.

meaning to understand the formations of these media systems, and the forms of disinformation; for example, *multi-lingual societies, supremacy of religious norms and values, persisting conflicts, trust, seniority, racism, etc*.

In Malaysia the connotative context factors *social stratifications/polarizations, supremacy of (religious) norms and values, persisting conflicts, multiethnicity, multilingual societies, ideology of powerful elites, education system* and *racism* build the basis to understand the formation of "negative campaigning". For Myanmar´s context *supremacy of (religious) norms and values, persisting conflicts, multiethnicity, nation-building/national identity, education system, racism, technological standard/development, transformative dynamics*, and *trust*, are most relevant to understanding how Facebook have developed to a most important information platform, already known colloquially as "Fakebook" or "Hatebook"; a facilitator of violent "racist propaganda" in Myanmar´s Rohingya refugee crisis. In Thailand´s Southern conflict connotative context factors such as *multi-ethnicity, seniority, culture of agreement, nation-building/national identity, social stratifications/polarizations, supremacy of (religious) norms and values and persisting conflicts* highlight why the "information operations" disinformation strategy of the military is mainly accepted.

The following discussion presents essential background information to understand which conflict lines condition the forms of disinformation, and how the connotative context factors impact their establishment in Malaysia, Myanmar, and Thailand. The mutually dependent connotative context factors (in *italic*) are used as explanatory statements/variables to understand the trajectories of the forms of disinformation.

Negative Campaigning in Malaysia Leads to On- and Offline Political Violence

Negative campaigning is a term James Gomez, a researcher on human rights and the media in Southeast Asia, uses to differentiate the spread of hate and disinformation in the polarized Malay public sphere from common discourses on hate speech (personal communication, 21 March 2017). The term negative campaigning relates to campaigning or advertising during elections but goes further in its meaning. Due to its radicalization negative campaigning is a communicative practice which gives rise to political violence in the media as well as in the streets. In contrast to a political debate or common election advertising this form of negative advertising "is just throwing negative stuff, saying you're bad, you're bad and you're no good, you're not fit for office and you're corrupt…" (J. Gomez, personal communication, 21 March, 2017). James Gomez emphasizes that negative campaigning is not a new phenomenon which results from online platforms, but changes with the use of online communication:

> So, in the past in Malaysia, negative campaigning was only undertaken by the ruling regime through the print and broadcast media, print in particular. But now with online capacity, both sides take negative campaigning online. As a result, you have very polarized communities online [(echo chambers)] and then it gives rise to offline violence. (personal communication, 21 March, 2017)

In Malaysia *supremacy of religious norms and values* is reflected in the vehemently enforced primacy of Malays and Islam, which leads to *social stratification* (Chin, 2016), and the fragmentation and polarization of the media landscape with a strong elite-media parallelism (Strout, 2016). The fragmentation of the media market reflects *social stratifications* along many lines: "new and old media, fragmentation between the rural and urban areas, fragmentation is equally important between Peninsular Malaysia and East Malaysia" (Z. Nain, personal communication, 4 April, 2017). Zaharom Nain also points to the link *between the ideology of powerful elites* and language in the fragmentation of the media market: "But it's not so much the multilingual, it's what goes behind that, it's the link within language and ideology, language and ethnicity." (Z. Nain, personal communication, 4 April, 2017).

Although in *multi-ethnic* Malaysia the three largest ethnic groups (Malays, Chinese, Indians) are well incorporated in a multilingual media market, the deep *social stratification* between ethnic groups, predominantly Malays and non-Malays, leads to daily communicative violence and to offline political violence: "That means violence outside polling stations, violence during political rallies, violence related to voting, blocking voters physically, motorbike gangs, (…)." (J. Gomez, personal communication, 21 March, 2017).

Before previous elections in May 2018, for a short time, Malaysia was the first country in the world to have implemented an anti-fake news law. The plan for an anti-fake news law had already been announced by the previous government in early 2017 "to police the online environment in order to avoid violence" (J. Gomez, personal communication, 21 March, 2017). After the elections in 2018 not only was the widely criticized law repealed, but it was also the first time in the Malay history that an opposition party won the general election. The previously ruling coalition BN, dominated by a political ethnic elite of the Malay-nationalist UMNO (United Malays National Organization), "divide[d] and rule[d] through ethnicity and religion" since independence in 1957 (Z. Nain, personal communication, 4 April, 2017). Malay sovereignty and Islamization of the society is implemented on various levels, for instance in the *education system* and government structures, and thus reflected in a *social stratification* as many of my interviewees assert (Ting, 2009; Chinyong Liow, 2014). Among others, Zaharom Nain emphasizes the impact of the three R's: "royalty, religion and race" of the "Malay Sovereignty" ("Ketuanan Melayu") policy (personal communication, 4 April, 2017). This policy encompasses a privileged treatment of Malays, e.g. for scholarships, research funding, public-service jobs, public-private partnerships/contracts and an overall Islamization policy in the multi-ethnic and multi-religious nation (Chinyong Liow, 2014; Ting, 2009; Zunar[9], personal communication, 6 April, 2017). Therefore, *supremacy of (religious) norms and values* is highly relevant for the analysis of the Malay media landscape and its specific form of harmful manipulative political communication practices.

Malaysia´s *social stratification* is exploited by the government and elites to manipulate different factions of society for their power maintenance and leads to social grievances, as interviewees highlight critically. While the multilingual media market in Malaysia does represent the main

[9] Zunar is the pseudonym of the political cartoonist Zulkiflee Sm Anwar Ulhaque

ethnic groups, interviewees clarified that this does not lead to a constructive pluralism because information is focused on the respective ethnic/religious group (Yang & Rycker, 2017), allowing the political elite to manipulate media reporting to spread hatred against one another along racial conflict lines (qua *racism*). All interviewees harshly criticize the stratification of the Malay media market and consider it one of the most significant factors affecting the degree of media freedom through the manipulation by political elites. Steven Gan (personal communication, 30 March, 2017), among others, considers the mainstream media a "party organ […]; so basically, that's where you see a lot of censorship, a lot of spinning, a lot of reporting half-truths […]." Zaharom Nain (personal communication, 4 April, 2017) pointedly criticizes the consequences of the *ownership structures* and refers to the media as propaganda organs. Regarding ownership structures, the "mainstream press in particular and the media in general is a crude manifestation of the symbiotic relationship between the state and the media" (Anuar, 2005, p. 27). This symbiotic relationship leads to the antagonism of negative campaigning in Malaysia and biased "positive campaigning" in the mainstream media. This positive campaigning goes as far as the mainstream media for example "can't have an opposition MP in the photograph doing something good." (S. J. De Rosario, personal communication, 5 April, 2017). This underpins the deep polarization between the ruling elite and the opposition, with their accompanying media outlets, as a basis of negative campaigning and hence a highly biased and manipulated public sphere.

The manipulation of a polarized Malay society and publics, which is based on a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual society, in combination with a strongly enforced *supremacy* of religious norms and values, mainly fans the fire for extreme speech and disinformation. Altogether, the political power struggle between the fragmented *multi-lingual, multi-ethnic society* and social injustice spreads hatred and provides the breeding ground for violent negative campaigning and offline violence which again fuels Malaysia´s *social stratification*.

"Racist Propaganda" on "Hatebook" Facilitates Disinformation and Human Rights Abuses in Myanmar´s Rohingya[10] Refugee Crisis.

In Myanmar, the currently strongly criticized and internationally well-reported Rohingya refugee crisis mirrors connotative context factors such as *racism, persistent conflicts, national security, multi-ethnicity, supremacy of religious norms and values*, and *nation-building/national identity* (Ahsan Ullah, 2016), which in turn significantly impact political and social processes, such as media reporting in Myanmar. After a Human Rights Council (HCR) fact-checking mission in the Rohingya refugee crisis "call[s] for the investigation and prosecution of Myanmar's Commander-in-Chief, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, and his top military leaders for genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes" (OHCHR, 2018) the International Criminal Court (ICC) in Den

[10] The so called Rohingya people are a Muslim minority, mainly stateless, living in the north of Buddhist majority Myanmar. In August 2017 more than 700,000 Rohingya have fled across the border into Bangladesh after brutal crackdowns by the military in which they "took the lead in killing thousands of Rohingya civilians, as well as forced disappearances, mass gang rape and the burning of hundreds of villages" (OHCHR 2018).

Haag opened “a Preliminary Examination concerning the alleged deportation of the Rohingya people from Myanmar to Bangladesh”.

In the investigations of the ethnic cleansing in the Rohingya crisis the HCR report says that “Facebook has been a useful instrument for those [(religious and military actors)] seeking to spread hate” (HCR, 2018). Although Myanmar is an Internet latecomer, Facebook can be considered a facilitator of racism and human rights violations in Myanmar. After strong international criticism and the release of the HCR report, Facebook reacted with the deletion of sixty-five Facebook pages and eighteen accounts, “including Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, commander-in-chief of the armed forces, and the military’s Myawady television network.” Accounts and pages were removed due to content violations and “inauthentic behaviour”; which means that “they used by seemingly independent news and opinion Pages to covertly push the messages of the Myanmar military. This type of behaviour is banned under our, [Facebook’s], misrepresentation policy because we want people to be able to trust the connections they make.” (Facebook, 2018). Interviewees emphasize the relevance of trust in the connections and information on Facebook due to the mistrust of official information. This is based on the experience of five decades of military propaganda and crony business in the media (Brooten, McElhone, & Venkiteswaran, 2019), where people trust personal information from friends and family over official or media publications. Facebook activates this form of trust because it’s algorithms are designed to privilege the sharing and receiving of information within a personal ‘trusted’ networks. This renders it easy to spread disinformation, and to manipulate information by government or military officials and other elites. On the other hand, of course, new online public spheres can lead to more transparency in governments and militaries activities, as former Minister of Information, Ye Htut, emphasises (personal communication, 17 April, 2017; Naung Oak & Brooten, 2019).

Htaike Htaike (personal communication, 16 February, 2017), who monitors extreme speech online, points out a very symptomatic development in the media-society relationship, mainly impacted by a low media literacy, a bad education system and the leapfrogging of *technological development* levels:

> Media literacy is also a very important factor. I mean, in Myanmar, because we are a latecomer of people using Internet, people tend to believe everything that’s written on Facebook, and there are lots of people that thought Facebook is the Internet, and also think that Facebook is a media house like for example BBC or CNN.

Thus, for most of Myanmar’s people the Internet equals Facebook. This is because Myanmar’s society did not have the chance to achieve new media literacy by step-by-step access to ICT[11]

[11] Myanmar’s society leapfrogged technological development levels such as the use of personal computers (PCs) and mobile phones due to a lack of availability and very high costs. Until recently landline communication was the only communication technology for the average people. It was mainly provided by street vendors and not part of regular households. Licenses for landline telephone connections, SIM cards, or PCs were only granted to people with government connections and not affordable for Myanmar’s general public. Since the political opening, the number of SIM card holders is skyrocketing and monthly spending on smartphone usage and mobile internet connections is very high compared to the still very low average income.

based developments through emails, blogs, websites, social media, and smartphones. In the combination with the now-available mobile Internet through smartphone usage and a pricing strategy of mobile internet providers that provides free access to Facebook (the Facebook service Free Basics was provided until September 2017 in Myanmar) but with payment restricted access to all other websites, for most of Myanmar's people the Internet equals Facebook. Nearly everything they retrieve from the Internet comes from Facebook. Therefore, many people literally think Facebook is the Internet.

Accompanied by very strong *supremacy of religious norms and values* and *racism*, most interviewees in Myanmar problematize hate speech and disinformation with reference to religious values. Buddhism was exploited by Myanmar's military junta to create a cultural and political *national identity* which assisted in legitimizing and installing political power (Schober 2005). Buddhist radical nationalists are sources of political *supremacy of religious norms and values* rhetoric which implements *racism*, represented on Facebook, as interviewees pointed out.

Racist rhetoric is also not a new online phenomenon. Rather the spread of racist propaganda and hate speech is installed in various ways and is even embedded in Myanmar´s *education system*. For example, history and education books are manipulated with disinformation to spread hatred against the Rohingya in Myanmar. Reuters reports that the military did not even flinch from using manipulated photographs - for example, Pulitzer Prize-winning images of Rwandan Hutu refugees in 1996 - in recently published educational propaganda books about the Muslim minority:

> [The awarded photo from Rwanda] has been converted to black and white, and the caption falsely describes the subjects as Bengalis who have "intruded" into Myanmar after the British colonial occupation of lower Myanmar. (…) In its new book, the military denies the allegations of abuses, blaming the violence on "Bengali terrorists" it says were intent on carving out a Rohingya state named "Arkistan". (…) Much of the content is sourced to the military's "True News" information unit, which since the start of the crisis has distributed news giving the army's perspective, mostly via Facebook. (McPherson, 2018)

This example highlights the military´s vehement effort to disrespect the Rohingya in Myanmar in order to facilitate Buddhist supremacy, *nation-building* and *national identity* based on hate, racist propaganda and disinformation. Altogether disinformation and racist propaganda in this fragile context has a high public impact due to low *media literacy*, brought on by nearly five decades of military rule with one of the most restrictive media systems worldwide, a *technological development* which leapfrogged decades of communication technologies (*technological standard*, *modernization*), a bad *education system*, *racism* and a strongly enforced *supremacy of religious norms and values*.

Military "Information Operations" in Thailand´s Southern Conflict.

Thailand´s military information operations exemplify a strategic information policy, set apart from other forms of extreme speech and disinformation in Thailand´s public sphere, which takes place without resistance from the society´s majority. Since 2004, the violent *persisting conflict* in

southern Thailand[12] has been rooted in the multicultural and *multi-ethnic social structure* in the borderland of southern Thailand (Horstmann, 2001). McCargo (2006) defines the *persisting conflict* between Thai Buddhists and Malay Muslims in the border provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat as two closely related wars: "a battle for control of territory; and a battle for 'hearts and minds', a psychological war between different parties to the physical conflict, and between competing ideas of identity and nation-hood" (Ibid., p. 23). In Thailand, where "the state manipulated Buddhism in order to subordinate citizens" (McCargo, 2004, p. 167), Buddhism serves as a source of identity and provides the ground for *nation-building* (McCargo, 2004). A unifying "Thai-ness" of the Buddhist majority, especially contrasts with the strong *social polarization* and the significantly weaker degree of nationalization in the political party system (Croissant & Schächter, 2008). The *persistent conflict* in the southern borderlands is symptomatic of the Buddhist supremacy in Thai politics and the bias of the media towards it (Kularb, 2016; McCargo, 2006). Additionally, the *persistent conflict* between progressive urban "Bangkok" elites (yellow shirts) and the traditional rural Thaksin Shinawatra supporters (red shirts) splits society into either "red" or "yellow", which makes its way into the polarized online and offline media (Sombatpoonsiri, 2018). This has resulted in several street protests with hundreds of deaths, where this deeply polarized media often took on a leading role in a media war "full of imagery and symbolism" (Forsyth 2010: 466).

In reference to the southern conflict, Phansasiri Kularb (personal communication, 3 March, 2017) stresses the significance of a communication policy by officials called "information operation" which is similar to what experts report from Myanmar, and is which is also marked by *racism* and *supremacy of religious norms and values*:

> [T]he military call [it] information operation I.O. So, basically what happens in the south, that is very similar to the situation in Myanmar, is that some of the soldiers or some of the military officers will have some fake accounts, Facebook accounts or Twitter accounts, and follow civil society organizations' websites or medium and make some countering comments on that, so kind of like mixing up a little bit the discussion so it would not sway towards their purpose only; (…) kind of like proposing opponent views, I mean opposing the user with another side of the story. But it's not fake per se. But again, it's not something that would give you a different perspective. (P. Kularb, personal communication, 3 March, 2017)

This mirrors a form of "patriotic trolling" that Sombatpoonsiri critically analyses for Thailand's and the Philippine´s manipulation of online spheres (Sombatpoonsiri, 2018).

Due to the deep polarization into "red" and "yellow", according to interviewees, Thai citizens seem to often be blind to any but their own political standpoints, and media reporting tends to be highly partisan (either red or yellow), non-investigative, uncritical and propagandistic. Interviewed

[12] For a closer read about the Thai southern conflict and related communication practices see: McCargo 2006 and Kularb 2016.

experts assess this critically because the omission of political deliberation fosters the opinion-oriented, sensational and polarized media landscape.

The combination of a strong *national identity,* which seems to be endangered by the southern conflict, and the Thai concept of *seniority*[13] legitimizes military actions, such as the I.O., when it comes to *national security*, social conflicts or *national identity*, as seen with the southern conflict. *Seniority* is the basis for a patriarchal hierarchical in Thai society which results in a *culture of agreement*, or absolute obedience because juniors are not eligible/allowed to confront seniors. This creates a conflict circumventive culture and leads to the need of intermediaries, such as the king or the military, when the Thai society faces conflict:

> We give importance to those who are in seniority and those who are considered of higher power than us. So, it goes without saying that, the ones who are in power feel that they have the legitimacy to think for other people (…) and at the same time the people find it acceptable to be led in such a way simply because our culture has grounded us into thinking that perhaps there are other people who are better off than ourselves. (S. Gadavanji, personal communication, 23 March, 2017)

Therefore, biased media reporting or information operations of the military in the southern conflict occur without resistance from the public. This may be based on the perception existing within Thai society and politics that the military is an appropriate intermediary to build social and political harmony:

> They know that they are peaceful under this government. There is no rally. People are also tired of Red and Yellow Shirt movements. And Thai culture is not a culture of contestation. In terms of democracy, it is kind of dead. (Anonymous, personal communication, 6 March, 2017)

Additionally, Thai governments have effectively relied on techniques of power coercion to control the online public sphere through "institutional mechanisms", "infrastructural mechanisms" and "ideational mechanisms", and have thus been able to establish "hegemonic control because other actors have internalized some of its norms and values" (Sinpeng, 2013, p. 435). These combinations of context factors and the wish for social peace explain the society´s and political concerns that the media enjoys too much freedom:

> [I]n their perception they think that media in Thailand right now enjoy too much freedom that creates conflict in the society (…); even civil society and academics come to the point that they think that the media should be controlled again. (S. Klangarong, personal communication, 21 March 2017)

[13] The concept of "Pooh Yai" and "Pooh Neuh" (Pooh Yai means senior, Pooh Neuh means young people) affects the media-politics and media society relationship to a great extend.

Freely reporting media is often perceived as an enemy of social harmony and the nation`s stability hence strategic forms of disinformation, such as the information operation, are handled with acceptance.

Although interviewees emphasised the problem of so-called fake news in reference to other forms of disinformation, for the analysis of the conflict in Southern Thailand it is noteworthy that the term "fake news" was not used in the debate on disinformation.

> [T]he term fake news wasn't used in that [conflict] region but they are very familiar with what the officials or what the military call information operation I.O., they tend to call it I.O., even social activists who shouldn't adopt the term (P. Kularb, personal communication, 3 March, 2017)

Furthermore, in Thailand, the term hate speech, as interviewees explain, is used elusively and arbitrarily. Largely when it comes to oppositional speech/reporting by "red shirts" (media), terms like fake news and hate speech are used to curtail dissent. However, when pro-government (yellow shirts) media report or speak out the same way it is not considered fake or hateful speech. This ambiguity, and altogether the three cases, shows that speech which might be tolerable in one context may not be acceptable in another, and this even changes within the same context.

Cultural Trajectories of Harmful Disinformation in Southeast Asia.

The comparative contextualized analysis of these three under-researched Southeast Asian contexts allows for a much-needed expansion of cases for the debate on and analysis of harmful disinformation, and accompanying constraints on media freedom. Negative campaigning in Malaysia, racist propaganda in Myanmar and information operations in Thailand occur along different types of *persisting conflict* lines, mainly resulted from *social polarizations* and *supremacy of religious norms and values*, and are inflected by other specific context factors.

In all three contexts, *persisting conflict*s (both armed and unarmed), which are highly correlated with *supremacy of religious norms and values* and *multi-ethnicity* induce a strong "national security culture" (Peri, 2012, p. 12), which in turn serves as justification to manipulate political communication, and leads to offline violence in all three contexts (or as a minimum to violence justification). In Thailand and Myanmar, national security cultures lead to manipulative political communication strategies that have facilitated human rights violations in Thailand´s southern conflict and in the Rohingya refugee crisis. These are social conflict lines that preserve Buddhist supremacy used to build a national identity in both countries. In Malaysia the social conflict lines are also connected to *supremacy of religious norms and values*, here Islam, but are further incorporated with a *social stratification* within Malay´s society, leading to offline violence mainly in times of political contentions (such as elections).

The volatility and arbitrariness of what the often ill-defined concept of hate speech captures, for example in Thailand´s case, accentuates the need to examine context-based communicative

practices. In the case of the southern conflict and when it comes to the bigger picture in Thailand´s communicative public spheres, universal conceptions of fake news and hate speech fail to paint the whole picture. The case of mainly accepted, but dubious, disinformation by the military information operations, is located in a definitional grey zone where it becomes specifically problematic to discuss ethical and legal foundations of such information actions. Although Thailand´s military information operations are predominantly handled with acceptance and may not be considered fake information, nonetheless they intend to manipulate the public in order to legitimize violent military actions in the Southern conflict. Although this seems mostly accepted by the Thai society and politics, analysis of cultural and historical impacts underlines the unique functioning of Thailand´s social and political processes which delegitimize other forms of disinformation or extreme speech, when it, for example, comes to seniority or culture of agreement. This underpins what is then conceived of as media freedom, hate speech or fake news. Further analysis will, therefore, depend on the context and the discourses on the limitations of (online) free speech; it also needs to go further by investigating actual communicative practices to capture their contextual trajectories and to tackle underlying social, cultural and political foundations.

At first glance negative campaigning in Malaysia might be considered an acceptable but harsh political discourse, however, on closer inspection, it reveals itself as a form of political communicative violence that does not support a deliberative public sphere and also leads to offline violence. Negative campaigning intensifies *social stratifications* and leads to daily communicative violence between cultural and political fractions. Nevertheless, this situation must not be exploited to curtail media freedoms through the implementation of fake news laws as inevitably they will fall short of solving actual social problems. In Myanmar, it becomes clearer that vitriolic speech on Facebook arises from a historically implemented racist propaganda machinery, thus exemplifying the most horrifying and undiluted form of harmful disinformation and human rights abuses not seen since the Nazi era.

What we can learn from the three cases is that although the three forms of disinformation result from different cultural trajectories they share a similar reinforcing process through the impact of harmful disinformation in volatile contexts (see Figure 1).

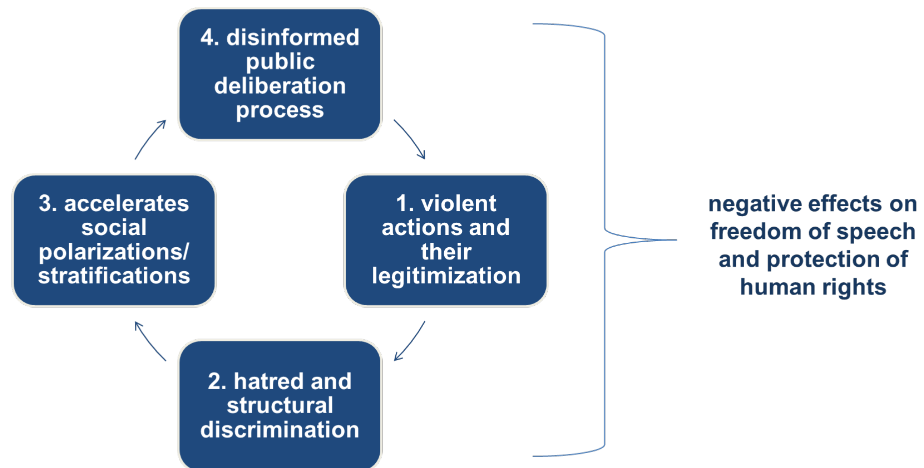

Figure 1. Reinforcing the process of disinformation impact in volatile contexts.

All three forms of disinformation with their differing cultural trajectories result in a process that curtails a free and plural media discourse and facilitates human rights abuses. Violent actions within the persisting conflicts, like physical attacks of political opponents in Malaysia or the persecution of Myanmar´s Rohingya, and their legitimization through power holders and citizens lead to hatred and structural discrimination in the analyzed societies. This accelerates social polarizations/stratifications, as seen in Thailand´s red/yellow shirt conflict or between Malaysia's ruling elite and it´s opposition, and leads to the spread of hate and harmful disinformation in all three contexts while giving rise to a disinformed public deliberation process. This circuit repetitively fuels the process of violence and disinformation (see figure 1).

In contexts where human rights situations are fragile and accompanied by xenophobia, racism, homophobia or other hostilities in the form of extreme speech and disinformation, these components should be considered as potential facilitators for human rights violations and analysed in terms of such potential.

Concluding Remarks

Three examples of disinformation in Southeast Asia indicate that different combinations of context factors give rise to divergent types of extreme speech and disinformation. It is evident that they cannot be captured sufficiently by universal and indistinct conceptions of "hate speech" and "fake news". Further analysis should consider disinformation as manipulative political communication and harmful disinformation practices intended to disturb social harmony, equality, and freedom; practices that facilitate manipulated and vitriol speech and are related to human rights violations (Sirsch, 2013). Although this article considers harmful speech in opposition to civil free speech, it has argued for an approach examining the origins of harmful speech (as condensed in Figure 1)

rather than advocating for an approach that seeks to find ways to limit media freedoms. Thus, before we can discuss how to legally deal with harmful manipulative speech, I would argue that we need to understand their cultural and historical trajectories; to find context-bound legal and political solutions for the protection of human rights abuses affected by harmful disinformation. Altogether, the three examples of manipulative political communication in Southeast Asia generally challenge the academic quest for a universal conceptualization of hate speech throughout world regions. In light of the selected national examples, where cultural conceptions impact what is considered a threat to media freedom and those which are not, we should also address the question of whether or not a Eurocentric perspective on how free and plural publics should function is helpful for a more general analysis of media freedom statuses and limitations.

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