

Strategy Note on Media Literacy Drive in the Indo Pacific

Navigating the Indo-Pacific: Unravelling the Interplay of Media Influence and Geopolitics

Within the confines of a more specific definition, often called the Indo-West Pacific or Indo-Pacific Asia, the Indo-Pacific region unfolds across the tropical expanses of the Indian Ocean, the western and central Pacific Ocean, and the interconnecting seas. Notably absent from this delineation are the cooler temperate and polar zones of the Indian and Pacific oceans and the Tropical Eastern Pacific situated along the Pacific coast of the Americas—a separate and distinct marine realm.

The geopolitical importance of the Indo-Pacific region:

The Indian Ocean stands as the cradle for some of the globe's most rapidly advancing economies, acting as a vital nexus that interlinks these economic powerhouses with both the Atlantic Ocean and the Asia-Pacific region. This underscores the Indo-Pacific's profound geostrategic significance. The Indo-Pacific region emerges as a pivotal geopolitical player, driven by its immense economic potential, rich resource reservoirs, and the robust web of international trade and connectivity it fosters.

1. Economic Potential: The Indo-Pacific stands as a beacon of economic promise, hosting some of the world's fastest-growing economies. Its diverse economic landscape encompasses thriving industries, innovative technologies, and burgeoning markets. The region's economic dynamism catalyzes global growth, offering vast opportunities for investment, trade, and sustainable development.

2. Resource-Rich Region: Beyond its economic prowess, the Indo-Pacific is a treasure trove of natural resources. Abundant reserves of minerals, fisheries, and energy resources contribute to the region's strategic importance. The responsible management and utilization of these resources not only fuel local economies but also play a vital role in meeting global demand, reinforcing the region's position as an indispensable player on the world stage.

3. International Trade and Connectivity: At the crossroads of major trade routes, the Indo-Pacific acts as a linchpin for international trade and connectivity. Its strategic location

facilitates seamless maritime and air transit, fostering a complex network of trade relationships. Robust connectivity infrastructure, including ports, shipping lanes, and air routes, further solidifies the region's role in facilitating the movement of goods and ideas on a global scale.

In summary, the geopolitical importance of the Indo-Pacific region extends beyond mere political confines. It constitutes a dynamic tapestry, richly adorned with threads of economic promise, abundant resources, and intricately woven trade networks. Grasping and leveraging these elements are paramount for navigating the intricacies of the global landscape and promoting sustainable development across nations.

This underscores precisely why strengthening the media narrative in these facets is imperative across the countries of this highly sensitive region. Achieving this goal is only possible through collaborative efforts transcending national borders. Cross-country collaboration becomes the linchpin for fostering a comprehensive understanding of the region's multifaceted significance and promoting an informed and cohesive narrative that aligns with the complexities and opportunities inherent in the Indo-Pacific.

Why is it important to get the media narrative right to ensure peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region?

False information, whether disseminated online or offline, presents a persistent challenge driven by diverse motives such as profit-driven interests and more covert objectives. This misinformation not only has the potential to undermine public trust in governing authorities but also poses a hindrance to compliance with essential safety measures. The importance of trust at the community level becomes pivotal for the effectiveness of policies, particularly those advocating for reform and inclusivity. The proliferation of disinformation, orchestrated by foreign states and non-state actors, constitutes a significant threat to Western democracies and the established international institutions they uphold. Heightened awareness of this peril has surfaced in the wake of foreign interferences in Western domestic policy, notably during elections. Unravelling the complexities of identifying and exposing disinformation involves navigating a landscape that incorporates intentional falsehoods, unintentional inaccuracies, and truthful information.

Getting the media narrative right is crucial for ensuring peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region for several reasons:

1. Preventing Misunderstandings: Accurate media narratives help prevent misunderstandings among nations in the region. Clear and truthful information reduces the likelihood of misinterpretation and miscalculation, fostering mutual understanding.

2. Building Trust and Cooperation: An accurate media narrative contributes to building trust among nations. Trust is a foundational element for diplomatic relations and regional

cooperation. When the media portrays information accurately, it helps establish a foundation for trust among countries in the Indo-Pacific.

3. Mitigating Tensions: Misleading or biased media narratives can contribute to the escalation of tensions. Accurate reporting helps in avoiding sensationalism that may lead to heightened political or military tensions, creating a more stable environment.

4. Promoting Diplomacy: The media plays a significant role in shaping public opinion. Accurate narratives can facilitate diplomatic efforts by creating an environment that supports dialogue and negotiations, promoting peaceful resolutions to conflicts.

5. Countering Disinformation and Propaganda: The Indo-Pacific region is vulnerable to disinformation campaigns and propaganda from various actors. Ensuring an accurate media narrative helps counter these efforts, reducing the influence of false information that could escalate tensions or fuel conflicts.

6. Supporting Regional Stability: A stable media environment contributes to regional stability. When media outlets present unbiased and fact-based information, they support the overall stability of the region by avoiding the dissemination of information that could incite unrest or hostility.

7. Encouraging Responsible Governance: Accurate media narratives hold governments and institutions accountable. By reporting on policies, actions, and developments objectively, the media encourages responsible governance, discouraging activities that could destabilize the region.

8. Promoting Economic Cooperation: Media narratives influence perceptions about economic opportunities and risks in the region. Accurate reporting fosters positive perceptions, encouraging economic cooperation and investment, which can be essential for long-term stability.

In summary, an accurate media narrative in the Indo-Pacific region is vital for maintaining peace and stability by fostering mutual understanding, trust, and cooperation among nations, as well as countering disinformation and promoting responsible governance.

Addressing this challenge, various Asian countries have established government-led fact-checking units to oversee media outlets. Notable initiatives include Singapore's Factually, Malaysia's *Sebenarnya*, India's PIB Fact Check, Thailand's Anti-Fake News Center, and Vietnam's Anti-Fake News Center. This proactive approach aims to regulate information, ensuring validation and eliminating discrepancies, thus preventing unnecessary panic and the spread of inaccurate or illegal information.

Who are the key stakeholders?

- In the intricate landscape of information regulation within the Indo-Pacific region, pivotal stakeholders encompass diverse entities. These include media bodies operating across various platforms - from traditional print to dynamic digital and pervasive social media. Additionally, the regulatory framework involves the active participation of governmental bodies within each nation in the Indo-Pacific, ensuring a coordinated approach to information oversight.
- Further amplifying this regulatory chorus are stakeholders entrenched in the international trade and logistics sector. Their involvement underscores the interconnected nature of information regulation and economic activities, highlighting the imperative of a seamless flow of accurate and timely information.
- In this digital age, the influence of social media influencers has emerged as a significant factor in shaping narratives. These individuals, with substantial followings, hold the power to disseminate information swiftly. However, this influence is a double-edged sword, as the rapid spread of news without proper validation can contribute to misinformation.
- Moreover, the role of the common people, scattered yet interconnected, cannot be understated. Individuals often play a crucial role in the dissemination of news, but the challenge arises when information is shared without adequate validation of its source or accuracy. This phenomenon further underscores the need for robust regulatory mechanisms to navigate the complexities of the information landscape.

In essence, the regulatory tapestry in the Indo-Pacific region is woven by the dynamic interplay of media bodies, government entities, international trade stakeholders, social media influencers, and the individuals who collectively form the intricate fabric of this vast and diverse region.

Strategies to strengthen the media narrative:

To fortify the media narrative and combat misinformation and disinformation within the Indo-Pacific region, targeted strategies must be employed. One integral aspect is the imperative focus on capacity building for media professionals operating within this expansive geopolitical landscape.

1. Capacity Building for Media Professionals: By implementing tailored training programs that address fact-checking, source verification, and regional nuances, while simultaneously nurturing cross-cultural competence and technological literacy, media professionals in the Indo-Pacific can bolster their capabilities and enhance the accuracy of their reporting. The recently concluded project by CUTS International supported by the US consulate General,

Kolkata needs to be scaled up and replicated in other parts of India as well as the Indo-Pacific region to ensure bigger footprint.

2. Proactive Fact-Checking Initiatives: With the implementation of robust fact-checking initiatives tailored to Indo-Pacific affairs, collaboration with social media platforms to counter misinformation and promote responsible online behaviour become equally important. Also, the media houses, with different scales of operation and audience, should either develop an in-house expertise on fact-checking or start outsourcing that activity to the external agencies on a regular basis to be able to serve authentic news to their respective audience base.

3. Regional Collaborations: It is important to encourage collaborative efforts among media professionals from Indo-Pacific nations for knowledge sharing and source verification. Enhancing their access to reliable resources and databases focusing on regional developments will eventually be more entitling to promote responsible journalism.

4. Public Awareness Campaigns: Going beyond the media fraternity, we also need to focus on launching campaigns to promote media literacy and critical evaluation of information amongst the common mass. This would emphasize transparency and accountability in mass scale and citizen reporting.

Journalists are considered to be the fourth pillar of democracy. It is the media responsibility to disseminate accurate information without any ulterior motive. Having media literacy is a skill which enables journalists to read between the lines of information and dodge the bullet of manipulation. This is even more imperative in light of the advanced technologies coming up for disseminating information which make it look like from genuine sources hence making it more difficult to differentiate.

By prioritizing the above-mentioned strategies, the Indo-Pacific region can fortify its media narrative, mitigate the impact of misinformation, and empower media professionals to contribute to a more accurate and nuanced understanding of geopolitical developments.

**This Strategy Note has been prepared by Trisha Dey, Research Associate, CUTS International and contributed by Sucharita Bhattacharjee, Policy Analyst, CUTS International under the Project titled 'Support for Women Journalists in Countering Misinformation and Disinformation in the Indo Pacific' supported by the US Consulate General, Kolkata.*
Power Generation Sector'