



**STRENGTHENING US-ASEAN  
COLLABORATION ON COMBATING  
MIS- AND DISINFORMATION IN  
SOUTHEAST ASIA**

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*US-ASEAN Futures Symposium in Washington DC.  
Photo: Attawat Joseph Ma Assavanadda*

The inaugural US-ASEAN Futures Symposium 2023, co-hosted by Globally and the US-ASEAN Young

Professionals Association between 4-5 October 2023 in Washington DC, welcomed a cohort of over 100 rising and established leaders to discuss a wide range of significant economic, social, and political issues prevailing in the United States and ASEAN nations and seek collaborative ways to address them. In addition to attending a series of thought-provoking panel sessions led by experts and high-ranking practitioners, junior participants were assigned to one of the programme's five thematic tracks: Climate Change, Economic Cooperation, Emerging Technology & Cybersecurity, Human Rights & Inclusion, and Youth, Peace & Security.

I worked together with other young-generation leaders in the Youth, Peace & Security (YPS) track to identify Southeast Asia's most urgent problem, critically analyze potential solutions, and deliver policy recommendations. As a result of several rounds of discussion, our team concluded that mis- and disinformation is the most formidable challenge currently facing Southeast Asian youth and suggested that multi-level collaboration between the United States and ASEAN countries is crucial to tackle the issue.

It is undeniable that information technology now has a central role in world affairs. The internet has become a part of life for around [two-thirds](#) of the global population. The number of internet users in ASEAN countries collectively stands at [460 million](#) and is expected to grow exponentially in the near future. The expansion of internet accessibility means that many more people will gain access to the World Wide Web, but it is by no means risk-free. While the internet can grant access to knowledge across the globe with just one click, it brings with it a wide range of potential harms, such as confusion, anger, and hatred. The internet can also be used as a tool to humiliate, harass, and attack others on individual, national, and international levels. The recent examples include, but are not limited to, the spread of mis- and disinformation to discredit the efficacy of [COVID-19 vaccines](#) or the dissemination of mis- and disinformation by [authoritarian states](#) to sway the Southeast Asian public towards their own political agenda. These problems must be addressed promptly

and effectively to ensure peace and security in the region.

The impacts of mis- and disinformation can be diverse and span across different layers of society. However, particular attention should be drawn to how to protect the youth from its malign influence. Not only do young adults constitute [a large portion of the population in ASEAN](#), they are indeed tightly connected to the online world. Statistics show that Southeast Asians aged 16 to 24 spend an average of more than [10 hours per day](#) using internet-connected devices (or roughly 60 percent of their waking lives), most of which are for surfing social media. Lacking real-world experience and skills to cope with deception, the more they drift into the online world, the more they are exposed to the harms brought about by it.

It is also worth noting that youth are highly susceptible to mis- and disinformation. A large number of teenagers – albeit widely regarded as “digital natives” – cannot distinguish fact from online conspiracies. They not only slip into consuming mis- and disinformation easily but are likely to spread it among their peers. A majority of Filipino youth, for instance, is proven to possess only [a moderate ability to identify fake news](#), in contrast to their self-evaluated confidence in doing so. Moreover, researchers have found [correlations between fake news susceptibility and political polarization](#) of the youth in the Philippines. Similar findings concerning young people's inability to detect false information echo across Southeast Asian countries such as [Malaysia](#) and [Indonesia](#). Because the youth of today are the region's future, it is vital for authorities to be concerned, and to buckle down and approach this issue seriously.

In this regard, our team recommends that the first step to combating fake news is to enhance digital literacy skills among young people in the region by providing them with the tools needed to engage responsibly online and unlock their full potential. It is necessary that a collaborative approach between the United States and ASEAN member states be developed. We encourage strengthening comprehensive education and training schemes for

youth educators in the region and calling more attention to government-to-government partnerships to enable knowledge transfer on mis- and disinformation, knowledge-sharing partnerships with technology companies to combat mis- and disinformation, increasing resources for civil society and non-government organizations involved in monitoring mis- and disinformation trends, and expanding [the ASEAN Digital Literacy Programme](#) for young people to reach a wider group of beneficiaries.

To reiterate, my participation at the US-ASEAN Futures Symposium 2023 was indeed meaningful. I had unparalleled opportunities to join forces with other promising American and Southeast Asian early-career professionals to delve into burning issues in the region. I am confident that a wealth of knowledge obtained from the event will be useful for my future scholarly and policy endeavors. At the same time, the network between the next generation of American and ASEAN professionals we build today will play a pivotal role in strengthening collaborations between the Washington and Southeast Asian nations in the future.

*Disclaimer: All opinions in this article are solely those of the author and do not represent any organization.*