



## Disinformation as Digital Weapon and Public Discourse in the Armed Conflict of Southernmost Thailand

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### Abstract

Disinformation is produced and disseminated through social media, especially in conflicts, disasters, or pandemic crises. Disinformation also threatens crisis management in the information disorder phenomenon. The spread of disinformation has become a vital issue at the regional level. An interesting case study is protracted violence between the Thai government and Malay separatist movements in the southern border provinces of Thailand. In the southernmost provinces, unidentified actors adhering to different political ideologies have produced two main types of disinformation, namely (1) satire and parody content and (2) fabricated content to attack each other on mainstream social media. The use of disinformation aims to discredit the opponents and intimidate the targeted audience. Meanwhile, disinformation is used as public discourse to maintain one's political ideologies and counter opposing ones which is a kind of social construction of reality related to ethnicity, religion, and history. These are the root causes of the violent conflict in the southern border provinces of Thailand.

**Keywords:** Disinformation; digital weapon; public discourse; armed conflict; southernmost Thailand

### Introduction

The violent conflict in the southernmost border provinces of Thailand initially started in January 2004 when an insurgent movement raided a military camp and committed dozens of arsons in schools around Narathiwat province. Since then, the violent conflict has been ongoing for almost two decades. "Ethno-political conflict" is the terminology that scholars use for such conflict, which means a conflict rooted in ethnic differences (Panjor, 2018). This, in turn, caused an intra-state conflict involving



different parties, which is usually the government and at least one non-governmental actor (Morales, 1999). In Thailand's southernmost provinces, separatist movements fighting against the Thai government are Patani Malayu National Revolutionary Front (BRN), Patani United Liberation Organisation (PULO), and Barissan National Pembebasan Patani (BNPP). All of them claim to represent the Malay Muslims in Patani. It is believed that the BRN is more influential than other groups in terms of command over violence on the ground (Chalermripinyorat, 2014).

This violence conflict consequently contributes to a casualty of approximately 7,200 deaths and over 13,000 injured persons (number of casualties as of March 2021)(Deep South Watch Database, 2021). The government has spent more than 300 billion Baht (approximately 8,500 million US dollars) to solve this crisis (Southern News Center, 2021). In February 2013, General Consensus on Peace Dialogue Process was signed in Kuala Lumpur between the Thai government representative and the BRN representative. This peace dialogue process was witnessed by the Secretary-General of the National Security Council of Malaysia and has brought hope in the quest to settle this conflict.

Even though the two conflicting parties have engaged in the peace dialogue, frequent violent clashes exist between the Thai security forces and the insurgent groups. Clashes occur in the physical sphere and the virtual space. In tandem with violent clashes, the online social media space is also another frontier for the fight between both parties.

Actors in Thailand's Deep South have shifted their attention to online communication channels due to an increased number of mobile phone owners among the local population. A survey by the National Statistical Office (2021) found that 49% of the Thai population owned mobile phones in 2009, 61% in 2013, and over 80% in 2017. Ownership of communication devices also reflects that more people can access the internet and social media. While a 2020 survey in the Deep South of Thailand revealed that the percentage of news consumption through social media (56.5%) among the local population was as much as through television (56.8%) (Peace Survey Network, 2020). According to the research of Kooyai et al. (2020) report that the most popular online channel for media consumption includes Facebook, Line, and YouTube. However, consumption through other channels such as mosques, tea shops, stalls, community leaders, and local news broadcasting stations, which used to be the significant sources of exchanging news and information in the past, decreased.

Therefore, modes of communication in the southernmost provinces have shifted to the internet and social technology, which is not much different from what is currently happening worldwide. Such a phenomenon affects people's communication behaviour because exposure, production, and distribution of information and engagement with social networking have become convenient. This, consequently, contributes to the modern information environment that can be described with 4 distinct characteristics: (1) in technological aspect, everyone can access technology to edit and publicise any content themselves; (2) information consumption are done publicly even though the information is privately published; (3) in terms of speed, information is spread quickly and widely; and (4) for real-time sharing, information is spread in a real-time manner through trusted peers (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

With the potentials of modern communication, conflicting parties in the southernmost provinces and their constituencies opt to utilise online communication more, especially the resistance groups who previously got problems into communication channels in terms of mainstream media. They are using social media platforms to communicate directly to the people without using the mass media. However, disinformation disseminated through Facebook pages by unidentified groups is more concerning. From surveying Facebook pages, it was found that they have several followers, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1** Examples of Facebook pages publishing content about the conflict in the southernmost provinces of Thailand (Updated April 2021)

Page Name	Social Media Account Sources	Number of Followers or Members	Content
Berita Bumi Patani	Unofficial actor	45,373	Content is written in Malay to present the negative impacts of military operations in local communities.
Fajar Harian	Unofficial actor	34,227	Content is written in Thai and Malay to present rumours, military operations, and harmful content, including politics in Bangkok.
Cham-lae Joan	Unofficial actor	58,773	Content is written in Thai to present



Page Name	Social Media Account Sources	Number of Followers or Members	Content
Fatoni (In Thai)			about violence instigated by groups and military operations and to harm persons, groups, and organisations who criticise the military.
Kwam Hod Rai Nai Din Daen Patani (In Thai)	Unofficial actor	60,838	Content is written in Thai to present about military operations and counteract anti- military pages.

From Table 1, Facebook pages created by unofficial actors are categorised as micro-influencers (10K – 100K followers) which become influential news sources about the conflict in the southernmost provinces for many people. Moreover, other social media channels are Facebook closed groups, YouTube, Twitter, and Blogs. These channels have thousands of members. Untrustworthy news and information are also shared through Line groups, which are difficult to scrutinise as those groups are highly private.

There is an interesting case study in which blogs are used as a medium to distribute disinformation about the conflict. Such blogs continuously publish news and articles. A popular blog called “The Truth from Deep South” has been viewed more than three million times. Content published on this blog supports military operations, criticises insurgent groups, and discredits human rights non-governmental organisations (NGOs), local politicians, and academics in universities. This blog was created in 2011, but it received public attention in early 2020 when an opposition party brought the issue to light during a no-confidence debate concerning the government’s handling of the conflict. The opposition party claimed the blog was an information operation (IO) created and supported by the military budget to disseminate disinformation. The opposition party believed that such an operation exacerbated the division among the people in the southernmost provinces (Isranews Agency, 2021).

Thus, the increase in disinformation in the Deep South under the context of digital communication has quite an impact on the local population’s news consumption related to the violent conflict and the peace process and may cause difficulties in resolving the conflict that currently has an ongoing issue peace dialogue. This study aims



to investigate the disinformation utilisation of pro-and-anti military fan pages and analyse the public discourse of created disinformation of pro-and-anti military fan pages.

## Literature review

### 1. Definitions of disinformation in a digital context

Academic arguments on the definition of fake news, misinformation, and disinformation have been vigorous, especially during Trump's presidency when he used the term "fake news" to attack news agencies reporting on content against his political belief. Consequently, the term has become the discourse to discredit the media. The communication technology change also accelerates to produce and flow the information, which causes complicated results. This phenomenon in line refers to "information disorder". They are classified into three types:

*"Mis-information is when false information is shared, but no harm is meant.  
Dis-information is when false information is knowingly shared to cause harm.  
Mal-information is when genuine information is shared to cause harm, often  
by moving information designed to stay private into the public sphere."*

(Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017)

Tudjman and Mikelic (2003) further explained that the difference between misinformation and disinformation is the agents' intention. Misinformation is a mistake in the information that is unintentionally produced and distributed. On the other hand, disinformation is intentionally produced with a purpose to intimidate or do harm to the targeted audiences. The above definitions show that both misinformation and disinformation are dissimilar and differ from propaganda. They differ from propaganda because misinformation and disinformation interrupt the data integrity in communication.

In contrast, propaganda attempts to dominate the targeted audiences' thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes. However, there are still theoretical debates over these terms. Distinguishing between misinformation and discrimination is difficult for the targeted audience as it is hard for the audience to know the producer's intention. Consequently, it is unsurprising that the audiences are unaware of the differences between the two terms.

Digital communication also positions disinformation in a complicated system. Complications can range from agents of disinformation – who could be state actors, state actors in cooperation with unofficial groups, political actors, terrorism actors, business actors, or even organism actors in the communication sphere – to a variety of approaches for dissemination and amplification of disinformation, to responses to disinformation, and different levels of dissemination from local, national to international (Canadian Security Intelligence Service, 2018).

## 2. Disinformation in the Political Conflict Context

Disinformation also appears in each stage of conflict. For example, before the invasion of Iraq by the United States in 2003, disinformation was a key tool to frame or set a narrative of the conflict. It was officially under the manipulation of the US government. Such framing impacted the cognition of the general public worldwide, contributing to the legitimacy of the US government and its allies to start the war to remove weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) from Iraq in the eyes of the public. Such phenomenon is called a preemptive war (Lewandowsky, Stritzke, Freund, & Krueger, 2013).

Disinformation is also part of asymmetric actions, a nonmilitary measure used in war tactics. This tactic aims to reduce the opponent's advantages. This kind of warfare is also called "hybrid warfare" where military and nonmilitary tactics are used along with traditional warfare. The term is further defined as follow:

*"Hybrid warfare basically encompasses any type of action designed intentionally to weaken an opponent, even through, for instance, economic, cultural or environmental policies."*

(Hansen, 2017)

This kind of war tactic differs from the one used in the Cold War during the 1940s – 1990s. Nowadays, information warfare consists of state and non-state actors and involves other actors who take part in and support the creation of disinformation. Moreover, these actors do not need to reveal true identities to communicate online. Such phenomenon is evident in the armed conflict in Rakhine, a state in the northwestern part of Myanmar. The conflict started around the mid-2010s when Myanmar's civilian authorities disseminated lots of fault information about such conflict throughout social media (Long, 2021).



Once the confrontation between the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and Myanmar's army in a clearance operation of ARSA was over, Ma Ba Tha, a nationalist association with over 5.5K followers on its Facebook page, had published anti-Rohingya content 200 – 300% more frequently during late August – November 2017. As Facebook was the main channel for news consumption for people in Myanmar, political movements used the channel to disseminate disinformation related to the situation in Rakhine and the Rohingya. Buddhist extremist groups and Ma Ba Tha exchanged information through Facebook and tactically used hate speech against the Rohingya (BBC, 2021; Safi, 2021).

This case study reflected that disinformation agents are not limited to conflicting parties. However, individuals, groups, or organisations could also be involved in the conflict by creating disinformation to serve their political ideologies passed on and disseminated via various social media platforms.

## Methodology

The methodology used in this study is the textual analysis to analyse two Facebook pages publishing information on the below violent incident on the 27<sup>th</sup> of May 2019. The two pages represent opposing political ideologies. One is a pro-military page, while the other is an anti-military page. This study selected the data from the 27<sup>th</sup> of May to the 26<sup>th</sup> of June 2019. It was found that archival data of each page contained details as follow. The name of the pro-military page has an unclear meaning, whether in Thai, Malay, or Indonesian. The page's slogan in Thai is “uncovering the truth and without disinformation”. Posts were published 1 – 3 times a day in Thai. There were approximately 3,000 followers. The design of the profile picture and the cover photo was mainly in black, red, and blue colours. It included a map of the southernmost provinces with a picture of a Muslim woman wearing black Niqab and graves in the background reflecting death, horror, mystery, and untrustworthiness. This page does not provide information on its creators.

On the other hand, the name of the anti-military page is in Malay. There were almost 30,000 followers. Contents were aimed to oppose military operations. Posts were published 1-5 times a day. The design of the profile picture and the cover photo featured Masjid Kerisek in a dark tone and gloomy sky. The term “Melayu Patani” was presented in the cover photo. Both the profile picture and cover photo conveyed Islam,





the Patani people, and the concerning situation on the ground. The creators of this page were also unidentified.

The selected violence situation in this study is the chaos on the 27<sup>th</sup> of May 2019, where a security force comprising the military, police, and civil servants in the provincial administration launched a search operation at a house located in Katong sub-district, Yaha district, Yala province. This operation was carried out to arrest suspects hiding inside the house. They were believed to be a member of Runda Kumpulan Kecil (RKK), a village-based combat unit of a separatist group, which carried out insurgent incidents during the last 10 days of Ramadan and may have been involved with a previous explosion of a market in Patani province. There is a distortion in Islamic teaching which carried out the acts of violence during the last 10 days of Ramadan. This distortion would result more in merits for those who take part in the violence than they do in usual times. It is presumed that this distorted teaching incentivizes more violent acts during this time of the year since the start of the conflict in 2004. Violent incident during this time especially includes sabotaging public places such as markets or malls.

The operation began at 13.00 hrs. A negotiation trying to persuade suspects to turn themselves in was conducted but failed. There were also sporadic exchanges of fire between the security forces and the suspects. As a result, security officers could not get inside the house to make an arrest. Later, there was a fire at the house. It was not until 18.00 hrs when officers noticed no movement of suspects and went inside the house to investigate. The spokesman of the Internal Security Operation Command (ISOC) stated to the media that an unknown number of suspects hidden inside the house managed to escape and the house was all burnt down. One police officer was injured from the shootings, and a suspect body with a gun was found behind the house lying near a well. This suspect had an arrest warrant for an allegation of staging violent incidents in the region (Matichon online, 2019; Thairath online, 2019)

The media, security officers took photographs of the prolonged violent incident and witnesses at the scene. Later, those photographs were widely shared throughout social media, which led to debates on various aspects and content production to counter one another on social media. Eventually, the virtual space became a battleground between supporters and oppositions to a military operation.



## Results and Discussions

### 1. Disinformation in the southernmost Thailand violent conflict

Immediately at the end of violence in the village, both the pro-military and anti-military pages actively published about the incident. The anti-military page started by providing information on the numbers of the casualties, extending condolences to the families of the deceased, condemning the use of excessive force, and publishing pictures of a large number of soldiers cordoning the house. This page stated that the fire was not set by the suspects as claimed by the security officers, but the officers themselves set it with an aim to destroy evidence and cover up their use of excessive force. They further stated that this incident reflected the brutality of the Thai state against the people of Patani.

The anti-military page also shared the link of ISOC's press release covered by the media but provided opposing views against the press release. They accused the Thai security officers of setting the house on fire to destroy any evidence of their wrongdoing. The page also accused the security authorities of stealing the house owner's assets valued over a million baht and using excessive force. After the incident, one of Yala's parliaments (MP) members visited the scene, then posted on his personal Facebook account and gave an interview to the press that there was excessive use of force at the incident. The anti-military page shared the MP's post and interview and expressed its support to the MP's remarks.

Whereas the pro-military page started posting content against the MP, claiming that he is a supporter of the separatist movements and that his actions contradicted his status as an MP who was supposed to solve the conflict caused by the insurgents. A petition campaign was also created on the Change.org website anonymously to remove him from his post as an MP. This campaign accused him of not being a Thai national because he supported the insurgents and the media reporting against the security authorities. Despite the petition signed by dozens of supporters, it was widely disseminated by the media in Bangkok. The pro-military page also published this campaign on their page so that their followers could sign the petition. At the same time, the anti-military page also attacked the Thai security authorities by stating that they were using disinformation to intimidate and discredit the MP who was against the military operation on the 27<sup>th</sup> of May 2019.

This phenomenon reflected the linkages between the physical field and the online field. The daily violent incidents act as a stimulant for the production and dissemination of disinformation to attack one another on Facebook pages. They also became a communication platform for actors with polarising political views and are used as a tool to challenge the main political ideology of illegal political movements under an asymmetrical conflict situation.

A proposal by Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) categorised misinformation and disinformation into 7 types based on their content, namely: (1) satire and parody: no intention to cause harms but has potential to fool; (2) false connection: When headlines, visuals or captions do not support the content; (3) misleading content: Misleading use of information to frame an issue or individual; (4) false context: When genuine content is shared with false contextual; (5) imposter content: When genuine sources are impersonated; (6) manipulated content: When genuine information or imagery is manipulated to deceive; and (7) fabricated content: New content is 100% false, designated to deceive and cause harm. Although categorisation contributes to a better understanding of misinformation and disinformation, however, some scholars see duplications in some categories. For example, false connection and false context could be grouped as “false context or connection”, which means information shared in a communication space that did not occur in the present context or a misleading headline (Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, 2017). This research found two categories of disinformation appearing on both fan pages.

### **1.1 Satire and parody**

Notwithstanding that satire and parody are created to entertain or make fun with no harmful intention to anyone, disseminating them extensively in online communication spaces subsequently confuses the audience (Ireton & Posetti, 2018). Moreover, the varying levels of analytical skills among the audience to analyse and evaluate, coupled with their varying attitudes, beliefs, and political ideologies, contribute to different interpretations of the content. Consequently, content initially created for entertainment could be harmful to individuals or institutions.

Satire and parody content related to the violent conflict in Thailand’s Deep South has been used as a tool to discredit individuals, groups, and institutions. The most obvious example was the case of the Yala’s Malay Muslim MP, who visited the crime

scene after the violent incident ended. Later, he posted against the military on his personal Facebook account. Not long after that, the pro-military page posted “There is a bald man in the southernmost provinces” to make fun of his appearance and also posted that he “always accuses the military of wrongdoing with no ground”. Those statements were aimed to discredit individuals holding opinions against military operations.

Even though the word “bald” may sound like a neutral term to describe appearance, in the Thai culture, bald is specifically found in many old literatures and often used to describe characteristics which were fat or have big belly. They are usually portrayed as funny characters or villains such as Khun Chang in Khun Chang Khun Phaen story, one of the most renowned Thai literatures included in national school curriculum. He was a bald and fat character with a big belly and well known for his cunning personality.

Meanwhile, the anti-military page responded to those statements and published messages containing hate speech content by using dehumanising terms to call the soldiers.



**Figure 1:** The admin of pro-military page blamed Yala’s Malay Muslim MP who condemned the military operation with the media by selecting the word bald to be made him a buffoon.

## 1.2 Fabricated content

Fabricated content is false content disseminated through websites and social media to make the audience believe that the content is genuine and threaten the audience (Wardle, 2020). Fabricated content can either be a picture or a message. In Thailand's southernmost border provinces, such content is created and disseminated through each party's Facebook pages to attack and discredit one another.

Fabricated content on the pro-military page consisted of an accusation of the MP who criticised the military operation of supporting the insurgents and media belonging to separatist movements and providing false information to the mass media. Similarly, the anti-military page also publicised information with no supporting evidence. They accused the military of setting fire to a civilian house where the suspects used it as a hideout and exchanged fire with the security officers. Moreover, they stated that the reason the house owner's properties went missing during the cordon and search operation was that the military stole them.

Both satire and parody and fabricated content disseminated through social media were not published on their own but with hate speech connecting to ethnic identity to create "us" and "them" discourse, and connecting to religious beliefs to honour fighting and death and that one would be praised in an afterlife. Both ethnic identity and religion are the roots causes of the conflict in the Deep South. Thus, it was not surprising that they were inherently linked with disinformation.

## 2. Public discourse in disinformation

Discussions in the public sphere do not constantly occur in the official public sphere but rather in the unofficial one. This is because there is no monopolising of power. This helps foster participation in discussions on public issues, especially for the minority that is excluded from the official public sphere. Consequently, they seek spaces to voice their needs. The emergence of the unofficial public sphere is constructed upon social groups that invent and circulate counter-discourse and interpretations based on their own ethnic identity, interests, and needs, which are opposite to those of the majority. This concept is part of Fraser's (1990) critique of the classical public sphere theory proposed by Jürgen Habermas.

Even though Fraser proposed this concept thirty years ago when social media was nonexistent, today, people are becoming members of social media based on their preferences and interests. Social media, therefore, has become what Bainbridge, Goc and Tynan (2015) called “unofficial public sphere” or the “postmodern public sphere”. This public sphere is more fragmented than that of Habermas. The postmodern public sphere consists of small fragmented public spaces created by people with similar cultures and subcultures. It is also called public spherules. Relationships between each public sphericle are characterised by both incorporation and resistance.

It is worth noting that not only people holding different political ideologies from the dominant ones tend to use public spherules to discuss and contest the dominant ideologies. Besides using the official public sphere, actors who support dominant ideologies also use public spherules to control public discourses. This is evidence in pro-military Facebook pages in Thailand’s Deep South. Thus, it can be concluded that the postmodern public sphere was a forum for people with different political ideologies to come in as players in such space equally, not just for voiceless groups that are excluded from the official public sphere. As a result, an online communication space is a space of public discourse, especially in political polarisation. The public discourse is presented by Facebook pages’ content creators. Their content is fused with disinformation, as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2** The table presents public discourse presented by the pro-military page and the anti-military page towards the violent incident on the 27<sup>th</sup> of May 2019

Pro-military page	Anti-military page
a suspect with an arrest warrant	Malay people Patani people
military operation Soldiers	ill-treatment towards the Malay Siamese dog (In the Thai cultural context, calling someone a dog is considered an insult and rude. This word is usually used when someone is angry. In some occasions, it is used to call subordinates of a thug)
extrajudicial killing	honorary death, revenge

Pro-military page	Anti-military page
Information Operation	The Siamese domination and the ill-treatment towards those who speak the truth
Thailand, state	Siam (Siamese was used to call people living in Thailand by foreigners and neighbouring countries. Nowadays, the word can be found in the local language used among the Malay living in the southernmost provinces. They refer to Thai people as “Orang Siye” (Orang Siam). The anti-government groups in the region usually use the word “Siam” in the sense of a colonist who invaded, taken and incorporated the Patani territory into their land. This kind of message has been disseminated through pamphlets and cloth banners in communities to express their resistance against the Thai government)
A civilian house was set on fire by the suspects to disguise	Destroying shreds of evidence

Going deeper into the public discourses presented on the two Facebook pages, it could be seen that this discourse was created from different paradigms. For the pro-military page, the paradigm centres around the Thai state’s legitimacy to enforce laws against wrongdoers. On the other hand, the anti-military page comes from the lens of religion, ethnicity, and history, which is a crucial characteristic of asymmetrical conflicts. Non-state actors usually use religion, ethnicity and history to legitimise their actions against the state (Morales, 1999). Therefore, it could be concluded that the conflicting paradigms in the virtual space are based on characteristics of the asymmetrical conflict in the physical space.





**Figure 2:** The admin of anti-military page posted the glorifying a suspected Patani Malay who died from the operation but dehumanized the death of Thai soldiers with specific words related to religion, ethnicity, and history.

## Conclusion

Social media has become the main channel for news consumption among people living in conflict areas. Consequently, it allows each side to disseminate disinformation for their advantage in the conflict. However, studying from the perspective of the targeted audience who were followers of those Facebook pages, they did not pay much attention to whether the information created and disseminated by the creators was disinformation. This is because by becoming a follower, most audiences have already believed that the page or account they follow holds a similar political ideology to theirs (bias confirmation). The assumption is in accordance with the Followers' comments on posts showing their dominant-hegemonic position, which means their interpretations align with the page's content. The posts are subsequently shared by those followers. Despite knowing that the posts provide disinformation, they are willing to disseminate such information because they want to participate and support their political ideology. Nevertheless, such an assumption needs more evidence to support it. There needs to be an in-depth study using netnographic methodology, which is a tool to study the lifestyle of people in a virtual world.





As mentioned above, under the existing conflict context, disinformation has become a tool for attacking the opponent and a channel for orienting people via social media. It has also been used as a tool for each side to express their public discourses. Conflicts that occur on social media reflect that physical conflicts remain, as evident because violent incidents stimulate greater production of disinformation. However, to answer whether the conflict on social media contributes to violence in a physical space, there is a gap in knowledge on that front and an in-depth study is further needed.

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