

## **SEAPA Submission to Study on Social Media, Search, and Freedom of Expression**

Southeast Asian Press Alliance (SEAPA) is a non-profit, non-governmental organization campaigning for genuine press freedom and freedom of expression in Southeast Asia. Established in Bangkok in November 1998, it aims to unite independent journalists' and press-related organizations in the region into a force for advocacy and mutual protection. SEAPA's goal is to provide a forum for the defense of press freedom, giving protection to journalists and nurturing an environment where free expression, transparency, pluralism and a responsible media culture can flourish. Membership in the Alliance is open to independent press advocacy organizations with a proven track record of working for press freedom. SEAPA's founding members—from Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand—are among the most well-established press advocacy organizations in Southeast Asia. Together they bring an innovative regional perspective to the practice of journalism and a vision of a Southeast Asia that is the home of a free and vibrant media.

One of SEAPA's regular programs is the Weekly Media Roundup (WMR), where we provide a summary of our media monitoring on press freedom and free expression-related events and issues in the region every week. For this report, we compiled cases from news reports related to content regulation happening in the region this year.

Based on our media monitoring, we put forward the following observations:

1. Restrictions on online freedom of expression in Southeast Asia are usually not in form of content regulation related to internet policy. Instead, criminal law and regulations are commonly being utilized to enforce these restrictions. Provisions on defamation, blasphemy, sedition, and *lese majeste* are some of the law and regulation that often being used to restrict or even criminalize voice of dissidents.
2. A tendency for social media companies to simply comply with government requests to enforce these restrictions, even if these impinge on individual freedoms. So generally, the restrictions are dependent on the government's vigilance to submit requests to social media companies.
3. A trend to take advantage of the reporting feature for 'offensive' or 'abusive' content in line with community guidelines to suspend accounts unilaterally (See case dated May 17, 2017). Many of these suspensions are unreported in the media. However, this tactic is used for partisan ends, often by parties allied with the government to enforce intolerance on legitimate criticism.

As a freely-accessible and widely-popular platform of communication that has taken over the previous role of traditional media to provide information and form public opinion, social media platforms carry a huge public interest responsibility to protect spaces for freedom of expression. This is important in the context of Southeast Asian countries, where traditional media is generally restricted and social media provided alternative means of public communication.

In order to create enabling environment for free expression, social media companies as the owner of platform for people to express themselves should be proactive in improving the digital literacy of its user and creating pro-freedom of expression internal policies, instead of

limiting the rights of the user, at the behest of government policy which are often restrictive of the right to freedom of opinion and expression.


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Date: January 10, 2017

Country: Thailand

Platform: Facebook

Content Regulation: Geo-blocking of content

 **Content unavailable in Thailand**

You're unable to view this content because local laws restrict our ability to show it. If you'd like more information please see [Help Center](#).

[Go back to the previous page](#) · [Go to News Feed](#) · [Visit our Help Center](#)

<https://www.facebook.com/zenjournalist/posts/10154612355501154>

Description: A post created by a journalist from UK, Andrew MacGregor Marshall, was being blocked by Facebook, but only in Thailand. The said post appears when accessed from outside the country, but not from any Thai IP address. The post contained content related to the royal family, about which Thailand has a strict *lese majeste* law forbidding anyone to speak ill of the royal family. According to Mashable: "Facebook confirmed to Mashable that it does work with governments to remove posts, and is simply doing what it can to stay within the bounds of local law."

Sources:

Marshall's Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/zenjournalist/posts/10154660294216154>

Techcrunch: <https://techcrunch.com/2017/01/11/facebook-censorship-thailand/>

Mashable: <http://mashable.com/2017/01/11/facebook-blocking-thai-posts/#FrrUvbbnWiql>

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Date: January 16, 2017

Country: Indonesia

Platform: Twitter

Content Regulation: Account Suspension

**Account suspended**

This account has been suspended. [Learn more](#) about why Twitter suspends accounts, or [return](#) to your timeline.

[https://twitter.com/DPP\\_FPI](https://twitter.com/DPP_FPI)

<https://twitter.com/HumasFPI>

<https://twitter.com/syihabrizieq>

<https://twitter.com/fpionline>

Description: Twitter suspended at least four of the main accounts of Islamic Defender Front (Forum Pembela Islam – FPI), including the personal account of their leader, Syihab Rizieq.

The suspension happened around the same time when FPI members gathered to stage a rally demanding the dismissal of West Java Police chief Insp. Gen. Anton Charliyan, after violence broke out during the questioning of an FPI leader the week before. Despite the controversies surrounding FPI, majority of users thought that the account suspension wasn't the right response, creating the hashtag #TwitterIDNotSafe to campaign against it. By the time of the creation of this report, all those FPI accounts are still suspended.

Sources:

[https://www.vice.com/en\\_id/article/gvppm/twitter-suspends-fpi-accounts-internet-reacts-with-dueling-hashtags](https://www.vice.com/en_id/article/gvppm/twitter-suspends-fpi-accounts-internet-reacts-with-dueling-hashtags)

<https://en.tempo.co/read/news/2017/01/20/310838190/Freedom-of-Expression-in-Social-Media>

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Date: March 17, 2017

Country: Vietnam

Platform: Facebook

Content Regulation: Account suspension

Description: Several popular Facebook pages in Vietnam, including a popular restaurant review Foody.vn and English language learning community *Tieng Anh la chuyen nhom*, were being closed by Facebook without any notice or warning. Most of the pages have been restored by now, but the reason of the sudden closure was still unclear, with some experts saying that intellectual property infringement might be the cause.

Sources:

Vn Express: <https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/vietnamese-internet-users-baffled-as-popular-facebook-pages-vanish-3557943.html>

Vietnamnet: <http://english.vietnamnet.vn/fms/science-it/175036/facebook-fan-pages-in-vietnam-unexpectedly-eliminated.html>

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Date: April 20, 2017  
Country: Thailand  
Platform: YouTube  
Content Regulation: Geo-blocking of account



[https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCpqKFS9qHhYCE\\_k6\\_wVQdBw](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCpqKFS9qHhYCE_k6_wVQdBw)



**ขอภัย**  
**การเข้าถึงข้อมูลดังกล่าวถูกปิดกั้น**  
**เนื่องจากมีเนื้อหา ข้อความ หรือรูปภาพที่ไม่เหมาะสม ตามคำสั่งศาล**

Sorry !!!  
The website you are accessing has been blocked  
Because it contain prohibit content by court order.

<https://thaivoicemedia.com>

Description: Jom Voice, a YouTube channel of Jom Petpradab, a veteran Thai journalist now living in US, was temporary being blocked in Thailand on 20 April 2017. His channel provides critical news and he often openly criticizes the junta government. Before the blocking, he criticized the government who had announced a ban on all online interaction with three of its most prominent overseas critics: Andrew MacGregor Marshall, who we mentioned

earlier also has his content blocked on Facebook, and exiled Thai academics Somsak Jeamteerasakul and Pavin Chachavalpongpun. Jom also founded Thaivoicemedia.com, a web-based Thai media outlet, which he produces from the US. Although the YouTube channel can now be accessed, the website itself still cannot be accessed from within Thailand.

Sources:

Prachatai English: <https://prachatai.com/english/node/7089>

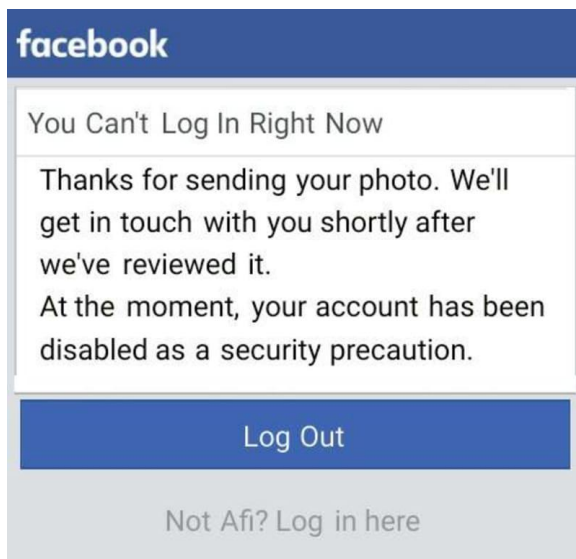
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Date: May 17, 2015

Country: Indonesia

Platform: Facebook

Content Regulation: Account Suspension



A screenshot sent by Afi to Kumparan

<https://kumparan.com/@kumparannews/akun-fb-afi-siswi-penulis-toleransi-di-suspended>

Description:

Afi Nihaya, an Indonesian high-school student had her Facebook account temporarily suspended for 24 hours, after one of her post titled 'Warisan' ('Inheritance' in English) went Viral on May 14, 2017. On the viral post, Afi criticized on nationalism and religious fanaticism, with a message of tolerance. However, it seemed that the post had sparked controversy and had enraged some communities, who then allegedly reported her account to Facebook. In this case, the Indonesian government also complained to Facebook about the suspension of Afi's account.

Sources:

The Jakarta Globe: <http://premium.thejakartaglobe.com/news/students-essay-on-diversity-religious-harmony-in-indonesia-goes-viral-on-facebook/>

Asia Pacific Report: <https://asiapacificreport.nz/2017/05/22/indonesian-student-afis-blog-items-inspirational-but-her-fb-frozen/>

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Date: May 29, 2017  
Country: Myanmar  
Platform: Facebook  
Content Regulation: Multiple Account Suspension

Description: Several Facebook users in Myanmar were reported having their accounts temporarily suspended after posting content with the word 'kala' or 'kalar', which is a word in Burmese which broadly means 'foreigner' but is also used as a derogatory word for people of Indian descent and also recently towards Muslim minority. In Myanmar, where Islamophobia is rising, the banning of the word outraged many of the netizens who claimed that it is the word they were using regularly and did not necessarily have racist meanings. There was an online pushback protest called 'We Own Kalar', and some experts also defending the use of the word and stated that Facebook was being 'excessively concerned'.

Sources:

The Irrawaddy: <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/facebook-ban-of-racial-slur-sparks-debate-in-burma.html>

TODAY: <http://www.todayonline.com/world/asia/facebook-ban-anti-muslim-slur-sparks-myanmar-outcry?cid=todayInsideTodaypage>

Date: June 24, 2017  
Country: Thailand  
Platform: YouTube  
Content Regulation: Geo-blocking of content



The Great Dictator (1940)  
mossyt  
398K views  
2:05:08

Greatest Scenes in Film: The Great Dictator - Final Speech  
Cringe  
113K views  
8:39

The Great Dictator คำปราศรัยสุดท้าย พากย์ไทย  
Riggs VoiceActor  
2.1K views  
3:37

The Great Dictator - complete globe scene  
nebelppa  
247K views  
3:44

Modern Times-Titine ชับนรก  
Yufratis  
4.4K views  
3:20

<https://youtu.be/B8DDvRbffeE>

Description: On June 24, a day when Thailand commemorates the 1932 revolution which ended the country's absolute monarchy, internet users reported that they cannot access a video clip of Charlie Chaplin's The Great Dictator on YouTube. The page for the video

instead displayed the standard message: “This content is not available on this country domain due to a legal complaint from the government.”. The clip contains message of anti-dictatorship and emphasized on the power of citizens to take back the power.

Sources:

Prachatai English: <https://prachatai.com/english/node/7230>

Global Voices: <https://advox.globalvoices.org/2017/06/27/at-thailands-request-youtube-blocks-video-clip-of-charlie-chaplins-the-great-dictator>

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Date: September 2017

Country: Myanmar

Platform: Facebook

Content Regulation: Account Suspension and Content Takedown

Dear Zaw Htay,

I wanted to reach out to you and let you know that following the recent news about the attack by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, we have updated our guidance to our community operations to remove all content by or praising this group.

Under Facebook’s Community Standards, dangerous organisations are not allowed to use our services and we also remove content that supports or praises such groups:

<https://www.facebook.com/communitystandards#dangerous-organizations>

Facebook’s message to Zaw Htay, Aung San Suu Kyi’s spokesperson, as posted on his facebook account

Our thoughts are with those impacted by this attack.

Kind regards,

<https://www.facebook.com/z.y.zawhtay/posts/1425064510923966>

Description: Facebook has confirmed The Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (Arsa) as ‘dangerous organization’ and has been deleting accounts and contents related to its movement. Mohammad Anwar, a Malaysian journalist and activist, has also reported that numerous posts describing military operations against Rohingya were being removed by Facebook. Arakan Times, a community news setup by Rohingya refugee Jafar Arakane also had its account temporarily suspended from Facebook on August 27, 2017.

Sources:

The Daily Beast: <https://www.thedailybeast.com/exclusive-rohingya-activists-say-facebook-silences-them>

The Guardian: [https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/sep/20/facebook-rohingya-muslims-myanmar?CMP=Share\\_iOSApp\\_Other](https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/sep/20/facebook-rohingya-muslims-myanmar?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other)

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Date: October 2017

Country: Cambodia

Platform: Facebook

Content Regulation: Modified Newsfeed

Description:

Facebook conducted a trial on its new feature: a newsfeed which separated post from Facebook Accounts and Facebook Pages. Six countries were chosen to receive the new feature in advance and one of them is Cambodia. The new feature had essentially removed all the content from Pages from the newsfeed and instead sent them into a new feed called 'explore feed'. This new feature, which was released without warning had been criticized by journalists and NGOs, citing that it has limiting them to reach people with their news and campaigns, which is especially important in Cambodia who is still experiencing crackdown on press freedom.

Sources:

Phnom Penh Post: <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/facebooks-new-explore-feed-vexing-cambodian-media-and-ngos-amid-crackdown-dissent>

VOA News: <https://www.voanews.com/a/cambodia-facebook/4096846.html>