

Review Article

Political Noise and Disinformation in Southeast Asia: A Systematic Literature Review of Impacts on Democratic Discourse and Governance

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Abstract

Digital political communication in Southeast Asia has expanded rapidly, but evidence on how political noise and disinformation affect democratic discourse and governance is dispersed across disciplines, countries and publication types. To synthesize evidence on the forms, actors, platforms and mechanisms of political noise and disinformation in Southeast Asia (2010–2025) and their reported impacts on democratic discourse and governance. Methods. Searches of academic databases and Google Scholar, structured with the Population–Exposure–Outcome framework and reported against PRISMA 2020, retrieved 700 records. After the removal of 49 duplicates, 651 unique records were assessed against the eligibility criteria, and, following re-screening of records initially excluded due to an overly narrow geographic criterion, 104 studies were included. Screening and extraction were carried out by a single reviewer. Findings were synthesized narratively; frequency counts are keyword-based coding frequencies, not prevalence estimates. The evidence is concentrated in Indonesia (n = 47), the Philippines (n = 44) and Malaysia (n = 21), is largely qualitative, and is mostly recent (81% published 2020–2025). Studies document identity-based hoaxes, propaganda, and coordinated troll, buzzer and bot activity, circulating mainly on social media and increasingly in encrypted messaging. Reported effects on democratic discourse include polarization, lower trust, distorted electoral communication and self-censorship among journalists and critics, alongside some evidence of

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pluralizing effects. Governance findings center on a tension between counter-disinformation regulation and threats to free expression, with little evaluation of effectiveness. The evidence supports recurring associations rather than established causal effects. Gaps include causal designs, understudied states, evaluation of countermeasures, and the clear operationalization of political noise, which the included studies rarely treat as a distinct construct.

Keywords: Civic trust, democratic discourse, democratic participation, electoral integrity, governance, information disorder, misinformation, political noise, political polarization, Southeast Asia.

1. Introduction

Southeast Asia provides an important setting for examining the relationship between digital political communication, public discourse, and governance. Citizens increasingly encounter political information through social media, online news, digital campaign networks, and informal communication channels. These environments can broaden access to political information and participation, but they can also accelerate the circulation of misleading, emotionally charged, fragmented, or strategically manipulated political messages. The problem is therefore not only whether false information exists, but how information environments affect citizens' capacity to identify credible claims, deliberate with others, and evaluate political institutions.

This review distinguishes political noise from disinformation while recognizing their frequent interaction. Political noise is treated as an excessive, confusing, or polarizing flow of political messages that may reduce informational clarity. Disinformation is defined as false or misleading information intentionally produced or circulated to deceive, damage opponents, manipulate political behavior, or influence public opinion (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Related concepts, including misinformation, propaganda, troll activity, or coordinated inauthentic behavior, and algorithmic amplification, are used as analytic categories where the included studies address them.

The democratic outcomes examined in this review are grouped into two domains. Democratic discourse refers to the quality of public debate, political deliberation, civic participation, polarization, trust in information, and public trust in political actors. Governance refers to institutional legitimacy, electoral integrity, accountability, policy responses, regulation of digital communication, and public trust in government. Regulation is treated as a potentially double-edged governance response because measures intended to reduce disinformation may also raise concerns about censorship, press freedom, and civic space.

Although scholarship on disinformation, social media, political participation, media control, and governance in Southeast Asia has expanded, the evidence remains dispersed across disciplines and national contexts. The present review consolidates evidence from a bounded search that retrieved 700 records, of which 100 unique studies met the eligibility criteria. It explicitly identifies where the evidence is concentrated and where important gaps remain. The review does not interpret the synthesis as establishing causal effects unless the included study designs support such claims.

This study primarily examined how political noise and disinformation have influenced democratic discourse and governance in Southeast Asia. Specifically, it aims to identify the forms of political noise and disinformation documented in the region from 2010 to 2025; examine the actors, platforms, and mechanisms involved in their production, circulation, and amplification; assess their effects on democratic discourse, particularly public debate, civic participation, polarization, and trust in information sources; analyze their implications for governance outcomes, including electoral integrity, institutional legitimacy, accountability, policy responses, and public trust in government; and identify existing gaps in the literature concerning political noise, disinformation, democratic discourse, and governance in Southeast Asia.

2. Methodology

2.1 Review design and reporting

The review protocol was structured using the Population–Exposure–Outcome (PEO) framework and reporting followed PRISMA 2020 (Page et al., 2021); the protocol itself was prepared with reference to PRISMA-P (Shamseer et al., 2015). The protocol (Version 1.0, dated 03 July 2026) was prepared for academic purposes and was not registered in a public systematic review registry. It was retained as the guiding document, and changes to it are to be recorded in an amendment log (protocol Section 1). Departures from the protocol are reported in Section 2.8.

The population domain covered Southeast Asian citizens, voters, social media users, journalists, civil society actors, political organizations and state institutions. The exposure domain covered political noise, disinformation, misinformation, propaganda, troll networks, coordinated inauthentic behavior and algorithmic amplification. The outcome domain covered democratic discourse (public debate, civic participation, political deliberation, polarization and trust in information sources) and governance (institutional legitimacy, public accountability, electoral integrity, policy responses and public trust in government).

The review was carried out by the first author under the supervision of the second author. Evidence is synthesized narratively and thematically; no meta-analysis was attempted because the included studies differ substantially in design, measures and outcomes.

2.2 Analytic taxonomy

Table 1. Analytic taxonomy used in the review.

Concept	Working definition	Use in this review
Political noise	Excessive, confusing, emotionally charged or polarizing flow of political messages that reduces informational clarity, without necessarily being false.	Proxy construct inferred from noise indicators recorded in the extraction matrix (see Section 3.3 and Section 5).
Disinformation	False or misleading information intentionally produced or circulated to deceive or influence.	Coded from the disinformation variables field of the extraction matrix.
Misinformation	False or misleading information shared without clear intent to deceive.	Coded together with disinformation; intent is not always reported.
Propaganda / coordinated manipulation	Organized persuasion or manipulation by state, party or paid actors, including trolls, buzzers, bots and influence operations.	Coded as actors and mechanisms (SRQ2).
Democratic discourse	Quality of public debate, deliberation, participation, polarization and trust.	Outcome domain for SRQ3.
Governance	Institutional legitimacy, electoral integrity, accountability, regulation and policy responses.	Outcome domain for SRQ4.

2.3 Eligibility criteria

Eligibility followed the PEO-based criteria in the protocol (Section 9), supplemented by design, timeframe and language criteria (Table 2). A source was to be included only when all population, exposure, and outcome criteria were met, unless a missing component was reasonably implied by the study's explicit focus on Southeast Asian political communication and its democratic or governance implications.

Table 2. Eligibility criteria (protocol Section 9).

Domain	Inclusion	Exclusion
Population	Studies focusing on Southeast Asia or a Southeast Asian country as the primary unit of analysis, or including Southeast Asia in a comparative analysis.	Studies with no Southeast Asian country in any capacity; studies exclusively on other regions.
Exposure	Political noise, disinformation, misinformation, propaganda, troll networks, coordinated inauthentic behavior or algorithmic amplification in a political context; studies that conceptualize or frame these in Southeast Asian political communication.	Strictly non-political misinformation (for example health or commercial fraud); studies solely on technical detection algorithms with no social, political or governance analysis.
Outcome	Effects on democratic discourse (public debate, civic participation, political deliberation, polarization) or on governance	Outcomes unrelated to democratic discourse or governance; no

	(institutional legitimacy, electoral integrity, accountability, policy responses).	findings relevant to any of the five secondary review questions.
Design and source type	Qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods and policy-analysis designs; peer-reviewed articles, policy reports, institutional publications, government documents, theses and dissertations, credible grey literature.	Opinion pieces, editorials, commentaries and letters without empirical or analytical content; studies that do not report their design; individual fact-check articles.
Timeframe	Published 2010–2025.	Published outside 2010–2025.
Language	English.	Non-English without an available English translation.

2.3.1 Application of the criteria

The protocol's population criterion covers any Southeast Asian country as a unit of analysis. The Screening Notices in the extraction matrix, however, repeatedly refer to the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia as the "target countries", and a keyword search of the notices identified 25 excluded records on single Southeast Asian states outside those three for which a target-country restriction is cited. All 25 were re-screened against the full protocol test in Table 2 (population, exposure and outcome). Four met all three components and were reclassified as included: McCargo (2025) (Thailand), Middleton and Win (2021) (Myanmar), Beban et al. (2021) (Cambodia) and Schaffar and Wongratanawin (2021) (Thailand), each of which records an explicit noise, propaganda or troll-network exposure and a democratic-discourse or governance outcome. The remaining 21 did not record any exposure to noise, disinformation, propaganda, troll networks, or algorithmic amplification and were confirmed as excluded. The re-screening record for all 25 is in Rescreen_28_Records.xlsx. This re-screening applied the protocol's eligibility test to the fields already recorded in the extraction matrix. It has not yet been checked by a second reviewer; confirmation of the four reclassifications, and of the 21 records whose exclusion was confirmed on re-screening, by the second author is pending and is reported as an open item in Section 5.1. Together with the three single-country studies retained at first screening (Thailand: Unahakate (2024); Singapore: Pandian and McGonigle (2025); Myanmar: Smith and Smith (2022)), seven included studies concern a Southeast Asian state other than the three named as targets, which is reported as a protocol deviation (Section 2.8).

2.4 Information sources and search strategy

As specified in the protocol (Section 8), searching was planned in three bibliographic sources, Scopus, Google Scholar and ProQuest, supplemented by backward and forward citation searching and by targeted searches of Southeast Asian research institutions, disinformation and media-freedom monitoring organizations and regional fact-checking initiatives. Searches were limited to English-language

publications from 2010 to 2025 and, where database functions allowed, to title, abstract and keyword fields. Which of these protocol-specified sources were actually searched, and on what dates, is recorded only in the authors' own search log and could not be reconstructed from the extraction matrix, which does not record the source of each record. An earlier draft of this manuscript named only Google Scholar and ProQuest; Table A1 is left for the authors to complete from the search log, and any protocol-specified source that was not searched should be added to Section 2.8 as a protocol departure.

The protocol combined three concept blocks with AND: (1) geography (Southeast Asia, ASEAN, Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Myanmar, Vietnam, Cambodia, Singapore, Southeast Asian); (2) exposure (political noise, disinformation, misinformation, fake news, information disorder, propaganda, computational propaganda, troll*, coordinated inauthentic behavior*, astroturfing, algorithmic amplification, bot*, influence operation*, information manipulation); and (3) outcomes (democratic discourse, public debate, civic participation, political polarization, civic trust, electoral integrity, institutional legitimacy, governance, accountability, democratic backsliding, digital authoritarianism, public trust). Where a database returned too many results, Block 3 could first be omitted to map Blocks 1 and 2 and then reapplied. Because Google Scholar does not support complex field-restricted Boolean searches, shorter phrase combinations (for example, "disinformation" AND "Southeast Asia" AND "democratic discourse") and country-specific combinations were specified, and the first 10 pages of relevance-ranked results were screened for each combination. The full strings are given in Appendix A.

The geographic block does not include Laos, Brunei, or Timor-Leste, so studies confined to those states would be retrieved only through the terms Southeast Asia, Southeast Asian, or ASEAN. Because Google Scholar screening was limited to the first ten pages of ranked results per combination, retrieval is bounded by design rather than exhaustive. These points are treated as limitations in Section 5.

2.5 Record management, screening and data extraction

Records were compiled in an Excel extraction matrix, in which each row contains bibliographic details, a Screening Notice recording the final eligibility decision and its rationale, and extraction fields for framing, geography, noise indicators, disinformation variables, democratic discourse impacts, governance impacts, methodological profile, main findings, and limitations. Duplicates were identified by title matching; 37 records had been flagged as duplicates during screening, and a title-matching audit carried out during revision identified 49 duplicate records in total, including second copies of four included studies. This left 651 unique records.

The protocol specified two-stage screening (title and abstract, then full text) by two independent reviewers, with disagreements resolved by discussion or a third reviewer or adviser and, where one primary reviewer screens, a check of a sample of decisions by a second reviewer or supervisor (Section 8.4). In this review, screening

and extraction were carried out by the first author against the criteria in Table 2, with the second author as supervisor; independent dual screening was not performed. This consistency check has not yet been completed. When it is, this section should report how the sample was drawn and its size; the number of records checked; the percentage agreement and Cohen's kappa; and how disagreements were resolved. A blind 130-record sample and a kappa calculator are available in the support workbook for this purpose. Until then, screening reliability is reported as an open item (Section 5.1).

The extraction matrix records one final decision per record. It does not record whether an exclusion occurred at the title/abstract or at the full-text stage, so Figure 1 and Table 3 report final decisions rather than stage-specific counts. If the authors' screening log includes stage-specific decisions (title/abstract versus full-text), Figure 1 can be revised to report exclusions at each stage separately. As recorded in the extraction matrix, only the final decision per record is available, so Figure 1 here reports final disposition rather than stage-specific counts. One record (ID 684) could not be extracted because its full text was unavailable.

2.6 Quality appraisal

Appraisal follows protocol Sections 11 and 12, which assign tools by source type rather than a single scoring system: the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) version 2018 (Hong et al., 2018) for empirical qualitative, quantitative and mixed-methods studies, including theses and dissertations with empirical designs; the AACODS checklist (Tyndall, 2010) for policy reports, institutional publications, government documents and other grey literature; and JBI or CASP checklists only as supplementary, design-specific guidance where MMAT or AACODS is inadequate. Table C1 lists the tool assigned to each source category.

Appraisal was to be conducted independently by two reviewers where feasible, with disagreements resolved by discussion or a third reviewer or adviser, or, where one primary reviewer appraises, a sample checked by a second reviewer or supervisor. In line with the protocol, no study was excluded solely on the basis of appraisal results; appraisal outcomes are reported transparently and guide the interpretive weight given to findings. GRADE was not applied because the review does not estimate intervention effects. Confidence in the cumulative evidence is assessed narratively based on methodological quality, source credibility, consistency across sources, relevance to the Southeast Asian context, and transparency of the evidence. A single-reviewer, extraction-based methodological-transparency rating has now been entered for all 104 included studies and is reported by source category in Appendix C (Adequately specified / Partially specified / Minimally specified, based on whether the extracted methodological-profile field names a design, a sample or data source, and an analytic technique). This rating is a transparency proxy computed from the extraction matrix, not a completed administration of the MMAT or AACODS instrument against the original full texts, and it has not been checked by a second reviewer.

2.7 Data synthesis

Following the protocol (Section 14), data were synthesized narratively and thematically and organized by review question; meta-analysis was not attempted. Two descriptive devices were used. First, publication characteristics (source category, period, country focus and design) were tabulated by rule from the extraction matrix (Appendix E). Second, coding frequencies for recurring themes (for example, polarization, trust, regulation) were obtained by searching the relevant extraction field for defined keywords; the rules and the studies behind each count are listed in Appendix E. Coding frequencies indicate how often a theme is recorded in the matrix. They are not prevalence estimates in the wider literature, and they do not measure effect size. Every synthesis statement in Section 3 cites the studies on which it rests, and Table 8 and Appendix B map studies to findings.

2.8 Deviations from the protocol

Departures from the protocol are listed here in line with the protocol's amendment procedure and PRISMA 2020 (item 24c).

1. **Reviewers.** The protocol preferred two independent reviewers at screening, extraction and appraisal, or a single primary reviewer with a sample check. Screening and extraction were performed by a single primary reviewer; the sample check is reported in Section 2.5.

2. **Geographic criterion.** The criterion applied in screening was narrower than the protocol's for several records and was not applied uniformly (Section 2.3).

3. **Documentation of screening stages.** The protocol required screening decisions and reasons to be documented at each stage. The extraction matrix records only the final decision and reason, so stage-specific PRISMA counts and counted exclusion reasons cannot be reported from it (Section 2.5).

4. **Eligibility of retained records.** The protocol requires all three PEO components to be met. Five included records have Screening Notices or limitation notes recording that they are not disinformation-specific, are historical, or are technical detection studies: Riego and Villarba (n.d.) (technical fake-news credibility detection), McCoy (2019) (media politics during democratic transition, limited focus on digital-era disinformation), Sanchez (2024) (Duterte-era political discourse, not disinformation-specific), Martin (2019) (state capacity and terrorism, not disinformation-specific) and Ong (2010) (Malayan Emergency propaganda, historical and pre-digital). None of these five underpins a synthesis statement in Section 3. Two further items are recorded as a forum essay and a commentary (Ong, 2022; Schipper, 2025); the protocol excludes commentaries without empirical or analytical content, and both were retained because the Screening Notices record ethnographic or analytical content.

5. Geographic re-screening. As reported in Section 2.3, 25 records excluded for falling outside Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia were re-screened against the full protocol test. Four were reclassified as included, raising the total from 100 to 104.

6. Sources. The extraction matrix does not identify which records came from Scopus, from citation searching or from supplementary sources (Section 2.4).

7. Extraction form. The matrix splits the protocol's exposure variables into noise indicators and disinformation variables and has no separate field for contextual or moderating variables. Pilot testing of the form is not documented in the matrix.

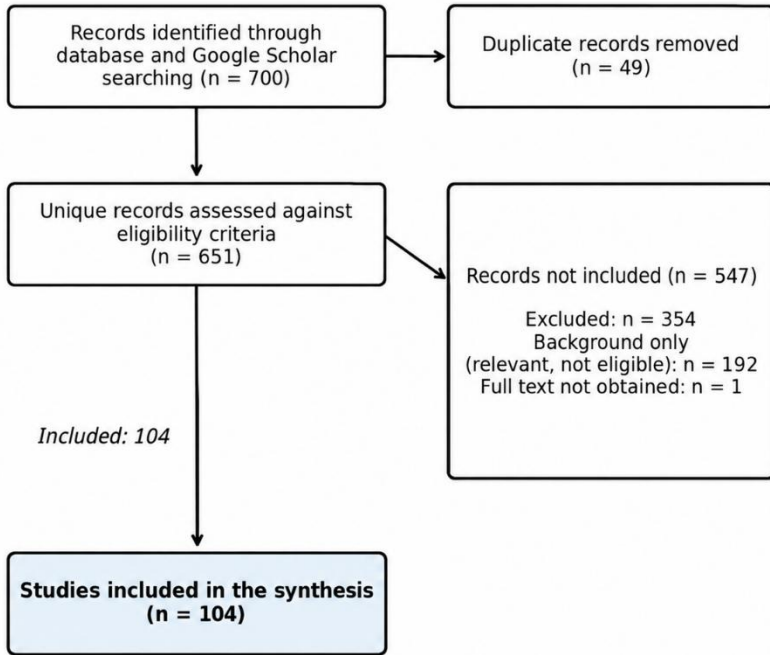
8. Synthesis. Coding frequencies are keyword-based rather than derived from line-by-line thematic coding; findings were not categorized by political system type (protocol Section 14.3), and quality-based interpretive weighting (Section 14.5) is applied only to the extent that the appraisal reported in Appendix C allows.

3. Results

3.1 Study selection

Figure 1 shows the flow of records. The searches yielded 700 records. After removing 49 duplicates, 651 unique records remained. Of these, 25 had been excluded on geographic grounds narrower than the protocol (Section 2.3); on re-screening against the full protocol test, 4 were reclassified as included, and 21 remained excluded. Table 3 reports the final decision for each unique record after this correction. In total, 104 studies were included in the synthesis. A further 354 records were excluded; 192 were classified as background only (relevant to disinformation or governance but not meeting the eligibility criteria, most often because of geographic scope, and not synthesized); and 1 could not be extracted.

Figure 1. PRISMA 2020-style flow of records (final eligibility decisions)



The extraction matrix records one final decision per record and does not record whether an exclusion occurred at title/abstract or full-text stage; stage-specific counts are therefore not shown.

Table 3. Final eligibility decisions for the 651 unique records.

Decision recorded in the Screening Notice	Records	Use in this review
Included	100	Synthesized (Appendices B and D)
Excluded	358	Not synthesized
Background only	192	Read for context; not synthesized
Full text not obtained	1	Not extracted
Total unique records	651	

The reasons recorded in the Screening Notices for non-inclusion fell mainly into four groups: no Southeast Asian focus (for example studies of Europe, North America, Africa, China or global cases); a Southeast Asian setting outside the three countries treated as target countries in the screening notes; a focus other than political noise or disinformation; and an ineligible publication type or design such as a book review or a purely conceptual essay. A small number of records were excluded for language or date. A rule-based count of the primary reason recorded in each Screening Notice,

across the 547 records excluded or classified as background only, gives: no Southeast Asian focus, or a Southeast Asian setting outside the three target countries, 493 records; a Southeast Asian setting outside the political-noise, disinformation or governance topic, 35 records; an ineligible publication type or design, 11 records; outside the 2010-2025 window, 2 records; and other or unspecified reasons, 6 records. These counts were reconstructed by keyword rule from the Screening Notice field and may differ by one or two records from a manual count at category boundaries; a manual check against the screening log is pending.

Two included reports, Kajimoto et al. (2018) and Kajimoto et al. (2019), are successive regional reports and were retained as separate publications; the three cyber-troop inventories (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018; Bradshaw & Howard, 2019; Bradshaw et al., 2020) are successive editions of the same program of work, and Ong and Cabañes (2018) and Ong and Cabañes (2019) report on the same Philippine research programme. Findings from these related sources are therefore not independent.

The four records added by re-screening are drawn on in Sections 3.3–3.6: a Myanmar hybrid public sphere study built around propaganda and discourse restriction (Middleton & Win, 2021), a Cambodian study of a state media crackdown (Beban et al., 2021), a Thai study of state-linked trolls and nationalist online attacks during a transnational meme conflict (Schaffar & Wongratanawin, 2021), and a Thai study of election-campaign narrative disruption and identity-based political noise (McCargo, 2025).

3.2 Characteristics of the included studies

Journal articles were the largest source category (50%), followed by policy and research reports and working papers (18%), books and book chapters (13%), and theses and dissertations (11%) (Table 4). Most studies were published between 2020 and 2025 (81%; Table 5). Indonesia ($n = 47$), the Philippines ($n = 44$), and Malaysia ($n = 21$) account for most of the country-specific evidence; 77 studies use a regional or multi-country framing (Table 6). Vietnam appears only in multi-country studies and reports. Cambodia and Myanmar each also have one single-country study, added after re-screening (Section 2.3). No included study concerns Laos, Brunei or Timor-Leste. Qualitative and discourse-analytic designs predominate (Table 7).

Table 4. Source category ($n = 100$).

Category	n	%
Journal articles	50	50%
Policy/research reports and working papers	18	18%
Books/book chapters	13	13%
Theses/dissertations	11	11%
Conference papers	5	5%
Review articles	4	4%
Commentary/essay/preprint	3	3%

Table 5. Publication period (n = 100).

Period	n	%
2010-2014	1	1%
2015-2019	21	21%
2020-2025	81	81%
Year not clearly reported	1	1%

Table 6. Country focus (studies may name more than one country).

Country or framing	n	%
Southeast Asia regional or multi-country framing	77	77%
Indonesia	47	47%
Philippines	44	44%
Malaysia	21	21%
Singapore	15	15%
Myanmar	11	11%
Thailand	11	11%
Cambodia	5	5%
Vietnam	4	4%

Table 7. Methodological design (keyword-based classification of the methodological profile field).

Design	n	%
Qualitative/discourse-analytic	53	53%
Policy/document analysis	16	16%
Quantitative	12	12%
Mixed-methods	7	7%
Other/not clearly reported	16	16%

Categories are assigned by rule from the methodological profile field (Appendix E), with four manual corrections after reading the method descriptions (IDs 242, 256, 361, 505). The category labels in earlier versions were not traceable to the extraction matrix and have been replaced.

3.3 SRQ1: Forms of political noise and disinformation

Across the 100 studies, the disinformation variables recorded most often were social media content (23 studies), fake news (23 studies), and propaganda (18 studies); a further 28 studies described troll, buzzer, bot, influencer, or otherwise coordinated activity in the noise or disinformation fields (Appendix E). These are coding frequencies in the extraction matrix, and the categories overlap.

Hoaxes and identity-based falsehoods. Fabricated or misleading news is documented most extensively for Indonesia. According to Kuntarto et al. (2021), hoaxes built on ethnic, religious, racial, and intergroup (SARA) themes are among the most frequent and dangerous types of hoax content. Other studies describe how readily false information spreads through online media (Hasan & Sokid, 2024), including in campaign periods (Hartanto & Purnomo, 2023). Identity-based narratives recur in electoral disinformation: a communist imaginary was mobilized in the 2014 and 2019

campaigns to discredit candidates (Wadipalapa, 2023), and post-truth identity politics has been linked to polarization (Sawitri & Wiratmaja, 2021). In Malaysia, fake news was shared during the 2018 election, and in Indonesia during the 2019 election, by ordinary users and by cyber armies linked to political parties (Jalli & Idris, 2019).

Propaganda and narrative manipulation. Manipulation extends beyond outright falsehood. In the Philippines, Marcos-era nostalgia is propagated online through emotionally structured narratives that support revisionist claims about martial law (Talamayan, 2021). In Indonesia, a "Taliban" narrative against the anti-corruption agency has been tied to intra-elite struggles and digital public opinion management (Hermawan, 2024). In Malaysia, ethnonationalist actors manipulate public opinion by exploiting sociopolitical divisions and labeling opposition as extremist (Mustaffa, 2024), and disinformation has relied on rhetorical sockpuppetry for more than two decades (Leong & Loh, 2024).

Organized and paid production. Ethnographic and interview-based studies describe Philippine disinformation as a professionalized, hierarchical and networked industry in which advertising and public-relations professionals and digital influencers take part, often treating the work as a side job (Cabañes et al., 2019; Ong & Cabañes, 2018; Ong & Cabañes, 2019; see also Ong, 2022). Troll narratives differ by campaign type, from glorification of preferred candidates to condemnation of opponents (Espina, 2025). Buzzer activity has been reported in Indonesia (Danarta, 2022; Rasidi, 2023; Seto, 2019), and an influence-for-hire market has been documented across the Asia-Pacific region (Wallis et al., 2021).

Behavioral evidence of coordination. Computational studies provide direct evidence. In the 2016 Philippine election, more than 12% of comments on political pages were classified as hate speech, with spillover from trolls to regular users (Hosamane & Garimella, 2025); coordinated activity has been identified in Indonesian Twitter discourse (Danaditya et al., 2022); and non-negligible bot activity was found in all four election cases examined in one cross-national study (Uyheng & Carley, 2021). Cross-national inventories document organized social media manipulation in several Southeast Asian states (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018; Bradshaw & Howard, 2019; Bradshaw et al., 2020).

Emerging forms. Artificial-intelligence-enabled disinformation appears as an emerging concern, treated as both a tool of manipulation and a potential countermeasure (Dikrurahman & Abdullah, 2025; Rodrigo et al., 2024; Schipper, 2025). Foreign influence operations in the Philippines are analyzed by Ong et al. (2024), and hate speech is examined in Hosamane & Garimella (2025) and Lim (2017).

Political noise as a construct. The extraction matrix records noise-type indicators such as identity-based campaign appeals, personality-centered coverage, information abundance and contested online allegations (for example, Basuki, 2017; Hermawan, 2016; Melissa, 2019; Omar et al., 2023), but only one extraction entry uses the term "political noise" itself. This review therefore, treats political noise as a proxy construct inferred from those indicators and distinguishes it from disinformation

(Table 1). Section 5 discusses the consequences of this for the strength of the conclusions.

3.4 SRQ2: Actors, platforms and mechanisms

Producers and amplifiers. Political parties, campaign teams and party-linked cyber armies are identified as producers and amplifiers of election-related falsehoods in Malaysia and Indonesia (Jalli & Idris, 2019; Leong & Loh, 2024) and, in cross-national inventories, across the region (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019; Bradshaw et al., 2020). For the Philippines, Gaw et al. (2025) conceptualize influence operations as election brokerage that operates through infrastructural capacity, reputation manipulation, relationship-building at scale, and obscured accountability. State and military actors appear as both producers and regulators: Army-linked information operations in Thailand (Unahakate, 2024), military disinformation campaigns in Myanmar (Smith & Smith, 2022), and government-aligned online support networks and cyber control in the Philippines and Thailand (Talamayan, 2020). Religious leaders mobilize sympathy through digital networks (Rosana et al., 2025), and Islamist buzzers combine online and offline organizing, including astroturfing (Seto, 2019).

Users and audiences. Ordinary users are both targets and disseminators. In Malaysia, the online environment predicted fake-news sharing more strongly than individual motivation, and greater awareness of fake news was associated with less sharing (Omar et al., 2023). In a cross-national survey, social media fatigue increased false beliefs and sharing, moderated by cognitive ability (Ahmed & Rasul, 2023). In the Philippines, homogeneous offline networks, distrust of traditional media and majority-opinion congruence predicted lower tolerance for criticism of authority (David et al., 2023). Studies of Indonesian students report that many accept fake news and some create it (Dulkiah, 2023).

Platforms. Social media dominates the evidence. Facebook is identified as the most common platform for organized manipulation in a 70-country inventory that includes Southeast Asian cases (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019) and is the data source for the Philippine hate-speech study (Hosamane & Garimella, 2025); Twitter is the main data source in the computational studies of Indonesia and the Philippines (Danaditya et al., 2022; Uyheng & Carley, 2021). Encrypted messaging applications are described as spaces where political actors coordinate agenda amplification and disinformation proliferates, while encryption complicates mitigation (Martin et al., 2023). Blogs (Akinnubi & Agarwal, 2023) and vlogs (Ragragio, 2023) are examined as channels for political persuasion and populist leadership, and independent digital news portals as counter-spaces (Chinnasamy & Volkmer, 2023).

Mechanisms. Four mechanisms recur. First, algorithmic and network sorting: the mutual shaping of users and algorithms is argued to form "algorithmic enclaves" that produce exclusionary tribal nationalisms in Indonesia (Lim, 2017), and high social media use is argued to interact with clientelism in an "affective patronage democracy" in the Philippines (Bakir & McStay, 2022). Second, emotional mobilization of anger,

resentment, fear and nostalgia (Cabañes et al., 2019; Talamayan, 2020; Talamayan, 2021). Third, professionalized and outsourced production with obscured accountability (Gaw et al., 2025; Ong, 2022; Ong & Cabañes, 2018; Ong & Cabañes, 2019). Fourth, links to elite political economy and offline organizing (Hermawan, 2024; Seto, 2019), and securitizing state responses to hoaxes (Lee, 2020).

Design differences shape what is known about these mechanisms. Ethnographic and interview studies illuminate labor structures (Cabañes et al., 2019; Ong & Cabañes, 2018; Ong & Cabañes, 2019), survey studies address sharing and susceptibility (Ahmed & Rasul, 2023; David et al., 2023; Omar et al., 2023), and computational studies address coordination and bots (Danaditya et al., 2022; Hosamane & Garimella, 2025; Uyheng & Carley, 2021). Few studies combine these approaches, which limits comparison across countries.

3.5 SRQ3: Impacts on democratic discourse

Recurring findings concern polarization, trust, electoral communication, journalism and civic expression. Polarization is recorded in the democratic-discourse field of 7 studies (Akinnubi & Agarwal, 2023; Cabañes et al., 2019; Kuntarto et al., 2021; Lee, 2020; Lim, 2017; Melissa, 2019; Talamayan, 2020), trust in 11 (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018; David et al., 2023; Dikrurahman & Abdullah, 2025; Fitriyah & Elfattah, 2024; Jayakumar et al., 2021; Kajimoto et al., 2019; Pandian & McGonigle, 2025; Parr, 2025; Rodrigo et al., 2024; Rosana et al., 2025; Schipper, 2025) and electoral discourse in 9 (Hosamane & Garimella, 2025; Jayakumar et al., 2021; Leong & Loh, 2024; Ong, 2022; Rasidi, 2023; Rodrigo et al., 2024; Schipper, 2025; Tan, 2020; Uyheng & Carley, 2021); these are coding frequencies, not effect sizes.

Polarization. Hoax circulation around the 2019 Indonesian election intensified public debate and divided families and communities (Lee, 2020), and SARA hoaxes are linked to sectarian sentiment and weakened social cohesion (Kuntarto et al., 2021). Philippine fake-news production is connected to emotional polarization (Cabañes et al., 2019), and online repression and manipulation are linked to self-censorship and intensified polarization (Talamayan, 2020). Other studies describe polarizing narratives that were not field-coded as polarization (Danaditya et al., 2022; Mustaffa, 2024; Ong & Cabañes, 2018; Sawitri & Wiratmaja, 2021; Talamayan, 2021; Wadipalapa, 2023).

Trust. Findings on trust are mixed. Social media use was associated with lower trust in government and higher trust in NGOs in a mixed-methods dissertation (Parr, 2025); satisfaction with government varied by survey period and partisanship (Sakti & Nainggolan, 2023); media distrust and homogeneous networks predicted lower tolerance for criticism (David et al., 2023); AI-enabled disinformation is framed as eroding trust (Dikrurahman & Abdullah, 2025; Rodrigo et al., 2024; Schipper, 2025); cross-national and regional overviews link misinformation to lower public trust (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018; Jayakumar et al., 2021; Kajimoto et al., 2019); and

declining media credibility is linked to weak ethics and fact-checking (Fitriyah & Elfattah, 2024).

Electoral communication. Evidence includes coordinated hate speech and troll spillover in the 2016 Philippine election (Hosamane & Garimella, 2025), bots shaping electoral conversations (Uyheng & Carley, 2021), paid buzzers shaping electoral discourse (Rasidi, 2023), and survey evidence that social media use was associated with university students' voting preferences (Morales et al., 2025). A small undergraduate thesis on the 2022 presidential vote in one province (Cavite) concluded that post-truth politics had a moderate influence among many interacting factors (Aznar et al., 2023); its limited sample illustrates why causal claims need caution.

Journalism and civic expression. Online harassment is reported to intimidate journalists (Griehsel et al., 2018); press restrictions under the Duterte administration encouraged self-censorship (Bagalawis et al., 2024); Filipino journalists reposition verification and public-service roles in response to disinformation (Balod & Hameleers, 2021); and tactics to criminalize youth dissent are documented in several states (Millora & Karunungan, 2024).

Countervailing findings. Not all findings point to degradation. Independent digital news portals in Malaysia enabled more diverse political deliberation (Chinnasamy & Volkmer, 2023); Twitter functioned as a relatively open marketplace of ideas when legacy media were partisan (Hermawan, 2016); social media allowed an outsider politician to rise, while also spreading allegations that contributed to his downfall (Melissa, 2019); youth and marginalized groups used social media for civic identities and protest, although disinformation, censorship and surveillance limited sustainability (Vanie, 2025); blogs expanded deliberation while also enabling manipulation (Akinnubi & Agarwal, 2023); journalist verification networks resisted corporate manipulation (Sultan et al., 2025); and a Thai election campaign generated narrative disruption around identity and monarchy that widened, rather than narrowed, contested public debate (McCargo, 2025).

Taken together, the studies support a cautious interpretation. Political noise and disinformation are associated with polarization, weakened trust and constrained civic expression, but the evidence is largely descriptive and qualitative, and the same platforms can also widen participation.

3.6 SRQ4: Impacts on governance and policy responses

Governance evidence clusters around regulation and free expression, regional and institutional responses, election integrity and accountability. Regulation is recorded in the governance field of 15 studies (Abidin, 2020; Akinnubi & Agarwal, 2023; Danarta, 2022; Dikrurahman & Abdullah, 2025; Fallorina et al., 2023; Fernandez, 2019; Jalli & Idris, 2019; Leong, 2019; Mann, 2025; Melissa, 2019; Ong, 2022; Ong & Cabañes, 2018; Rasidi, 2023; Schipper, 2025; Vanie, 2025) and electoral matters in 5 (Akinnubi & Agarwal, 2023; Aznar et al., 2023; Lim, 2017; Miyawaki, 2023; Uyheng & Carley, 2021).

Regulation and free expression. A recurring dilemma is that measures against false information can restrict expression. Malaysia's Anti-Fake News Act was criticized as poorly drafted, with reform needing to go beyond repeal (Fernandez, 2019). Indonesia's ITE Law is analyzed as both a digital-rights instrument and a threat to free expression, with reported compliance gains and fewer cases in 2020–2022 alongside strong criticism (Afisa et al., 2024); online defamation provisions were used against activists in a case described as designed to chill criticism (Mann, 2025). Comparative legal analysis finds broad fake-news laws across Southeast Asian jurisdictions during COVID-19 (Smith & Perry, 2022). Crackdowns are better explained by political circumstances than by the objective severity of fake news (Neo, 2021), illiberal responses may be active (legal and censorship measures) or passive (encouraging pro-regime information) (Cho, 2025), and vague national-security restrictions can subvert online freedom (Pedram et al., 2024).

Regional and institutional responses. ASEAN recognizes fake news normatively but lacks a tangible collective approach (Putra, 2024). Electoral management digital readiness was rated high for Singapore and Thailand, medium for Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia, and low for Cambodia and Myanmar (Tan, 2020). Election-integrity interventions include civil-society fact-checking initiatives such as Kawal Pemilu, FactsFirstPH, and Break The Fake (Bandaranayake et al., 2024), as well as civil-society advocacy on election integrity and civic space (Horiuchi, 2024).

Non-legal responses. Fact-checking trends differ between the EU and ASEAN (Slijepčević et al., 2021); Indonesian media have adopted data journalism and verification networks (Roza, 2022; Sultan et al., 2025); media literacy is proposed in survey and qualitative studies (Dulkiah, 2023; Hasan & Sokid, 2024; Omar et al., 2023); platform accountability and oversight of labor and campaign arrangements are called for (Hosamane & Garimella, 2025; Ong, 2022; Ong & Cabañes, 2018); and AI governance is described as fragmented and capacity-constrained in Indonesia (Dikrurahman & Abdullah, 2025) with cross-sector collaboration urged for the Philippines (Rodrigo et al., 2024; Schipper, 2025).

The state as actor. Governments and armed forces are treated not only as regulators but as sources of manipulation and as securitizers of dissent: internet throttling and securitizing moves in Indonesia (Lee, 2020), Army-linked operations in Thailand (Unahakate, 2024), military campaigns in Myanmar (Smith & Smith, 2022), and labeling of opposition as extremism in Malaysia (Mustaffa, 2024).

Legitimacy and trust in government. Evidence is mixed and thin: social media use was associated with lower trust in government (Parr, 2025) and with satisfaction that varied by period and partisanship (Sakti & Nainggolan, 2023). Governance entries in the extraction matrix are predominantly descriptive, comparative-legal or normative, and few evaluate whether measures achieve their aims; Afisa et al. (2024) is one of the few to report trends after a legal change.

3.7 SRQ5: Evidence gaps

Geographic concentration. Evidence is concentrated in Indonesia (47 studies), the Philippines (44 studies), and Malaysia (21 studies). Vietnam appears only in multi-country studies; Cambodia and Myanmar each have one single-country study; and Laos, Brunei and Timor-Leste do not appear at all.

Designs and causal inference. Qualitative and discourse-analytic designs predominate (53 of 100). Only a small group of studies uses surveys, computational analysis, or experiments (Ahmed & Rasul, 2023; Danaditya et al., 2022; David et al., 2023; Hosamane & Garimella, 2025; Morales et al., 2025; Omar et al., 2023; Parr, 2025; Sakti & Nainggolan, 2023; Uyheng & Carley, 2021), and few isolate the effect of exposure to disinformation on democratic outcomes.

Concepts. Political noise is rarely used as an analytic category, and its relation to disinformation is seldom examined empirically.

Evaluation of responses. Legal, platform, and civil society responses are described and criticized far more often than they are evaluated (Section 3.6).

Emerging channels. Evidence on AI-enabled disinformation (Dikrurahman & Abdullah, 2025; Rodrigo et al., 2024; Schipper, 2025) and encrypted messaging (Martin et al., 2023) is recent and limited.

Source base. Policy and research reports and working papers contribute 18 studies, several of them related editions (Section 3.1), and 81 studies were published in 2020–2025, so the evidence base is recent and partly non-independent.

Table 8. Summary of evidence by review question (studies cited by author and year; Appendix B gives full study-level detail).

SRQ	Finding	Supporting studies	n
1	Identity-based hoaxes and campaign falsehoods (Indonesia, Malaysia)	Hartanto & Purnomo (2023); Hasan & Sokid (2024); Jalli & Idris (2019); Kuntarto et al. (2021); Sawitri & Wiratmaja (2021); Wadipalapa (2023)	6
1	Propaganda and delegitimizing narratives	Hermawan (2024); Leong & Loh (2024); Mustaffa (2024); Talamayan (2021)	4
1	Organized, paid or professionalized production (trolls, buzzers)	Cabañes et al. (2019); Danarta (2022); Espina (2025); Ong (2022); Ong & Cabañes (2018); Ong & Cabañes (2019); Rasidi (2023); Seto (2019); Wallis et al. (2021)	9
1	Behavioral evidence of coordination, bots and hate speech	Danaditya et al. (2022); Hosamane & Garimella (2025); Uyheng & Carley (2021)	3
1	Cross-national inventories of organized manipulation	Bradshaw & Howard (2018); Bradshaw & Howard (2019); Bradshaw et al. (2020)	3
1	AI-enabled disinformation	Dikrurahman & Abdullah (2025); Rodrigo et al. (2024); Schipper (2025)	3
2	Parties, campaign teams and cyber armies as producers	Bradshaw & Howard (2019); Bradshaw et al. (2020); Gaw et al. (2025); Jalli & Idris (2019); Leong & Loh (2024)	5

2	State and military actors	Lee (2020); Smith & Smith (2022); Talamayan (2020); Unahakate (2024)	4
2	Users, sharing and susceptibility	Ahmed & Rasul (2023); David et al. (2023); Dulkiah (2023); Omar et al. (2023)	4
2	Platforms: Facebook, Twitter, encrypted messaging	Bradshaw & Howard (2019); Danaditya et al. (2022); Hosamane & Garimella (2025); Martin et al. (2023); Uyheng & Carley (2021)	5
2	Algorithmic and affective mechanisms	Bakir & McStay (2022); Lim (2017)	2
3	Polarization (field-coded)	Akinnubi & Agarwal (2023); Cabañes et al. (2019); Kuntarto et al. (2021); Lee (2020); Lim (2017); Melissa (2019); Talamayan (2020)	7
3	Trust in information and institutions (field-coded)	Bradshaw & Howard (2018); David et al. (2023); Dikrurahman & Abdullah (2025); Fitriyah & Elfattah (2024); Jayakumar et al. (2021); Kajimoto et al. (2019); Pandian & McGonigle (2025); Parr (2025); Rodrigo et al. (2024); Rosana et al. (2025); Schipper (2025)	11
3	Electoral discourse (field-coded)	Hosamane & Garimella (2025); Jayakumar et al. (2021); Leong & Loh (2024); Ong (2022); Rasidi (2023); Rodrigo et al. (2024); Schipper (2025); Tan (2020); Uyheng & Carley (2021)	9
3	Journalism, self-censorship and civic space	Bagalawis et al. (2024); Balod & Hameleers (2021); Griehsel et al. (2018); Millora & Karunungan (2024); Talamayan (2020)	5
3	Countervailing or pluralizing effects	Akinnubi & Agarwal (2023); Chinnasamy & Volkmer (2023); Hermawan (2016); Melissa (2019); Sultan et al. (2025); Vanie (2025)	6
4	Regulation and free-expression tension	Afisa et al. (2024); Cho (2025); Fernandez (2019); Mann (2025); Neo (2021); Pedram et al. (2024); Smith & Perry (2022)	7
4	Regional and election-management responses	Bandaranayake et al. (2024); Horiuchi (2024); Putra (2024); Tan (2020)	4
4	Fact-checking, journalism and media-literacy responses	Dulkiah (2023); Hasan & Sokid (2024); Omar et al. (2023); Roza (2022); Slijepčević et al. (2021); Sultan et al. (2025)	6
4	State as actor and securitization	Lee (2020); Mustaffa (2024); Smith & Smith (2022); Unahakate (2024)	4
4	Legitimacy and trust in government (mixed)	Parr (2025); Sakti & Nainggolan (2023)	2

4. Discussion

The included studies indicate that political noise and disinformation in Southeast Asia are best understood as embedded in political competition rather than as isolated information problems. Falsehoods and manipulative narratives are produced by party networks, paid influencers, buzzers, state and military actors and, in some cases, foreign actors, and they circulate through platform architectures and offline networks (Gaw et al., 2025; Jalli & Idris, 2019; Ong & Cabañes, 2019; Smith & Smith, 2022; Unahakate, 2024). The evidence therefore, supports a systemic reading in which

incentives, labor arrangements, platform design, and political economy interact, rather than a reading centered on individual falsehoods.

The evidence on democratic discourse points to recurring associations with polarization, lower trust and constrained civic expression (David et al., 2023; Kuntarto et al., 2021; Lee, 2020; Parr, 2025; Talamayan, 2020), together with some pluralizing effects (Chinnasamy & Volkmer, 2023; Hermawan, 2016; Melissa, 2019). Most of these findings come from qualitative or descriptive designs, and the few studies that estimate associations report modest or context-dependent relationships (Aznar et al., 2023; Morales et al., 2025; Sakti & Nainggolan, 2023). The review therefore, does not conclude that disinformation causes democratic decline. It concludes that the literature documents mechanisms and associations by which noise and disinformation may weaken deliberation, and that stronger designs are needed to test these mechanisms and associations.

4.1 Governance and regulation

The governance evidence exposes a persistent dilemma. Regulation is among the governance responses most often recorded (15 studies), yet the studies that examine it repeatedly warn that broad or vague laws can restrict expression, dissent and press freedom (Afisa et al., 2024; Fernandez, 2019; Mann, 2025; Neo, 2021; Smith & Perry, 2022). Fact-checking, media literacy, platform accountability and election-integrity measures are proposed or documented alongside regulation (Bandaranayake et al., 2024; Hasan & Sokid, 2024; Omar et al., 2023; Slijepčević et al., 2021), but their effectiveness is rarely evaluated. Regional coordination through ASEAN is described as normatively recognized but practically thin (Putra, 2024).

4.2 Implications for research and practice

For research, the priorities are designs that can test causal pathways (for example, panel or experimental studies in the Philippines and Indonesia), comparative work on under-studied states, systematic evaluation of legal and civil society responses, and clearer operationalization of political noise so that it can be distinguished empirically from disinformation. For policy and practice, the evidence supports approaches that address production incentives, campaign finance, platform accountability, and content, and that protect free expression and independent journalism while doing so (Bandaranayake et al., 2024; Gaw et al., 2025; Ong, 2022; Ong & Cabañes, 2018).

5. Limitations

This review has the following limitations, several of which arise from the way the corpus was assembled and documented.

1. Single primary reviewer. One primary reviewer screened records and extracted data. The protocol permits this, where a second reviewer or supervisor

checks a sample of decisions; the outcome of that check is reported in Section 2.5. Independent dual screening was not performed, so screening and extraction errors or idiosyncratic judgments may remain.

2. Quality appraisal. Findings are not weighted by a completed MMAT/AACODS appraisal. A single-reviewer, extraction-based methodological-transparency rating is reported in Appendix C (62 of 104 studies rated Minimally specified, 37 Partially specified, 5 Adequately specified), but this is a proxy computed from the extraction matrix, not a full-text appraisal, and has not been checked by a second reviewer. The source category and design of each study are given in Appendix B so that readers can judge the strength of the evidence behind each statement in the meantime.

3. Search documentation and coverage. The protocol specified Scopus, Google Scholar, and ProQuest, backward and forward citation searching, and supplementary sources, but the extraction matrix does not record which records came from which source, and search dates and per-source counts are reported in Appendix A only to the extent they were logged. Google Scholar screening was limited to the first 10 relevance-ranked results per combination, so retrieval is bounded, and the review should not be read as exhaustive. The geographic block does not name Laos, Brunei or Timor-Leste.

4. Screening stages. The extraction matrix records only final decisions. The flow diagram therefore shows final decisions, not the stage at which each record was excluded, and exclusion reasons are summarized qualitatively.

5. Inconsistent geographic scope. The protocol covers any Southeast Asian country, but many single-country studies of other Southeast Asian states were excluded because they fell outside the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia, while three single-country studies of Thailand, Singapore and Myanmar were retained (Section 2.3). Evidence on the other states is therefore under-represented in ways that are not fully systematic.

6. The construct of political noise. Only one extraction entry uses the term "political noise". Most conclusions concern disinformation and related manipulation, and noise is treated as a proxy inferred from indicators. Conclusions about noise as distinct from disinformation are therefore weaker.

7. Heterogeneity, borderline studies and non-independence. The matrix's own notes flag concerns about topical fit, document type, or strength of evidence for 13 included studies (marked † in Appendix B), and five retained records may not meet the protocol's exposure criterion (Section 2.8). No sensitivity analysis excluding these studies was carried out, although none of the five underpins a synthesis statement. Several sources are successive editions or products of the same research program (Section 3.1).

8. Rule-based descriptive categories. Source category, design, period and country are assigned by explicit rules; coding frequencies are keyword counts. These make the tables reproducible but are coarser than manual coding, and the design classification in particular should be read as approximate.

9. Extraction-based reporting. Numerical results from individual studies (for example, correlation coefficients or percentages) are taken from the extraction matrix. Each quoted figure should be checked against the original study before submission; this verification has not yet been performed for the figures reported below.

10. Scope. Only English-language studies from 2010 to 2025 were eligible. The corpus includes grey literature and working papers that have not been peer reviewed, and 77% of the studies are from 2020–2025.

6. Conclusion

This review examined 100 unique studies identified from 700 retrieved records on political noise and disinformation in Southeast Asia. The evidence documents hoaxes, identity-based narratives, propaganda, and organized troll, buzzer, and bot activity, circulating mainly through social media and increasingly through encrypted messaging. Reported consequences include polarization, weakened trust, distorted electoral communication, and self-censorship, along with some pluralizing effects, while governance responses are dominated by regulation that carries risks for free expression. The evidence, concentrated in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia, is largely qualitative and rarely evaluates the effectiveness of responses or treats political noise as a distinct construct. The findings should be read as documenting associations and mechanisms rather than established causal effects, subject to the limitations set out above.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data, appendices, and supplementary materials supporting the findings of this review are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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