



## TERMS OF REFERENCE RESEARCH CONSULTANCY

### A. PROJECT DESCRIPTION

DigitalReach on behalf of the Southeast Asian Coalition on Tech Accountability (SEACT) is looking for a short-term consultant to document the social media platforms accountability in the upcoming 2023 Thailand Election.

Social media platforms often play a significant role in elections around the world as it is a key channel for political election campaign to take place. However, often that the platforms have been weaponized to spread misinformation and disinformation and hate speech for political advantages. As election is a foundation for democracy, this is a concerning situation as it has been documented that the malicious information can influence public opinion. Platforms have always been criticized for not being able to do enough to keep their platforms free from the malicious information resulting in the election being manipulated.

In Thailand, the country has had a history of state-sponsored cyber troops that is also known as Information Operations (IO). It was first [exposed](#) in 2020 in the parliament in which the opposition provided evidence that the Thai military is behind the operation. Political critics have admitted their social media accounts have been attacked by the operation. This led to a court case in 2021 where some critics have decided to [file](#) a lawsuit against the military regarding the operation. Twitter also [discovered](#) at least 926 accounts to be linked to the Thai military in 2020 that are associated with the IO, while Facebook [reported](#) to remove 185 accounts and groups to be linked to the Thai military regarding the operation in 2021.

Given the country's political dynamics, the situation of social media being weaponized is not expected to be limited to only the IO. Freedom of expression has long been threatened by the use of lèse-majesté offense for political purposes. As the more progressive side is [campaigning](#) for a repeal of the lèse-majesté laws, this goes against the tide of those who adopted a more politically conservative ideology that consider the idea to be a disrespectful act towards the Thai monarchy, or worse. Some parties even announced that they would do everything to prevent the repeal from happening. This leads to a question of how the situation might become a debate between a progressive and the conservative in the election campaign, and whether this law would be weaponized during the election campaign against particular individuals or parties.

Following the recent Ministerial Regulation of the Ministry of Digital Economy and Society (MDES) that came into effect in December 2022, the situation might also be more complex during the campaign period. This is because the new law [requires](#) social media platforms to remove content considered to violate offences in the 2017 Computer Crime Act within 24 hours, and the owner of the content cannot appeal if the removal happens. The country has a history of requesting social media platforms to remove content many times, and this content is usually associated with lèse-majesté. In 2020, Facebook [blocked](#) the "Royalist Marketplace", a satirical

group that criticizes the Thai monarchy from audiences in Thailand after the MDES threatened a legal action against the company under the CCA. In early 2023, it has been [reported](#) that the group was blocked again in Thailand for several hours.

In the upcoming 2023 election, this situation might have contributed to the election, among others. This research is therefore looking at how social media platforms can be more accountable to human rights and democracy given the situations that may occur during the election campaigns. What happens might violate the platforms' policies or clearly wrong based on the moral standards, but what is of concern is whether social media platforms will take any adequate actions to handle the situations to prevent their platforms being a place where malicious content harbors.

This research is part of the regional project under the SEACT to explore social media platform accountability in the national elections throughout Southeast Asia. As an election is an important foundation of democracy, exploring the accountability of the platforms during the event helps determining how the platforms play a role in shaping democracy of a country. Prior to Thailand, research projects at a country level have been done in the Philippines and Malaysia in 2022. Thailand is the first country that a national election will happen in 2023.

## **B. OBJECTIVES**

- To explore social media platforms accountability in the 2023 Thailand's General Election.
- To address the areas that social media platforms have overlooked in the 2023 Thailand's General Election.
- To use the findings for advocacy for greater accountability of social media platforms under the SEACT Coalition.

## **C. WORK DESCRIPTION**

The researcher is responsible for the project on the following tasks;

- Document the situation using mixed approaches such as online research, observations, and in-depth interviews.
- Analyze the situation based on the given framework.
- Write a report based on the findings.

## **D. QUALIFICATIONS**

- Fluency in Thai and English
- In-depth understanding of Thai politics and its dynamics
- Have at least a bachelor's degree in political science or related fields.
- Have proven research and written communication skills in English.
- Microsoft Office literate
- Demonstrable knowledge of human rights in Thailand, particularly freedom of expression.
- Demonstrable knowledge of issues including state-sponsored information operations (IO), weaponizing the lèse-majesté law, and threats from local laws related to social media platforms (particularly those that grant officials power to direct social media platforms to

remove content). The researcher has to understand how these issues can be a threat to democracy for this research to be successful.

- This work is remote, but the consultant has to be based in Thailand during the period of the project.

#### **E. TIMELINE AND DELIVERABLES**

<b>TIMELINE</b>	<b>ACTIVITIES</b>
April – May 2023	The researcher works to monitor the situations in the lead-up to the election. During the period, the researcher simultaneously conducts an in-depth interview with related stakeholders, particularly social media platforms regarding their preparation (if it's not available on the online source already).
May 2023 (post-election)	The researcher analyzes information gathered during the pre-election and conduct post-election interviews with social media platforms to learn about their success measures in terms of their efforts and whether the efforts are efficient.
June 2023	The first draft is expected to be submitted by the second week of June. The final draft is expected to be finished by the final week of June.

\*The timeline might be changed due to the political situation.

#### **F. CONTRACT DETAILS**

The researcher is expected to work for 3 months starting from April 1<sup>st</sup> – June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2023, during which the consultant is expected to complete the tasks described above, based on a work plan agreed upon with DigitalReach, the SEACT's secretariat. The researcher will work under the direct supervision of the Executive Director. The work is full time (40 hours a week) and the consultant is required to be responsive to communications and provide updates related to the work on a weekly basis. The compensation is 5,400 USD (five thousand four hundred dollars) for completing the tasks.

#### **G. SUBMISSION OF APPLICATION**

Please submit the following application documents to [digitalreach@digitalreach.asia](mailto:digitalreach@digitalreach.asia) by March 5, 2023. All documents are expected to be in PDF.

1. Your CV/Resume with names and contacts of two references.
2. 1-page max cover letter detailing why you are interested in this consultancy, and how you will be able to contribute to the consultancy given your experience.
3. 2 unedited writing samples

#### **About DigitalReach**

DigitalReach was founded in 2019 with the objective of assessing the impact of technology on human rights in Southeast Asia. The organization's mission is to safeguard digital rights and internet freedoms in the region. Our work revolves around three core strategies, which are research and monitoring, advocacy, and community building and empowerment.

### **About the Southeast Asian Coalition for Tech Accountability (SEACT)**

The SEACT was founded in 2021 as a coalition that looks into accountability of social media platforms on human rights and democracy in Southeast Asia. The coalition was founded as a result of DigitalReach's observation that sees attempts of digital authoritarianism in the region in controlling how social media platforms should operate. As of 2023, the coalition has 14 member organizations across 8 countries in Southeast Asia.