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'Crisis' plan is censorship

If the measure proposed by Digital Economy and Society Minister Buddhpongse Punnakanta to have state agencies dictate news coverage during "times of crisis" is adopted, it could further undermine press freedom and people's right to information.

Mr Buddhpongse floated the idea at a Senate meeting on Monday while discussing concerns about certain media outlets' intrusive coverage during the mass shooting in Nakhon Ratchasima. The intrusive reporting allegedly compromised security operations and the safety of people trapped inside the shopping mall.

After the meeting, the minister posted on Facebook that he will "explore ways to regulate the media and control social media", adding that it may be necessary to designate a single state-run media outlet to take sole responsibility for reporting on crises.

What he is proposing is in fact the sort of censorship imposed on the media in countries ruled by authoritarian regimes such as in China, Laos and Vietnam. If implemented, this measure will have far-ranging effects on society.

First of all, as soon as the government starts slapping controls on what can or cannot be reported about gun attacks, it will likely expand censorship on news coverage of other "crises", such as disasters, disease outbreaks or street protests.

This sort of control will hinder the media's ability to scrutinise or expose flaws and irregularities in the authorities' handling of crises.

It will also allow the state to dictate what the public can or cannot know about a specific incident, paving the way for the abuse of power and the hiding of information.

It will also deprive people of their right to information from different sources.

Mr Buddhpongse is known for his harsh stance against freedom of expression.

Upon taking office last year, he vowed to "purge" social media of any insults to the monarchy.

He then set up an anti-fake news centre which has slapped criminal charges against people for what they wrote or shared on social media.

Late last month, the centre slapped computer crime charges against two people for sharing misleading information on the coronavirus outbreak, while yesterday, the minister announced that four more people were detained for spreading the same kind of "fake news".

Many people have slammed the minister's fake-news crusade for his failure to differentiate between those who systematically create or spread fake news with malicious intent, and those who simply share incorrect information.

What the minister should do instead is provide correct information on the subject, or the virus in this case.

After the minister's proposal, top brass in the military and the police joined in, saying they will consider confiscating the assets of online media outlets found to have broken the law.

They said this was in response to a government policy, without elaborating.

However, such policies are unhealthy.

Mr Buddhpongse's proposal only shows that the government wants to gag the media and control all public narrative on certain issues.

In reality, the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission discussed the mass-shooting coverage with six media organisations, and they agreed there is a need for self-regulation.

With media outlets already aware of such incursions, such proposals are unnecessary as they will do more harm than good.