

Indonesia battles fake news after quake-tsunami disaster

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The disaster agency's efforts are being fronted by spokesman Sutopo Purwo Nugroho, who has won admirers for battling to update journalists around the clock despite suffering from terminal cancer

Indonesia has cracked down on "fake news" about its deadly quake-

tsunami disaster, with police arresting nine people for spreading hoaxes in a bid to prevent further panic spreading among survivors.

False reports claiming that another huge quake was about to hit Sulawesi island—which is already reeling from last Friday's double tragedy that has killed over 1,400 people—have circulated online in recent days.

Another Facebook post used a photo of the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami aftermath to depict what it claimed was a scene from the seaside city of Palu.

A caption read: "Those who share this post will be spared from calamities".

Setyo Wasisto, Indonesia's national police spokesman, told Kompas TV on Thursday that nine people had been arrested on suspicion of spreading false news. Most of the contents were posted to Facebook, he added.

Indonesia has a long-standing problem with internet hoaxes, and [fake news](#) is never far behind after a disaster.

The country has one of the world's biggest online audiences, with a population of 260 million people and one of the world's highest [social media](#) usage rates.

"If anyone predicts another massive earthquake or tsunami, it's fake news," said Daryono, head of the geophysics agency's quake and tsunami information centre, who like many Indonesians goes by one name.



Sulawesi island is already reeling from last Friday's double tragedy that has killed over 1,400 people

"If you spread this kind of information, you're just going to create more suffering and confusion for people."

Teams from Indonesia's communications ministry and disaster agency have taken to Twitter and other social media to debunk fake claims in recent days.

Communication and Information Ministry spokesman Ferdinandus Setu told AFP a 70-strong team was working 24 hours a day on fake reports about disaster, including a claim that Palu's mayor was among the dead.

"We've confirmed that the mayor is still alive and healthy," Setu said.

Rampant hoaxes

Once the team debunks the contents, the ministry announces the findings through regular press releases and also gives the findings to the police.



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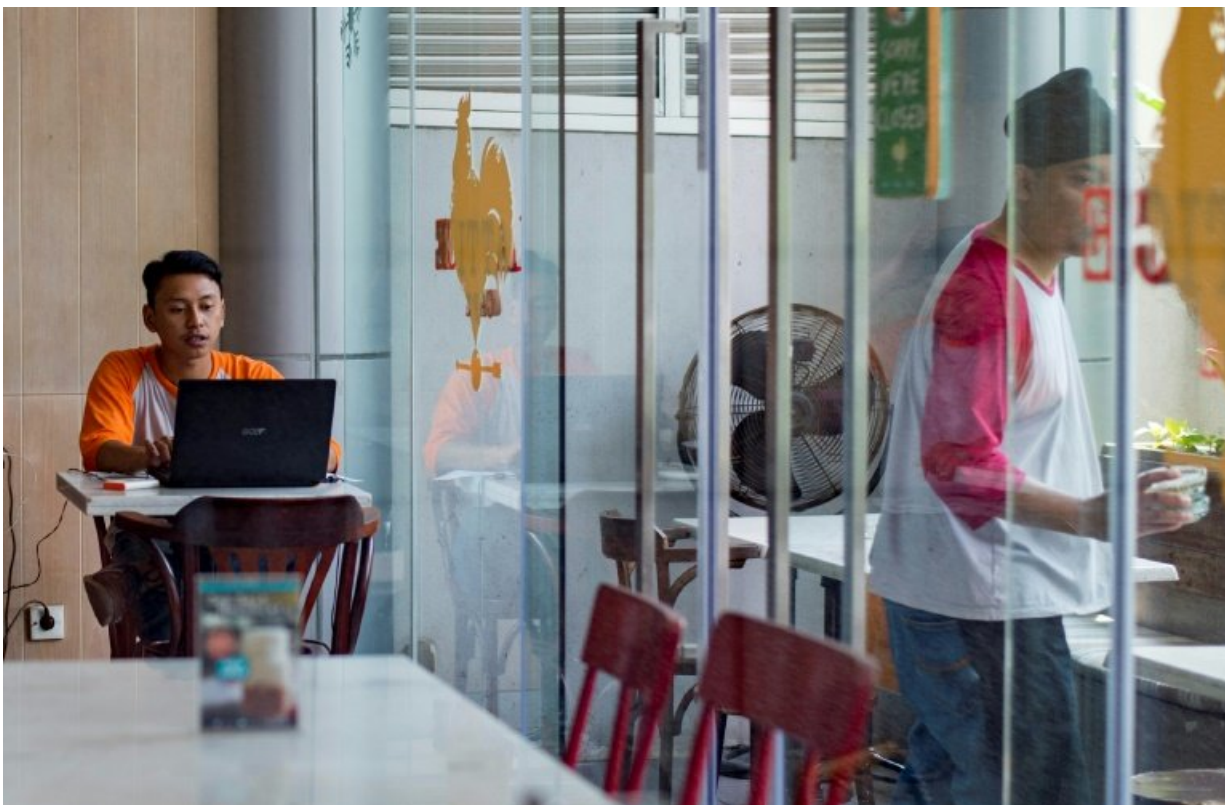
"I apologise if I cannot respond to every question from journalists, my friends. If I was healthy, I would surely do it no matter what," Nugroho told reporters this week, even as he continues to hold daily press briefings, take journalists' calls and communicate on social media.

Hoaxes were also rampant during a quake disaster on the island of Lombok, next to Bali, this summer.

Indonesian police have clamped down on fake news and online hate speech more broadly in recent months, ahead of next year's presidential election.

President Joko Widodo—who has battled false internet claims that he is a communist—inaugurated a new cyber security agency in January.

The following month, the communications ministry announced it was deploying new software to identify fake news websites.



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Members of the Muslim Cyber Army (MCA)—a cluster of loosely connected groups accused of using Facebook, Instagram and Twitter to attack the government and stoke religious extremism—have been rounded up.

Some 130 million Indonesians—about half the population—spend an average of nearly three-and-a-half hours a day on social media, one of the highest rates in the world, according to data from London-based creative agency We Are Social and social media management platform Hootsuite.

The country was also late to introduce digital literacy programmes, experts say.

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