



How Civil Society's Tobacco Ad Tracking Inspired Action From YouTube and Indonesia's Government

This case study documents how Canary-powered monitoring identified 2,300+ YouTube videos with tobacco content, generating evidence of advertising violations under Indonesia's new online tobacco advertising ban and driving both platform and government action.



A YouTube program with users reviewing electronic cigarettes captured by SAFEnet monitoring.

[Read the report.](#)

What is Canary?

Canary is an AI-powered media monitoring and reporting service that tracks social media accounts and news stories in real time, identifying industry strategy and promotional tactics, including hidden formats such as influencer posts and product reviews.

THE PROBLEM:

Online Tobacco Advertising Persists After Regulation

Indonesia's Health Law (2023)¹ and its implementing regulation (2024)² prohibit tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship (TAPS) on digital platforms, including YouTube. However, mechanisms for monitoring and enforcement were not built into the regulations, and technical implementing guidelines were still in development at the time of this study. As a result, enforcement bodies had no systematic way to detect violations or verify compliance on digital platforms.

THE APPROACH:

Civil Society Steps in to Gather Evidence

The Southeast Asia Freedom of Expression Network (SAFEnet), a leading digital rights organization in Southeast Asia, is a member of [Free Net From Tobacco \(FNFT\)](#)—a coalition of nine Indonesian civil society organizations working toward a digital environment free from tobacco advertising, which uses Canary evidence for its advocacy. SAFEnet monitored YouTube in 2023 (August to December) and 2024 (March to August) to identify tobacco content violations.³

How Content Was Identified

Based on Canary methodology, YouTube videos were surfaced through targeted account searches and structured keyword searches, then reviewed by experts to confirm the presence of tobacco content (e.g., product use, brand logos, or instructions on how to use or buy tobacco products).

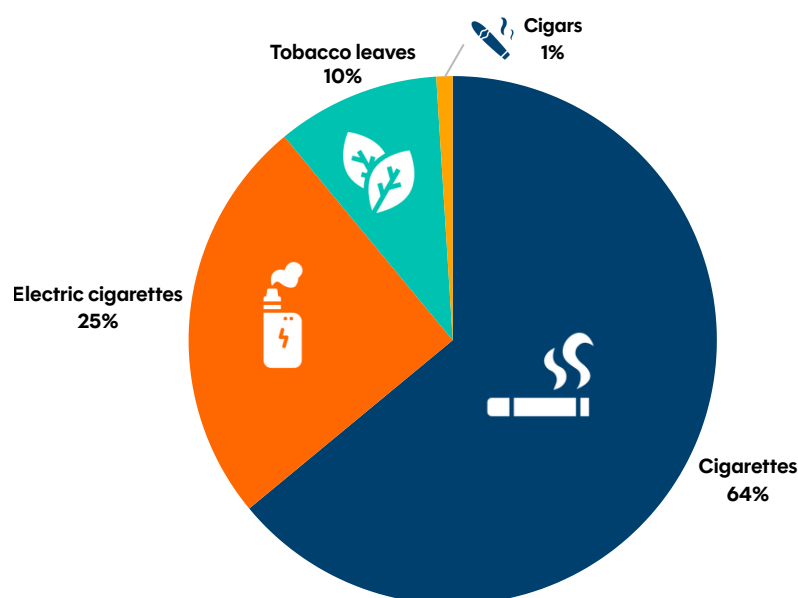


1 Republic of Indonesia. Law No. 17 of 2023 on Health [Undang-Undang Nomor 17 Tahun 2023 tentang Kesehatan]. Jakarta: State Secretariat; 2023 Aug 8.

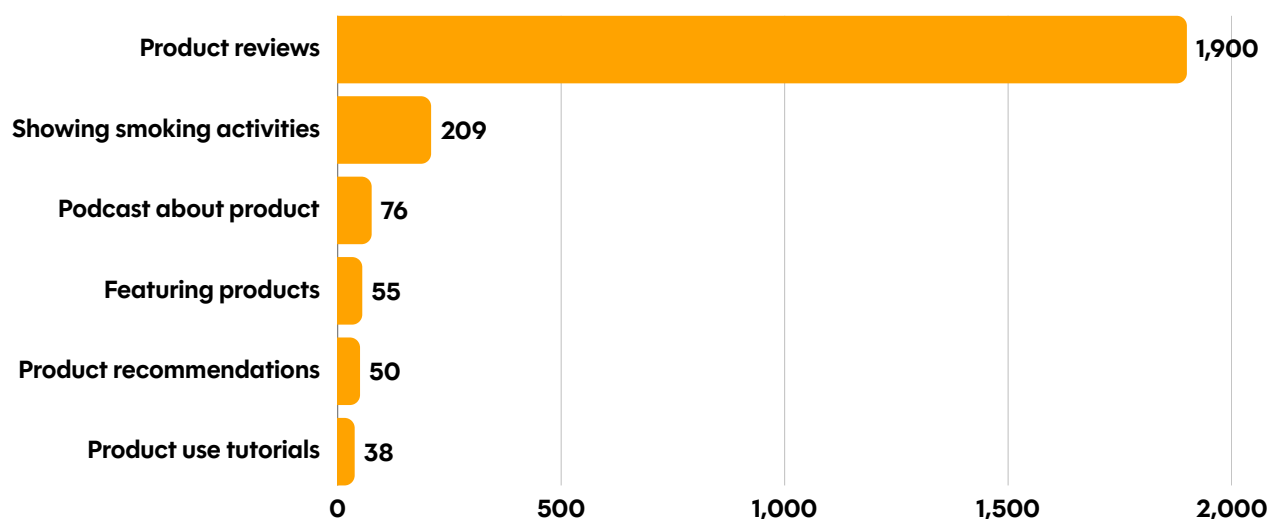
2 Republic of Indonesia. Government Regulation No. 28 of 2024 on the Implementation of Law No. 17 of 2023 on Health [Peraturan Pemerintah Nomor 28 Tahun 2024]. Jakarta: State Secretariat; 2024 Jul 26.

3 Southeast Asia Freedom of Expression Network (SAFEnet), Vital Strategies, Free Net From Tobacco Coalition. Monitoring and reporting of tobacco product advertising on YouTube. Denpasar: SAFEnet; 2025.

Types of Tobacco Products Identified in YouTube Videos



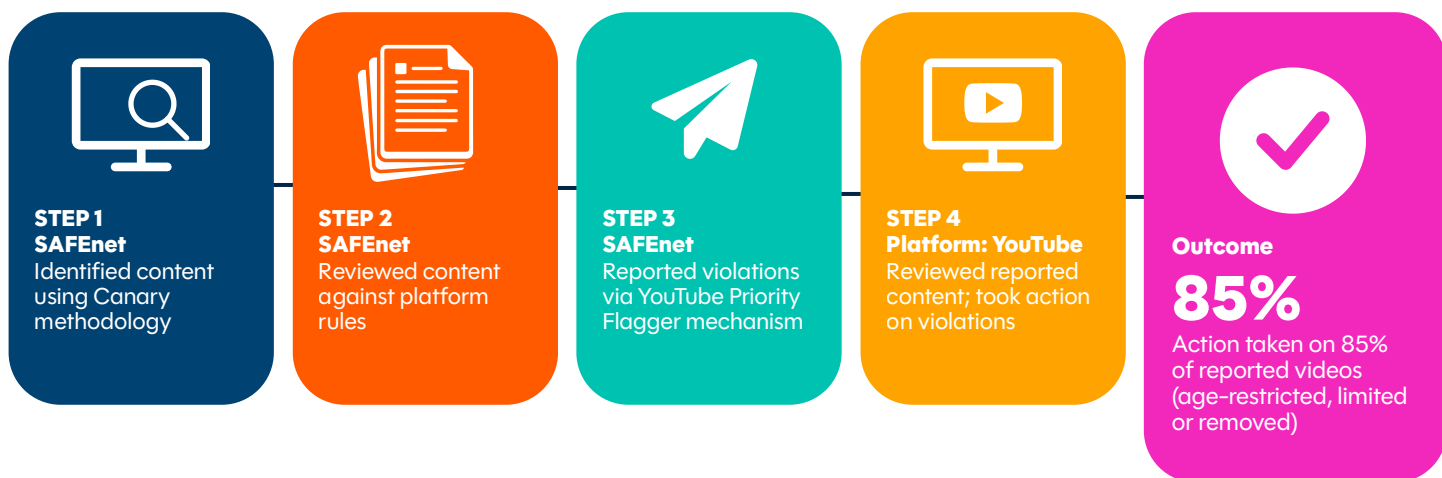
How the YouTube Video Featured Tobacco



THE OUTCOME: Platform and Government Response

SAFEnet flagged identified content through YouTube's Priority Flagger program, which grants trusted organizations a direct channel to report content for expedited review. SAFEnet is one of only five Indonesian civil society organizations with official flagger status. This structured reporting led to platform moderation action in the majority of cases.

However, similar content was treated inconsistently—some videos were removed, others were age-restricted or had their visibility limited, and others remained fully accessible.



Same Content Creator: Three Different Outcomes



Video removed by YouTube for violating Community Guidelines



Video access restricted based on age



The video is not considered to violate Community Guidelines

Report findings were delivered to Indonesia's two ministries responsible for enforcing the law on tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship: the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Communication and Digital Affairs. Two things were clear: Tobacco marketing was still circulating on YouTube, and self-regulation programs like the YouTube Priority Flagger program could not substitute for government-led enforcement. This helped drive the Free Net From Tobacco coalition and the ministries to forge a working partnership, developing interim enforcement solutions to fill a critical gap, while advancing technical guidelines for a more comprehensive monitoring and enforcement system.

What We Learned

- **Periodic findings can inspire action.** Even monitoring from a specific, limited time frame drove platform responses and encouraged the Indonesian government to accelerate development of a formal enforcement system and guidelines.
- **Continuous monitoring is needed to cover detection gaps.** Promotional content exists at such a scale on major platforms that much can go undetected without structured, continuous monitoring.
- **Platform self-regulation is ineffective.** Similar content received inconsistent outcomes—age-restriction/visibility limitation, removal or no action—suggesting that platform self-regulation programs may be more performative than genuine attempts at regulation, further underscoring the need for continuous government-led monitoring and enforcement.

Recommendations

For YouTube:

Strengthen Community Guidelines and enforcement against tobacco advertising to align with Indonesian regulations, increase transparency and consistency in moderation decisions (including publishing data on reports and actions taken), improve accessibility of reporting and appeal mechanisms, and engage meaningfully with stakeholders, including government, civil society and trusted flaggers.

For the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Communication and Digital Affairs:

Establish clear technical guidelines, invest in systematic monitoring, create a reporting mechanism for civil society evidence and strengthen collaboration with digital platforms like YouTube to hold them accountable—securing enforcement that is effective, rights-based and protective of both young people and legitimate access to information.

For governments and civil society worldwide:

Invest in structured, continuous monitoring partnerships to close the detection gap. While informal or periodic review can prompt action, it cannot substitute for systematic oversight that operates at scale and includes clear enforcement pathways.

About Canary!

Canary is a real-time media monitoring and reporting service that harnesses AI and expert analysis to identify emerging threats in digital environments. Canary is a core capability of Vital Strategies' [Behavioral Insights Lab](#). For more information on our Canary methodology, visit our [website](#).

About Vital Strategies

Canary is a project of Vital Strategies, a global public health organization that partners with governments and local organizations to tackle the growing burden of noncommunicable diseases and injuries, using data and evidence to assess health and environmental threats and to move policy, practices and people. Our team of 400+ includes epidemiologists, policy experts, communicators, data analysts and others who work in 80+ countries around the world.

About The Southeast Asia Freedom of Expression Network (SAFE-net)

[SAFE-net](#) is an Indonesian civil society organization dedicated to advancing and protecting digital rights, including the rights to internet access, freedom of expression and digital safety. SAFE-net works to promote a human rights-centered digital ecosystem through policy advocacy, victim assistance, digital security capacity building and coalition strengthening.

More by Canary



To learn more visit:

alertsbycanary.org

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