Disinformation Shadow Economies in SEAsia: Worker Arrangements and Moral Justifications

UC San Diego Symposium
Political Economy of Misinformation
April 7, 2021
1. media as culture of production with organizational hierarchies, collaborative arrangements & power struggles

2. empathy for precarious media workers: from the film extra to call center worker, but what about the racist/classist casting agent and the misogynist porn producer (Graham et al 2015; Grindstaff, 2009; Mayer, Caldwell & Banks 2011)?

3. ethical critique of “complicity and collusion” (Silverstone 2007)
1. How can disinfo studies more responsibly represent the ‘fake news’ producer or perpetrator behind hate speech?

2. How can disinformation studies help shine a light on global South contexts where local reform is infinitely more challenging than blaming big tech?

3. Where are opportunities for tech regulation “from below”: digital advertising monitoring, industry self-regulation, transparency in political consultancies, business taxation, fairness in election campaigns, influencer industry blacklists, etc.?
POLITICS AND PROFIT
IN THE FAKE NEWS FACTORY

FOUR WORK MODELS OF POLITICAL TROLLING
IN THE PHILIPPINES

Published by the
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MITIGATING DISINFORMATION
IN SOUTHEAST ASIAN ELECTIONS:
LESSONS FROM INDONESIA, PHILIPPINES AND THAILAND

Published by the
NATO Strategic Communications
Centre of Excellence
Four emerging disinformation models:

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<th>State-Sponsored Model</th>
<th>In-house Staff Model</th>
<th>Advertising and PR Model</th>
<th>Clickbait Model</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Politics-Profit Mix</strong></td>
<td>Political.</td>
<td>Political.</td>
<td>Both political and profit-driven.</td>
<td>Primarily profit-driven.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strategists’ authority or job positions are dependent on maintaining popular support for the current administration</td>
<td>Staffers sometimes take on fake account operations as an add-on to their primary work, sometimes with no additional pay</td>
<td>Chief strategists can be rewarded with official government positions and an expanded social network of powerful political and business figures</td>
<td>Revenue is dependent on advertising technology measuring pay-per-click and web traffic</td>
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<td><strong>Leadership and Strategic Direction</strong></td>
<td>Controlled by the chief of communications</td>
<td>Controlled by the chief of staff</td>
<td>Controlled by chief strategist, enlisted as an outsourced project-based consultant</td>
<td>Commercially driven, guided by social media ‘engagement’ metrics</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Client</strong></td>
<td>The Philippine state</td>
<td>Incumbent politician or political contender</td>
<td>Politician, party, or political donor</td>
<td>No direct political clients initially, but campaign partnerships developed over time</td>
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Architects of Networked Disinformation

Behind the Scenes of Troll Accounts and Fake News Production in the Philippines

By Jonathan Corpus Chong & from Vincent A. Fuentes

Political Clients

Chief Architects of Networked Disinformation
Elite advertising and PR strategists: they liaise with political clients and set campaign objectives

Digital Influencers
Anonymous Influencers: Anonymous operators of social media pages with humorous/inspirational/pop culture content, they translate campaign messages into viral posts
Key Opinion Leaders: Celebrities and pundits with highly engaged fans and followers on social media, they carry core campaign messages

Community-Level Fake Account Operators
Precarious middle-class workers subcontracted by ad and PR strategists or hired by politicians’ chief-of-staff, they amplify reach and create “illusions of engagement”

Grassroots Intermediaries
Politician’s fan page moderators, unpaid opinion leaders, volunteer political organizers

PUBLIC
Reporting on disinformation as big business

Disinformation For Hire: How A New Breed Of PR Firms Is Selling Lies Online

One firm promised to “use every tool and take every advantage available in order to change reality according to our client’s wishes.”

Craig Silverman
BuzzFeed News Reporter

Jane Lytvynenko
BuzzFeed News Reporter

William Kung
BuzzFeed Contributor

Posted on January 6, 2020, at 8:08 p.m. ET

Ong said PR firms use industry jargon while communicating with clients to help “neutralize the stigma of the real disinformation work that they do.”

“For instance, they would use the terms ‘supplemental pages’ and ‘digital support workers’ to describe what is otherwise known as ‘fake news sites’ or ‘paid trolls’ when they pitch their services to prospective clients. This lends an aura of respectability to the transaction and — crucially — gives politicians a level of plausible deniability,” he said.
Moral Displacement at the Top

“Other strategists like taking credit for trending-this, campaign-that. But not with me. I like working from the shadows, you know, like Olenna Tyrell. Nobody needs to know it was me!”

Competitive collegialities among micro-influencers

Micro-influencers enlisted in digital influencer agencies encourage and support each other.
We need to watch out for anti-fake-news legislation that will deal greater harm than the information crisis itself.

Researchers, especially ethnographers in the field of disinformation studies, agree that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to fighting information disorders, and that interventions should be culturally appropriate. But learning from Southeast Asia can help answer critical questions in the global fight against fake news. How can researchers help lobby for responsible tech regulation in countries where government leaders are the biggest bad actors?
Conclusions

1. Pro-democracy coalitions should identify industry "champions" who can advocate for reform and better self-regulation systems. Reflexivity tends to come from younger people — and also disillusioned and burnt out workers.

2. Journalists may themselves be reluctant to antagonize those who control the corporate advertising money that their news agencies depend on.

3. Pro-democracy allies and foreign donors need to lend support to local civil society and researchers to advocate for tech regulation "from below". We cannot reproduce the same disinformation interventions that have not adequately coped with the powerful businesspeople who are invested in keeping the current system in place.