

# Overview: Monetization of Disinformation

April 7, 2021

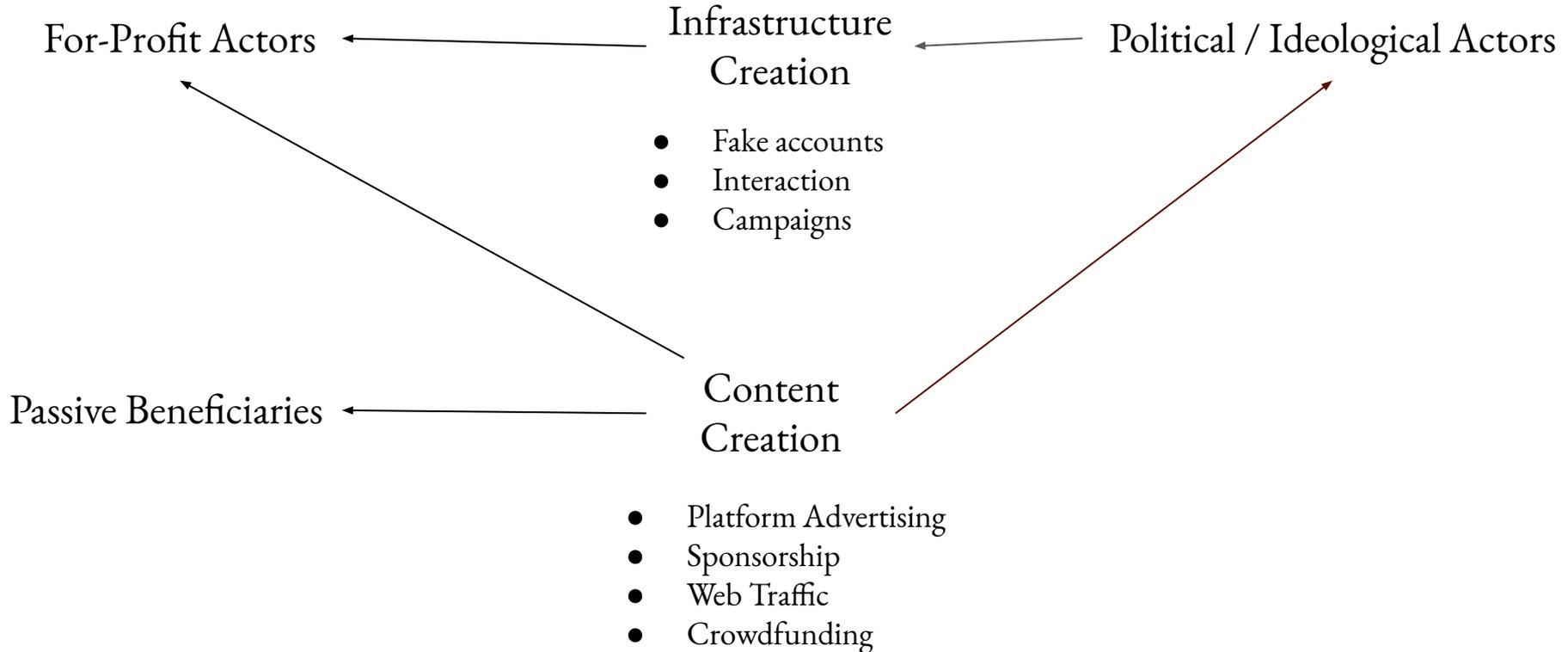
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# Functions in the Market: Who profits from disinformation?

1. **Content Creators:** Individuals or groups profiting from creating and sharing disinformation content.
  - a. *For-Profit:* Content reflects attention-grabbing topics. Goal to maximize clicks.
  - b. *Ideological:* Both states and non-state actors (political campaigns, social/ political groups, individuals). Content reflects political or ideological motivations.
2. **Infrastructure Creators:** Individuals or groups that sell fabricated likes, accounts, views, comments and bots which help to amplify disinformation content.
  - a. *For-Profit:* Firms, organizations or individuals. Varying degrees of organization. Existence of firms can reflect regulatory environment of a country. Profitability of infrastructure reflects platform policies.
3. **Passive Beneficiaries:**
  - a. *Platforms*
  - b. *Advertisers*

# Disinformation Economy: Functions and Actors



# Methods of Content Monetization

- **Platform Facilitated Advertising:** Use tools provided by the platform itself (qualifications differs by platform), such as platform-sponsored affiliate or associate programs. Most platforms have introduced measures to severely limit this approach to monetization.
- **Sponsorship:** Affiliate with a third party which pays for promotion of content on a platform (not facilitated by the platform itself).
- **Web Traffic:** Propagate/promote content with links to external websites. The web traffic to that site then becomes the revenue stream, typically in the form of advertisements.
- **Crowdfunding:** Followers pay actors directly to continue posting. Payments would take place on a crowdfunding platform (such as Patreon, Kickstarter, Indiegogo, Tipeee) or a via platform developed by actors that provides opportunities to donate (facilitate by online payment systems such as PayPal).
- **Selling Merchandise:** Selling items which are affiliated with the content/ideological brand.

Source: EU Disinfo Lab



**Marta S**

is creating podcasts and videos

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(+VAT)

**Q-stions**



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PER MONTH  
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Apr 16 at 7:23pm

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Sarah V. [redacted]

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Source: EU Disinfo Lab

# Market for Disinformation Campaign Infrastructure

- **Interaction:** In addition to content publishing, accounts can also generate revenue by being paid to like/view/reshare/comment on disinformation to improve its propagation.
- **Infrastructure:** There also exists a market for selling accounts. These accounts can be bought by state actors in order to make a campaign look more authentic and avoid detection.
- **Campaigns:** Organizations or individuals are paid to develop and administer disinformation campaigns against particular websites, companies, individuals, etc. This seems to reflect the regulatory environment of a given country.
- **Purchasing Ads:** e.g. Russian purchase of Facebook ads during the 2016 election

## **Outsourcing Arrangements:** How do for-profit actors interact with ideological actors?

- It's important to consider when state or politically-driven actors might consider outsourcing, especially purchasing campaign infrastructure from for-profit actors.
- Often political disinformation is discussed as one market or ecosystem. In reality, the actors engaging in it are diverse. We need to focus our attention on the complete range of organizations, including smaller states and non-state actors, which will engage with the economy differently.

# Tiers of Outsourcing - Market for Campaign Infrastructure

## State Actors

- Majority of coverage of the disinformation ecosystem has focused on major powers: e.g. Russia / China / Iran. However, Russia's share of newly initiated campaigns is dropping.
- States like Russia can build their own infrastructure, but what does it look like for smaller, less-resourced states to engage in information campaigning? How much is being outsourced to for-profit actors?

## Political Actors

- How do political campaigns participate in the disinformation economy?
- Particularly abroad (in environments with more lax regulatory measures), how do political candidates and campaigns outsource campaign creation?

# Key Takeaways

1. **Profitability varies across platforms.** Critical to identify the key levers and incentives contributing to profitability on different platforms.
2. **Cross-platform networks matter.** There is some evidence of disinformation propagators jumping between platforms to avoid censorship measures on another. This also applies to profit-driven strategies; many for-profit actors have secondary channels on crowdsourcing websites that they switch back to after removals/bans.
3. **Platforms often engage in topic-specific bans rather than targeting monetization.**
4. **For-profit vs. ideologically-driven actors of disinformation likely exhibit different behavioral markers.** Ideologically-driven care about continued engagement by the same individuals, whereas for-profit want to maximize the number of eyes on their content.
5. **For-profit and ideological actors interact in a variety of ways.** Targeting one can have consequences for the other.