Influence for hire

The Asia-Pacific's online shadow economy

Dr Jacob Wallis, Ariel Bogle, Albert Zhang,
Hillary Mansour, Tim Niven, Elena Yi-Ching Ho,
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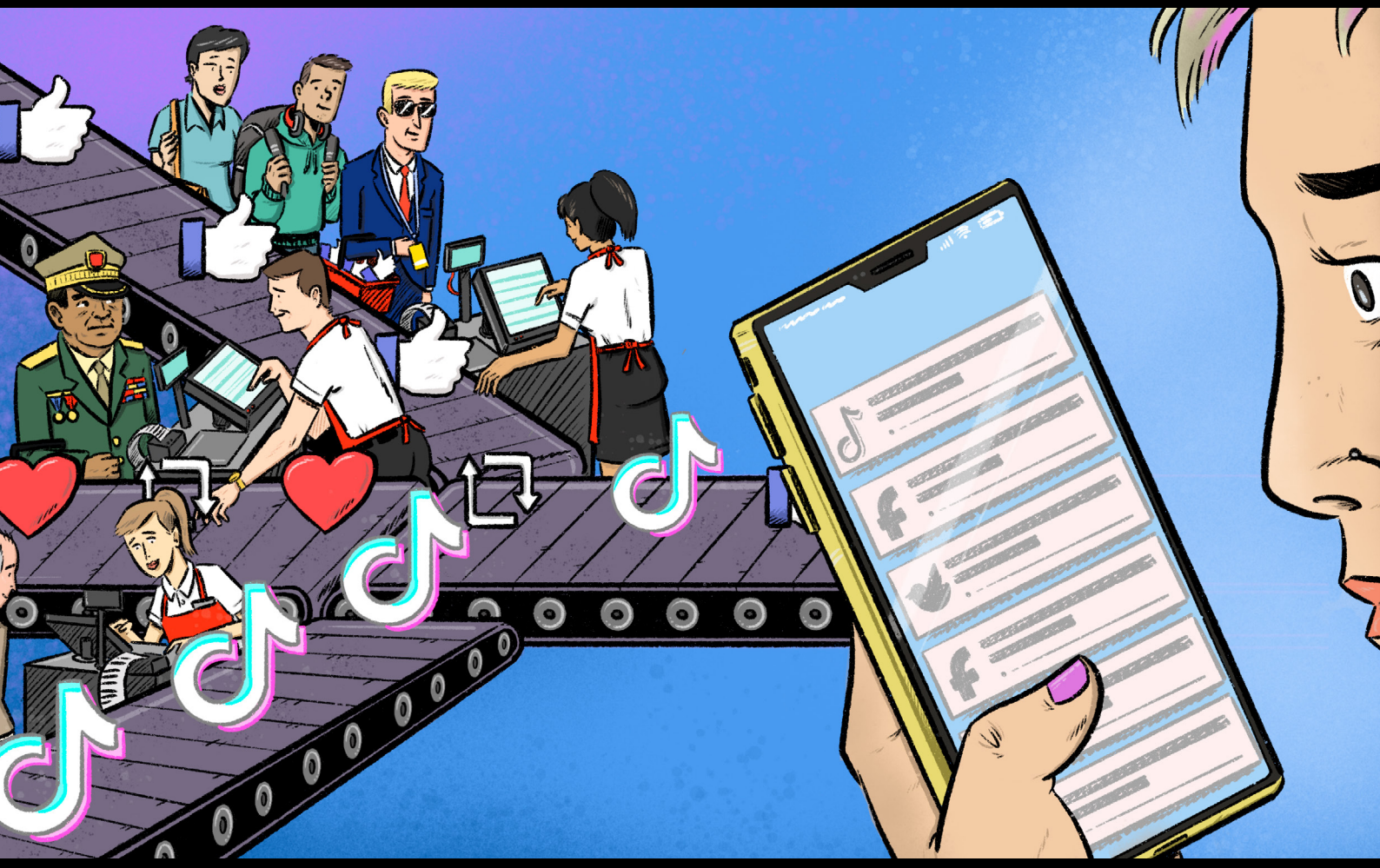

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What's the problem?

It's not just nation-states that interfere in elections and manipulate political discourse. A range of commercial services increasingly engage in such activities, operating in a shadow online influence-for-hire economy that spans from content farms through to high-end PR agencies. There's growing evidence of states using commercial influence-for-hire networks. The Oxford Internet Institute found 48 instances of states working with influence-for-hire firms in 2019–20, an increase from 21 in 2017–18 and nine in 2016–17.[1] There's a distinction between legitimate, disclosed political campaigning and government advertising campaigns, on the one hand, and efforts by state actors to covertly manipulate the public opinion of domestic populations or citizens of other countries using inauthentic social media activity, on the other. The use of covert, inauthentic, outsourced online influence is also problematic as it degrades the quality of the public sphere in which citizens must make informed political choices and decisions.

The Asia–Pacific region contains many states in different stages of democratisation.[2] Many have transitioned to democratic forms of governance from authoritarian regimes. Some have weak political institutions, limitations on independent media and fragile civil societies. The rapid rate of digital penetration in the region layered over that political context leaves populations vulnerable to online manipulation. In fragile democratic contexts, the prevalence of influence-for-hire operations and their leverage by agents of the state is particularly problematic, given the power imbalance between citizens and the state.

A surplus of cheap digital labour makes the Asia–Pacific a focus for operators in this economy, and this report examines the regional influence-for-hire marketplace using case studies of online manipulation in the Philippines, Indonesia, Taiwan and Australia. Governments and other entities in the region contract such services to target and influence their own populations in ways that aren't transparent and that may inhibit freedom of political expression by drowning out dissenting voices. Several governments have introduced anti-fake-news legislation that has the potential to inhibit civic discourse by limiting popular political dissent or constraining the independence of the media from the state.[3] These trends risk damaging the quality of civic engagement in the region's emerging democracies.

What's the solution?

This is a policy problem spanning government, industry and civil society, and solutions must incorporate all of those domains. Furthermore, influence-for-hire services are working in transnational online spaces that cut across legislative jurisdictions. Currently, much of the responsibility for taking action against the covert manipulation of online audiences falls to the social media companies. It's the companies that carry the responsibility for enforcement actions, and those actions are primarily framed around the terms of service and content moderation policies that underpin platform use. The platforms themselves are conscious of the growing marketplace for platform-manipulation services. Facebook, for example, notes this trend in its strategic threat report, *The state of influence operations 2017–2020*.[4]

Solutions must involve responsibility and transparency in how governments engage with their citizens. The use of online advertising in political campaigning is distinct from the covert manipulation of a domestic population by a state. However, governments, civil society and industry have shared interests in an open information environment and can find alignment on the democratic values that support free—and unmanipulated—political expression. Support for democratic forms of governance remains strong in the Asia–Pacific region,[5] albeit with degrees of concern about the destabilising potential of digitally mediated forms of political mobilisation and a trend towards democratic backsliding over the last decade that is constraining the space for civil society.[6]

The technology industry, civil society and governments should make that alignment of values the bedrock of a productive working relationship. Structures bringing these stakeholders together should reframe those relationships—which are at times adversarial—in order to find common ground. There will be no one-size-fits-all solution, given the region's cultural diversity. Yet the Asia–Pacific contains many rapidly emerging economies that can contribute to the digital economy in creative ways. The spirit of digital entrepreneurship that drives content farm operations should be reshaped through stakeholder partnerships and engagement into more productive forms of digital labour that can contribute to a creative, diverse and distinct digital economy.

Introduction

It is already well known that the Kremlin's covert interference in the 2016 US presidential election was outsourced to the now infamous Internet Research Agency.[7] ASPI's investigations of at-scale manipulation of the information environment by other significant state actors have also identified the use of marketing and spam networks to obfuscate state actor involvement. For example, ASPI has previously identified the use of Indonesian spam marketing networks in information operations attributed to the Chinese Government and targeting the Hong Kong protest movement in 2019.[8] In 2020, ASPI also discovered the Chinese Government's repurposing of Russian and Bangladeshi social media accounts to denigrate the movement.[9] Those accounts were likely to have been hacked, stolen or on-sold in the influence-for-hire shadow economy. In May 2021, Facebook suspended networks of influence-for-hire activity run from Ukraine targeting domestic audiences and linked to individuals previously sanctioned by the US Department of the Treasury for attempted interference in the 2020 US presidential election.[10]

Audience engagement with, and heightened sentiment about civic events create new business models for those motivated to influence. Australia's 2019 federal election was targeted by financially motivated actors from Albania, Kosovo and the Republic of Northern Macedonia.[11] Those operators built large Facebook groups, used inflammatory nationalistic and Islamophobic content to drive engagement, and seeded the groups with links through to off-platform content-farm websites. Each click-through from the Facebook group to the content-farm ecosystem generated advertising revenue for those running the operation. A similar business model run from Israel used similar tactics to build audiences on Facebook, again manipulating and monetising nationalistic and Islamophobic sentiment to build audiences that could be steered to an ad-revenue-generating content-farm ecosystem of news-style websites.[12] Mehreen Faruqi, Australia's first female Muslim senator, was a target of racist vitriol among the 546,000 followers of 10 Facebook pages within the network. These financially motivated actors demonstrate that even well-established democracies are vulnerable to manipulation through exploitation of the fissures in their social cohesion.

This report examines the influence-for-hire marketplace across the Asia–Pacific through case studies of online manipulation in the Philippines, Indonesia, Taiwan and Australia over five chapters and concludes with policy recommendations (pages 36-37). The authors explore the business models that support and sustain the marketplace for influence and the services that influence operators offer. Those services are increasingly integrated into political campaigning, yet the report highlights that those same approaches are being used by states in the region to influence their domestic populations in ways that aren't transparent and that constrict and constrain political expression. In some instances, states in the region are using commercial services as proxies to covertly influence targeted international audiences.

1. ‘What’s up with the BBC?’ A pro-palm oil Twitter network in Indonesia

Ariel Bogle, Hillary Mansour and Albert Zhang

On 30 November 2020, the hashtag #AdaApaDenganBBC (or ‘what’s up with the BBC’ in Indonesian) spiked on Twitter at 13:00 AEDT (09:00 Western Indonesian Time). More than 1,200 tweets used the hashtag that day to critique the British broadcaster and, in particular, a *BBC* article that alleged fires had been deliberately lit to clear forests for palm oil in Papua in eastern Indonesia.[13] However, many of the accounts also had other interests: as well as the palm oil tweets, the accounts promoted e-commerce sites, such as the Alibaba-owned Lazada (see ‘Commercial activity’), and shared images boosting Indonesia’s Covid-19 vaccination campaign (see ‘Political activity’). And the posts were typically coordinated by time, image, hashtag and theme—behaviour suggestive of a Twitter network for hire.

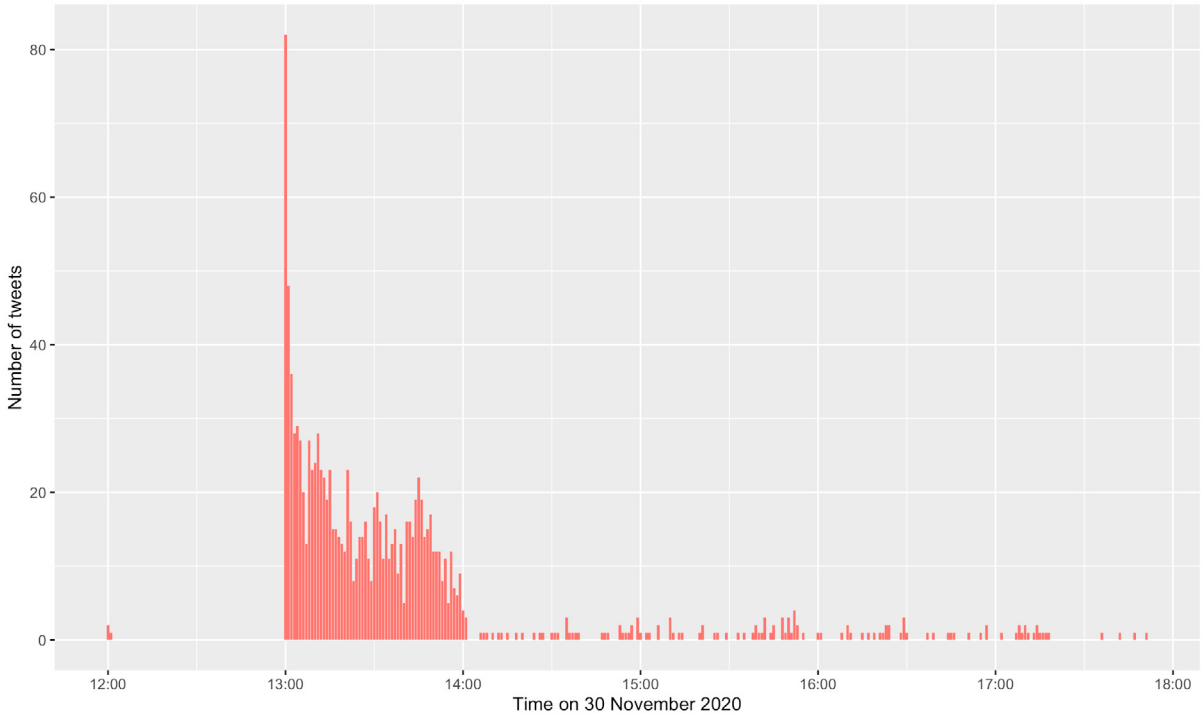
The global reputation of the palm oil industry is a concern for Indonesia, which, along with Malaysia, accounts for most of the commodity’s global production.[14] The industry has attracted the attention of environmentalists, non-government organisations (NGOs) and foreign governments concerned about its environmental impact and its labour practices, prompting Indonesia and Malaysia to decry ‘discrimination’ against their products.[15] Some forms of environmental advocacy have been labelled as a *kampanye hitam* or ‘black campaign’ by palm oil industry advocates—a common term for online smears or disinformation in Indonesia.[16] The two nations recently indicated they intend to undertake joint advocacy and lobbying to counter the industry’s critics in the European Union.[17]

Social media and online influencers have been used both overtly and covertly to challenge negative palm oil stories. In some cases, this has involved government-led hashtag campaigns proclaiming #sawitbaik or ‘good oil’,[18] and, in others, alleged efforts by lobby firms that seek to create the perception of grassroots support.[19] In 2019, *Reuters* reported that the Malaysian Palm Oil Council (MPOC), for example, had hired PR firms to run campaigns ‘centered around small holder farmers, carried out by platforms that say they represent farmers but are created or run by PR firms hired by the MPOC’, reportedly using social media and a variety of websites.[20] One campaign, known as Faces of Palm Oil, was also accused of ‘smearing’ the director of a UK supermarket chain in a video after he announced that the chain would remove palm oil from own-brand products.[21]

Using social media to respond to negative coverage of palm oil: #AdaApaDenganBBC

On 30 November 2020, the apparently coordinated network activity on Twitter (Figure 1) largely focused on countering an article published by the *BBC* on 12 November 2020 that examined allegations that South Korean plantation company Korindo had used fires to clear Papuan forests for palm oil, and the impact on local groups, including the Mandobo tribe.[22] Korindo denied the report.[23] The *BBC*’s report was published in collaboration with Greenpeace and the Forensic Architecture group.[24]

Figure 1: Timing of tweets using the #AdaApaDenganBBC hashtag on 30 November 2020



Indonesia's Ministry of Environment and Forestry had previously pushed back against the allegations, claiming in part that Greenpeace used a video from 2013 in its report and questioning why the video was exposed only in 2020.[25] Industry groups also criticised the *BBC*'s story as containing 'shocking falsehood', including the Council of Palm Oil Producing Countries, which represents Indonesia and Malaysia. It claimed that the *BBC*'s reports on the commodity 'can only be perceived as anti-palm oil'.[26]

More than 1,000 tweets were shared using the #AdaApaDenganBBC hashtag over the hour from 13:00 and 14:00 on 30 November 2021. Almost 70 tweets occurred between 13:00 and 13:01, suggesting a level of automation and potentially an attempt to make the hashtag trend. The accounts don't necessarily appear to be bots, but rather may be run by real people acting in a highly coordinated fashion or using automation tools. ASPI examined a sample of accounts and the range of political and commercial promotions tweeted and retweeted by the network. The evidence suggests that these accounts may offer their online platform to various stakeholders as a service.

The #AdaApaDenganBBC tweets on 30 November typically received minimal engagement (they had a median of zero likes or retweets), but there was some evidence of organic interaction. Twitter has already suspended many of the accounts—a further indication that Twitter considered some to be engaging in inauthentic behaviour. As well as the network's use of #AdaApaDenganBBC, other related hashtags were also used by a small number of the same accounts in early December 2020, including #JebakanFramingBBC ('framing trap BBC') and #KampanyeHitamBBC ('BBC black campaign').

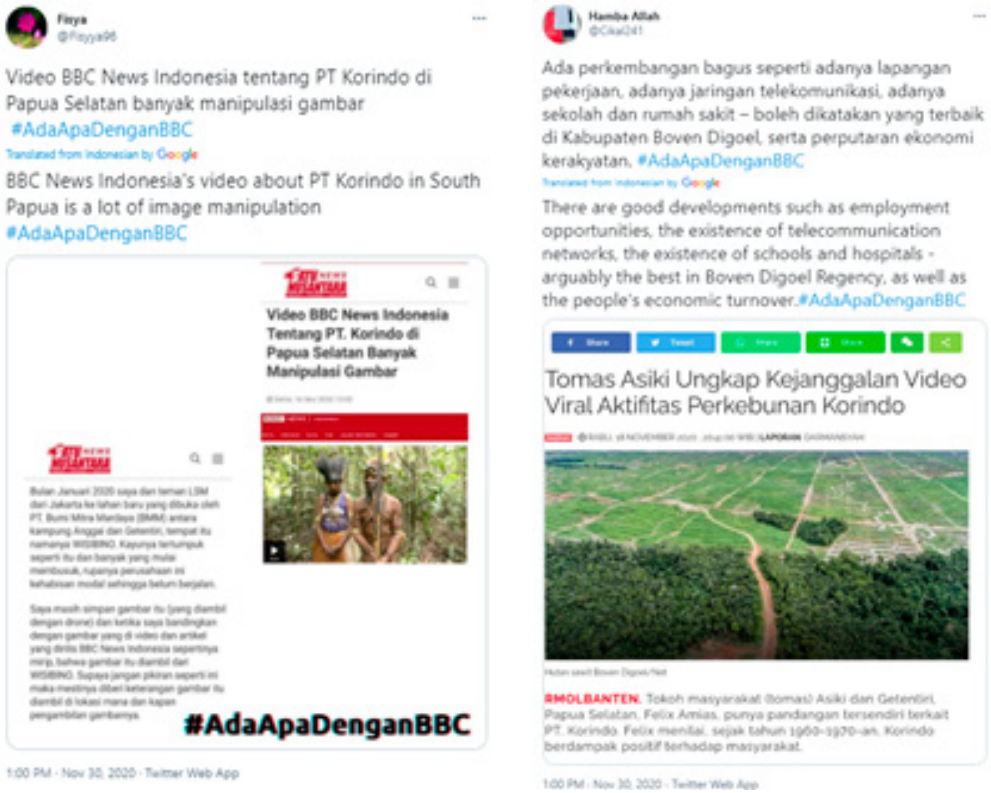
While the campaign on 30 November was coordinated around the hashtag, accounts in the sample also often posted a screenshot from one of six Indonesian news articles that contained criticisms of the *BBC*'s palm oil deforestation story and the Greenpeace report (Figures 2-4 detailed in Table 1), indicating an alignment of messaging across digital assets, but with enough variation to potentially avoid the quick identification of inauthentic behaviour by platform detection systems.

Some of the tweets replicated content from the news article depicted in the screenshot, while others included the hashtag on the screenshot. Interestingly, a high number of accounts using the hashtag instead shared links or screenshots to stories about Princess Diana allegedly being tricked into an interview with *BBC* journalist Martin Bashir (Figure 5)—a story that was also in the news in November 2020. This may have been a mistake or an extension of activity designed to discredit the *BBC* overall.

Table 1: Origins of BBC palm oil screenshots shared by the network

Figure	Outlet	Headline
2	satunusantaranews.co.id	Video *BBC News Indonesia* Tentang PT. Korindo di Papua Selatan Banyak Manipulasi Gambar *BBC News Indonesia*'s video about PT. Korindo in South Papua [contains] lots of image manipulation
2	rmolbanten.com	Tomas Asiki Ungkap Kejanggalan Video Viral Aktifitas Perkebunan Korindo Tomas Asiki reveals inconsistencies in viral video of Korindo's plantation activities
3	papua.antaranews.com	Ketum GAPKI: Kampanye hitam sawit suad melewati batas The chairman/leader of GAPKI (Indonesian Palm Oil Association): Palm Oil black campaign crosses the line
3	papua.antaranews.com	P.Felix Amias: Video BBC News Indonesia tentang PT Korindo di Papua Selatan banyak manipulasi gambar *BBC News Indonesia*'s video about PT. Korindo in South Papua [contains] lots of image manipulation
4	sawitindonesia.com	Kesaksian Pastor Felix Amias: Korindo Bantu Masyarakat, Video BBC News Manipulatif Pastor Felix Amias's testimony: Korindo helps the community, BBC News video is manipulative
4	denpasarupdate.pikiran-rakyat.com	Investigasi Soal Dugaan Pembakaran Hutan Papua Oleh Perusahaan Sawit, Greenpeace Diancam UU ITE Investigation into alleged burning of Papuan forests by palm oil companies, Greenpeace is threatened by Indonesia's ITE (Information and Electronic Transactions Act)

Figure 2: Tweets using satunusantaranews.co.id and rmolbanten.com at 13:00 on 30 November 2020

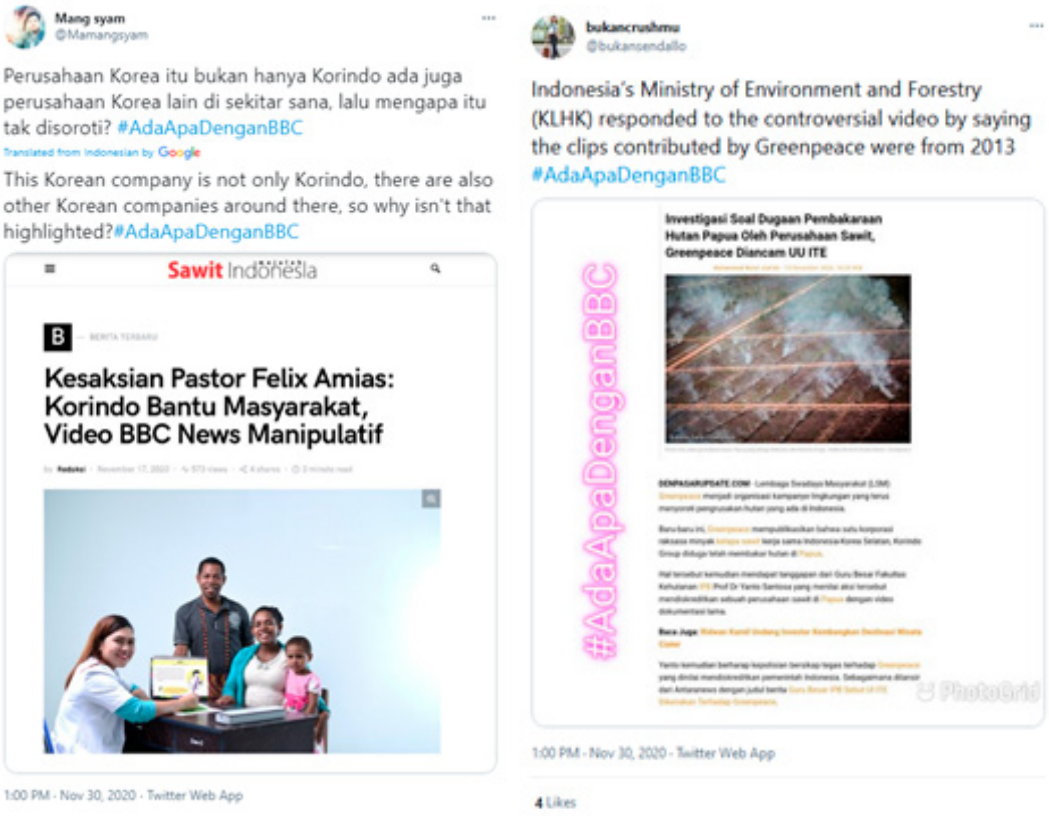


Sources: left, online; right, online.

Figure 3: Tweets using two papua.antaranews.com stories at 13:00 on 30 November 2020

Sources: left, online; right, online.

Figure 4: Tweets using sawitindonesia.com and denpasarupdate.pikiran-rakyat.com at 13:00 on 30 November 2020



Sources: left; online; right, online.

Figure 5: Tweets using a Kompas and CNBC story about Princess Diana with the #AdaApaDenganBBC hashtag on 30 November 2020

Sources: left, online; right, online.

Two of the news-article screenshots shared by the network describe a local man in Papua questioning the *BBC*'s report. This potentially mirrors a strategy described to ASPI by a number of environmental NGOs that operate in the region: Namely, that palm oil industry proponents will attempt to find and publicise a local representative to counter a critical report. It is unclear whether monetary incentives are provided to these local representatives, and ICPC does not suggest that has occurred in this case.[27] On 26 November 2020, a press release was shared via Cision's *PR Newswire* that claimed a Papuan Catholic priest, Father Felix, had issued a public statement 'to question the veracity of a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) report on Korindo' and questioning the outlet's motives (Figure 6).[28] Father Felix's commentary also appeared on the palm oil company's own news website and Twitter account,[29] and the press release was shared on news websites.[30 31]

Figure 6: A tweet from Korindo Group spotlighting the Catholic priest from Papua, 2 December 2020

Source: online.

In a further indication of coordination, other content was also replicated across many of the accounts that shared the #AdaApaDenganBBC hashtag on 30 November. For example, on the same day, many accounts in ASPI's sample retweeted a video shared by @asosiasiapsi (the account for the Indonesian Garbage Entrepreneurs Association) that attempted to push back against some arguments about waste collection (Figure 7).[32]

Figure 7: Retweets of @asosiasiapsi on 30 November 2020

Source: online.

The use of online influence operations to counter negative narratives about palm oil was also found in a coordinated network of Twitter, Facebook and Instagram social media accounts targeting West Papua's independence movement and examined by ASPI in December 2020.[33] Overall, the network regularly shared messages supporting claims that Papuans don't support independence, and, in late 2020, the accounts were also used to counter Greenpeace's palm oil investigation. Days after the BBC report's launch on 12 November 2020, a number of accounts in the network shared memes in English on Twitter and Instagram claiming that Greenpeace had shared a video of forest fires from 2013, which undermined the report (a narrative also used by Indonesian Government officials[34]), as well as graphics claiming the *BBC*'s report was 'propaganda by foreign media to influence the sovereignty of the Republic of Indonesia' on 16 November 2020 (Figure 8).

Figure 8: An Instagram post claiming that the BBC's report was 'propaganda by foreign media'

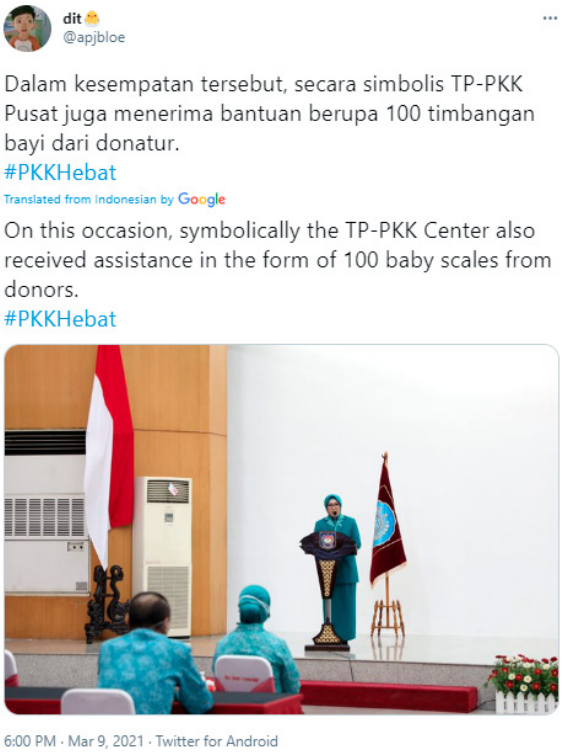
Source: online.

Political activity

As well as the *BBC* – palm oil tweets on 30 November 2020, accounts in the Twitter network shared political content that typically favoured the Indonesian Government, coordinated by time and message. While the same or similar images were often replicated, the text of the tweets varied according to the topics.

For example, on 9 March 2021 at around 18:00, some accounts in the network tweeted about an Indonesian women and families organisation (the PKK). While each account shared a slightly different version of the same photo, the text of the tweets shared positive messages about the PKK using the same hashtag—suggestive, potentially, of different responses to the same media kit and attempted evasion of Twitter's inauthentic behaviour sensors (Figure 9).

Figure 9: PKK tweets on 9 March 2021 at 18:00



Sources: left, online; right, online.

These Twitter accounts often promoted other pro-government lines, such as promoting the nation's Covid-19 vaccination campaign, for example, using hashtags including 'Jokowi's been vaccinated' and 'vaccinations have begun'. Some of their posts contained screenshots of elected officials, including President Joko Widodo (Figure 10), getting the vaccination on television. The Indonesian Government has acknowledged using influencers to promote the Covid-19 vaccine.[35]

Figure 10: Images showing Jokowi being vaccinated on 13 January 2021 at 20:11

Sources: left, online; right, online.

Commercial activity

As well as sharing content supportive of the Jokowi government, accounts in the network regularly shared a variety of commercial content that promoted mobile phone deals and other advertisements for entities, including Alibaba's e-commerce company, Lazada (Figure 11). For example, groups of accounts often tweeted the same advertisement for Lazada on specific days at the same or almost the same times. While the image and hashtags were the same or similar, the text of the tweets varied. As mentioned above, this may have been an attempt to evade the automatic detection of inauthentic behaviour on the platform.

Figure 11: Lazada advertisements on 11 December 2020 at 22:00

Sources: left, online; right, online.

Linguistic and profile traits

Tweets in the #AdaApaDenganBBC network sample often used a combination of formal and informal Indonesian when tweeting about palm oil. Text in the tweeted graphics was often reposted in the tweet itself, but converted into an informal register. Informal Indonesian and local slang dialects (known as *bahasa gaul*) are both commonly used online, and can be used to make the user seem more relatable and authentic.[36] However, the tendency for slang to draw on local dialects rather than Indonesia's national language can limit its audience.

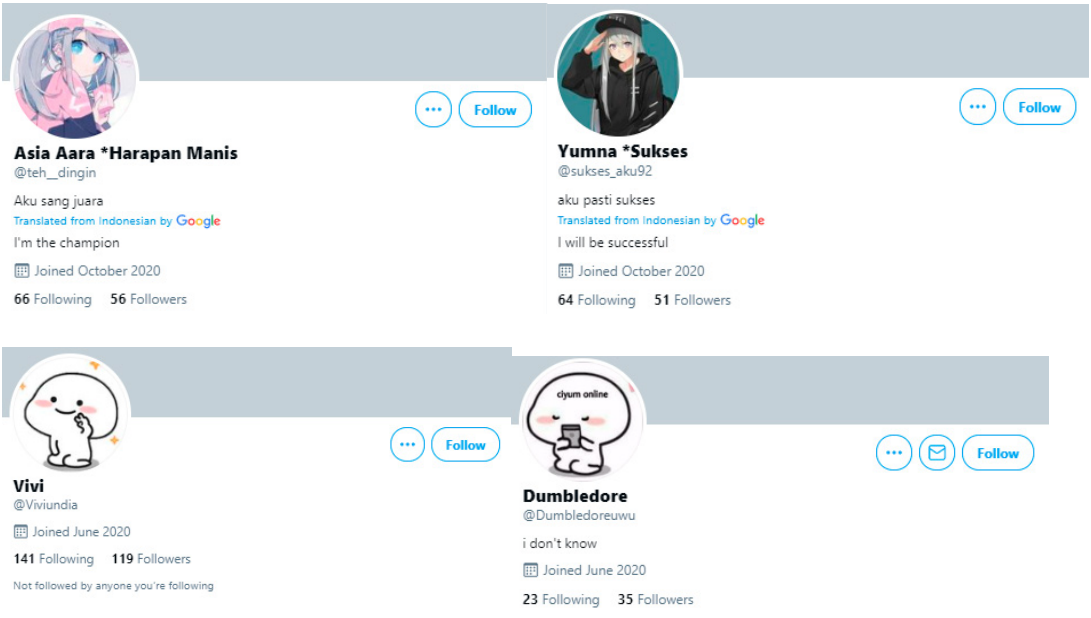
It's therefore unsurprising that the network used informal Indonesian rather than local slang to tweet political messages. For example, one account in the sample shifted between language registers, using the Jakartan slan pronoun *gue* ('me') when tweeting about a music video and the standard Indonesian pronoun *saya* when tweeting about palm oil (Figure 12). The impact of that language, whether intentional or otherwise, may have broadened the potential reach and impact of the message throughout all Indonesian-speaking communities.

Figure 12: Use of Jakartan slang pronoun gue in a tweet by an account in the network, and use of formal Indonesian pronoun saya in a palm-oil-related tweet

Sources: left, online; right, online.

While pictures and profile presentations varied, many of the accounts in the #AdaApaDenganBBC network sample used cartoon pictures as profile pictures. Although that isn't necessarily an indication of inauthentic account creation, the replication was striking. Some accounts had 'lil bean' cartoon pictures, while others used largely female anime characters (Figure 13).

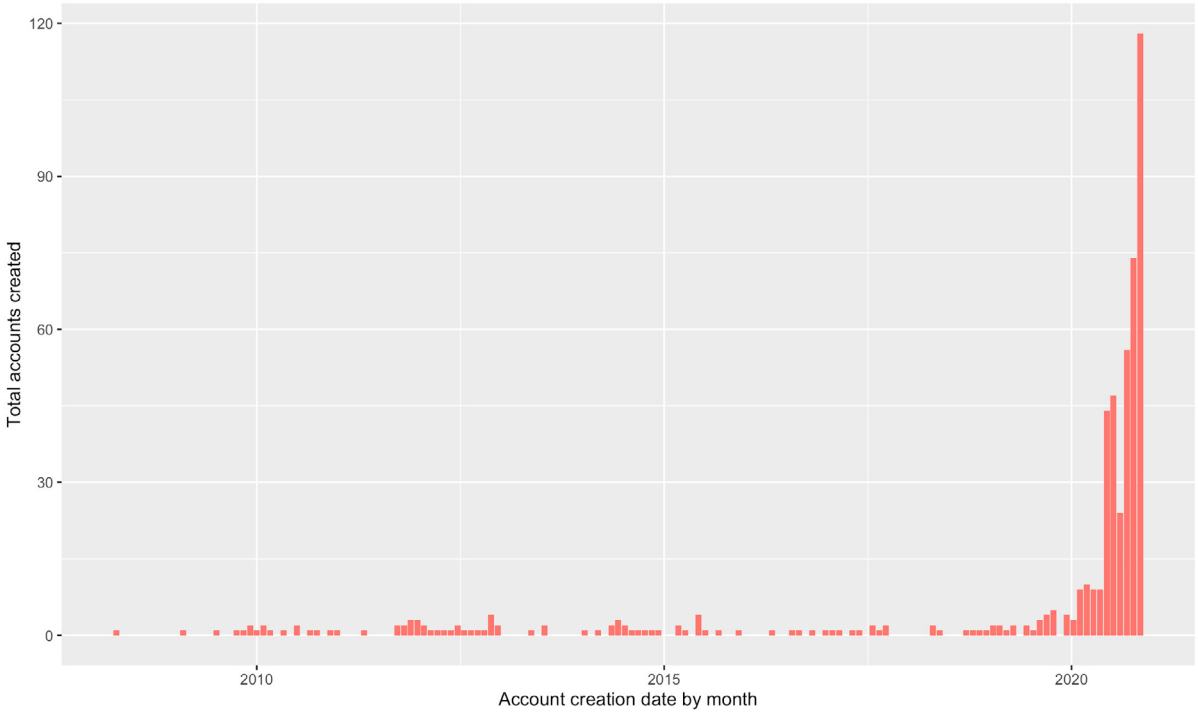
Figure 13: Cartoon profile pictures



Sources: top left, online; top right, online; bottom left, online; bottom right, online.

In addition to the similar profile images, ASPI examined a sample of 524 accounts in the network by account creation date. The majority were created in 2020, which suggests but doesn't confirm the creation of an inauthentic network (Figure 14).

Figure 14: Account creation dates, by month, in a sample of 524 accounts



Conclusion

While the #AdaApaDenganBBC Twitter network can't be definitively attributed, the use of coordinated accounts to counter negative messages about the palm oil industry may be a continuation of existing tactics used by proponents of the industry, especially in palm-oil-producing countries, although its impact is unclear.

Globally, online influence is often outsourced by governments and industry to lobby firms and commercial operators. Given that this network of Twitter accounts shared explicitly commercial content as well as pro-palm-oil-industry messages, it appeared to operate as a network for hire, with the flexibility to adapt images and messages—possibly in order to evade sensors that might catch more automated behaviour.

The use of online influence-for-hire networks is likely to grow and adapt in the Asia–Pacific, both for political and business interests, given the high penetration of social media in the region and the perceived need to promote a positive public view of key industries.

2. Clickbait propaganda: the CCP and news content farms in Taiwan and Australia

Albert Zhang, Tim Niven, Ariel Bogle and Elena Yi-Ching Ho

ASPI's ICPC and the Taiwan-based civil society organisation DoubleThink Lab have collaborated to analyse two Chinese-language content farms and news outlets targeting audiences in Australia and Taiwan. Our analysis shows that these online entities regularly publish articles that can be biased or favourable towards Chinese Government policies and narratives. By disseminating propaganda via third-party outlets, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has an indirect channel into the Chinese-language information ecosystem in Australia and Taiwan through which to shape perceptions about contemporary geopolitical events.

This research used open-source information and quantitative methods to analyse the output of two Chinese-language news content-farm websites. The two websites—*Au123.com* (a Chinese-language news outlet based in Australia) and *Qiqis.org* (a content farm that targets Taiwanese audiences)—were selected based on previous investigative research that unveiled financial affiliations with the CCP[37] or because they were reported to publish content in favour of the CCP's policies.[38] We found that articles published by the two websites showed relatively high biases towards CCP state media framing and diplomatic statements in the period around the Capitol Hill riots in Washington DC on 6 January 2021 and sought to compare that event with the 2019 Hong Kong protests. The language and tactics used reflect the CCP's broader strategy to undermine the global standing of the US and spread the perception of democracy in decline.[39]

Content farms usually pursue profit by publishing large amounts of online content to generate traffic and advertising revenue. The income derived from their websites or social media accounts is tied to quantifiable metrics, such as the number of interactions or 'clicks'. This typically incentivises content quantity at the expense of quality. These operations usually distribute entertainment-based content, such as how-to guides or listicles (easy-to-read articles structured as extended lists), but articles about politics and current affairs are also common, especially if news events are sensational or high profile.

To appeal to a broader audience, breaking news can provide engaging content, and content farms distributing news stories can be leveraged by state actors to disseminate propaganda or manipulate how the reporting of events is framed. This can occur through financial backing, contractual arrangements to republish state-produced content or the amplification of publications that align with state views through other state-controlled media. The funding and staff structures of the organisations that manage content farms are often secretive and obscure, given their novel positioning on the fringe of the digital economy. These organisations rarely belong to media governance bodies, and their websites typically lack clear editorial policies. That lack of transparency potentially allows malign actors to disguise their motivations if they exploit content-farm operations as proxies.

The methodology presented in this chapter demonstrates an emerging approach in computational linguistics to analyse online media and its potential bias towards disinformation or propaganda content.[40] These computational methods model language to measure bias in the framing of content through sentiment, entity or topic selection, and provide an evidence base from which to undertake further comparative investigation. This study compares the content from *Au123.com* and *Qiqis.org* with Chinese diplomatic and state media messaging.

The computational methods used in this analysis are detailed in the section below titled "Measuring bias using computational linguistics". We include this methodological detail because of the innovative approach and to provide methodological transparency, but the section can be skipped if readers are more interested in findings.

Chinese-language content farms

Content farms continue to play a significant role in enabling mainland Chinese disinformation efforts targeting Taiwan and are increasingly targeting overseas diaspora communities.[41] A Taiwanese website called 'Mission' was a widely shared news source across Taiwan-based Facebook pages before it was banned in 2019 for breaching the platform's community guidelines. *Mission* published a diverse range of articles, including pet stories and pop-psychology tests, but most of its content was copy-and-paste news from other sources that were reportedly false, misleading and criticised Taiwan's ruling Democratic Progressive Party. An extensive investigation by news outlet *The Reporter* suggested that *Mission* was likely to be affiliated with members of Taiwan's New Party's Youth Committee—a Taiwanese right-wing nationalist party that supports unification with mainland China.[42]

Research and reporting by media and civil society organisations have uncovered multiple instances of content farms targeting audiences in Taiwanese political discourse, but other countries are less well studied.[43] A 2020 ASPI ICPC report found that four of the 24 Chinese-language Australian media organisations studied showed 'evidence of CCP ownership or financial support'.[44] There's limited research on CCP affiliations or bias in Chinese-language media elsewhere.

Qiqis.org and *Au123.com* both publish Chinese-language news articles on a broad range of topics and current affairs. *Au123.com* tends to focus on stories more relevant to Australian audiences, whereas *Qiqis.org* reports on international news. Both websites have an active presence on US-based social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, which suggests—given that those platforms are inaccessible in mainland China—that these sites are targeting Chinese diaspora communities or overseas Chinese nationals.

Qiqi news network

The first website analysed in our dataset was *Qiqis.org*, which belongs to a group of websites with consistent branding and run by the *Qiqi News Network*, including:

- Hotqiqi.com
- Xqiqis.com
- Iqiqis.com
- Newqiqi.com
- Facebook-qiqi.com.

ASPI analysis found that these sites shared the same articles in 2017 but, over time, began covering different topics. For example, a sample of articles in May 2021 showed that *Hotqiqi.com* and *Xqiqis.com* reported mostly on political events occurring in the US and India, whereas *Iqiqis.com* and *Newqiqi.com* focused on military-related content. None of these websites has a publicly-accessible editorial policy, an 'about' page or a list of authors and staff associated with the website. *Qiqis.org* has published a total of roughly more than 23,000 articles since February 2017.[45]

Qiqi's news network is supported by several Facebook fan pages featuring similar profile pictures and cover photos (Figure 15). The fan pages also have similar names, such as 'Qiqi watches news' (琦琦看新聞),[46] 'Qiqi watches life' (琪琪看生活),[47] 'Qiqi reads history' (琪琪看歷史)[48] and 'Qiqi tells fortune' (琪琪看运势).[49] The fan pages have created a self-contained content-sharing ecosystem, promoting posts from within the *Qiqi News Network* or fan pages linked to it. The Qiqi ecosystem distributes content in both simplified Chinese (used in mainland China and many overseas Chinese communities) and traditional Chinese (mainly used in Taiwan and Hong Kong). The use of traditional Chinese across the Qiqi network suggests that this content is probably targeting audiences in Taiwan. There are, however, some give-aways that provide indications of the origins of the content. Articles on the network's websites use terms and phrases more common in mainland China and occasionally lapse into using the simplified Chinese characters used on the mainland. The network has also promoted CCP-aligned disinformation on the origins of the Covid-19 pandemic and on geopolitical topics such as Taiwan and Hong Kong, as well as targeting the US.[50]

Figure 15: Profile photos of Qiqi Network News Facebook pages

According to *The Reporter*, the *Qiqi News Network* can be traced back to pro-CCP Malaysian businessman Yee Kok Wai (余国威).[51] [52] Yee appointed himself as chairperson of the 'Global Chinese Alliance' (全球华人联盟) Facebook page, and, before starting Qiqi, created other content farm websites supportive of Chinese reunification, such as the *Global Chinese Weather Union* (全球華人風雲聯盟) and the *Global Chinese Taiwan Union* (全球華人台灣聯盟). Although there's no evidence that Yee is directly connected to the Chinese Government or Chinese state media, analysis by *The Reporter* of content on the Qiqi network and his interactions with others on Facebook suggest that he is broadly supportive of Chinese Government foreign policy positions. For example, Yee reportedly invited Chang Dong-nan, a member of Taiwan's Chinese Unification Promotion Party (CUPP, 中華統一促進黨), to become an administrator for the Global Chinese Alliance on Facebook.[53]

Australia Pacific Media Group

The second website in our analysis was an Australian-based news website. *Au123.com*, which is operated by the Australia Pacific Media Group (Pacific Media, 澳大利亚大洋传媒集团). Previous ASPI ICPC research revealed Pacific Media's close relationship with the CCP and Chinese state media:[54] Pacific Media signed a partnership in 2010 with *China News Service* (*CNS*, 中国新闻社),[55] which is China's primary state media outlet targeting overseas Chinese audiences and operates from within a bureau of the United Front Work Department.[56]

Articles on *Au123.com* are primarily in simplified Chinese and, according to our analysis, are shared more often on Chinese-based social media platforms, such as Weibo and WeChat (popular amongst Australia's Chinese diaspora community), than English-language platforms. The exact number of

Au123.com articles is unknown but, using Google's search indexing as a proxy, we estimate that there are at least 5,000 pages associated with the *Au123.com* domain.[57] We that found 38 articles were published per day on average over the three months from November 2020 to January 2021.

Measuring bias using computational linguistics

The large number of articles produced by both *Qiqis.org* and *Au123.com* makes manual analysis difficult; however, quantitative methods developed by DoubleThink Lab helped to reveal a correlation in output with CCP Government messaging on certain news and political topics.[58] We measured bias over a two-month period (December 2020 and January 2021) and found that relative spikes in bias indicated data points for further investigation. We focused on the period surrounding the Capitol Hill riot that occurred in Washington DC on 6 January 2021, as the data identified that as the highest peak in narrative alignment between *Au123.com*, *Qiqis.org* and Chinese diplomatic and state media messaging.

To measure narrative alignment and bias, we used the frequency of the top one thousand entities and word phrases in articles to compare publications by *Au123.com* and *Qiqis.org* with CCP diplomatic statements and state media articles. Entities are objects such as persons, organisations or locations and can be thought of as important nouns in sentences. They indicate what a media outlet chooses to report or not report on. The most frequently mentioned entities in articles published between 3 January and 10 January 2021 suggested that *Qiqis.org* and *Au123.com* articles were focused on topics including 'United States' (美国), 'Trump' (特朗普) and 'Congress' (国会大厦) (Figure 16).[59]

Figure 16: The similarity (sim) of entities such as 'Trump' or 'Congress' used in Qiqis.org articles to CCP text between 1 December 2020 and 22 January 2021[60]

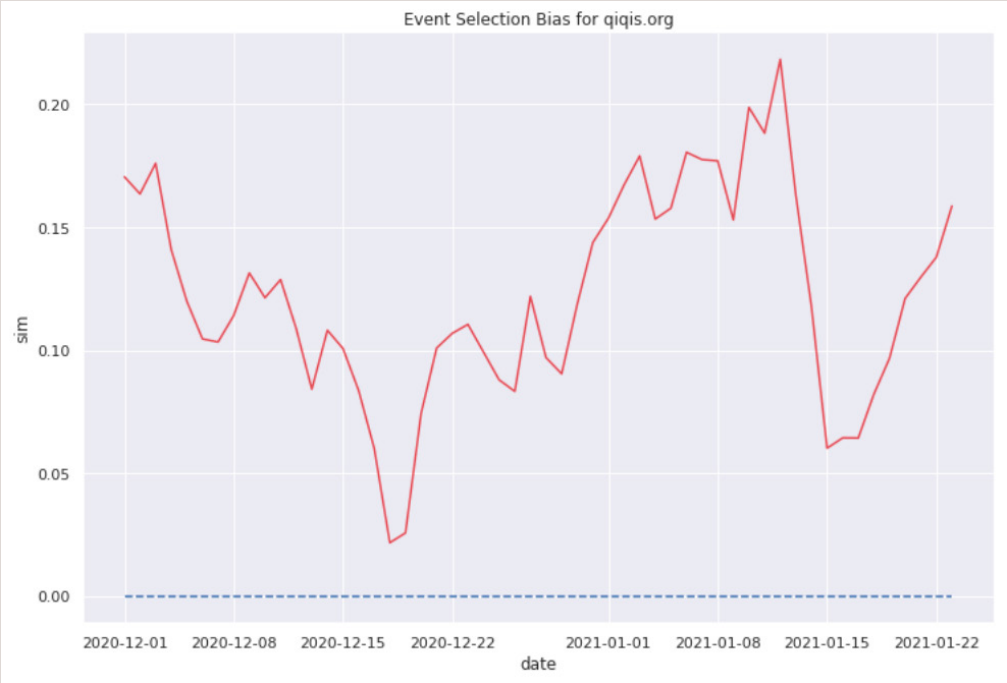
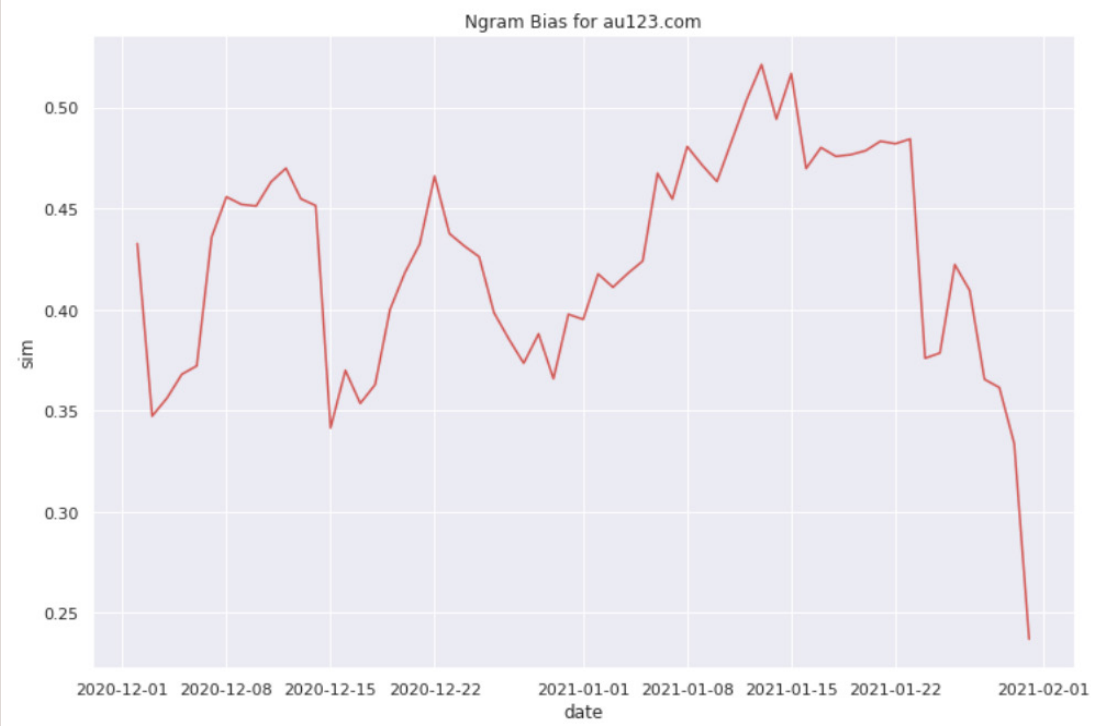


Figure 16 shows the similarity in term usage over the period between 6 and 10 January 2021. There was a relative increase in the similarity of entity usage in *Qiqis.org* articles and CCP text compared to the average similarity across the observed period.[61] This indicates that, in that period, *Qiqis.org* was more likely to be reporting on the same topics or events as CCP-linked sources (Figure 17).

Figure 17: The similarity (sim) of word phrases (ngrams) such as 'western media' or 'colour revolution' used in Au123.com articles to CCP messaging between 1 December 2020 and 1 February 2021[62]



In the period between 6 and 10 January 2021, there was a relative increase in the similarity of *Qiqis.org* and CCP word phrases compared to the average similarity across the observed period.[63] This indicates that, in that period, *Au123.com* was more likely to be using the same word phrases as CCP-controlled sources (Figure 17).

The Capitol Hill riot articles sampled from *Au123.com* and *Qiqis.org* and analysed were mostly factual between 3 January to 10 January 2021, but they did align in framing the riot as representative of flaws in US democracy. The discussion of US democracy in decline was not drastically different from global media framing, including by major news outlets in the United States,[64] but these Chinese-language articles largely presented the event as a symptom of a systemic issue in the US political system, as opposed to reporting that described the event as a product of the Trump administration or other interpretations. One article on *Qiqis.org* incorrectly claimed that Antifa, an anti-fascist group, had attacked the home of a US senator on 4 January 2021.[65] However, that false story cited 'US media reports' and originated from a misleading tweet by the US senator himself.[66] No correction or fact check was published by *Qiqis.org*.

Content analysis: *Qiqis.org*

Qiqis.org tended to publish more articles than *Au123.com* and had anonymised authors and sources. We analysed 31 articles written about the Capitol Hill riot on *Qiqis.org* between 3 January and 10 January 2021 and found that keywords such as 'American democracy' (美式民主), 'a beautiful sight to behold' (美丽的风景线) and 'liberty light tower' (自由灯塔) were often repeated, as were topics such as how the US was handling the Covid-19 pandemic and protesters breaking into Nancy Pelosi's office during the Capitol Hill riot. The headlines of some pieces were provocative, such as 'US media: The riots in Washington expose the hypocrisy of US law enforcement officials'[67] and 'US democracy is extremely ironic, the only weapon senators have is a pen'.[68]

As we have mentioned, there's no direct evidence to prove Qiqi's connections with the CCP. However, the content of the articles published by *Qiqis.org* showed a clear alignment with similar stories published by Chinese state media and narratives pushed by Chinese diplomats.

A beautiful sight (美丽的风景线)

Past remarks made about the Hong Kong protests by US politicians, including Nancy Pelosi, were turned into memes about the events of 6 January 2021. A number of CCP diplomats and state media journalists seized on Pelosi's June 2019 comment that a picture of a candlelight vigil in Hong Kong was 'a beautiful sight to behold', for example.[69] While Pelosi spoke about a vigil and commented before Hong Kong protesters broke into the Legislative Council in July 2019, her words were used to imply that she also endorsed violent action in Hong Kong. *China Daily* EU bureau chief Chen Weihua wrote that 'Nancy Pelosi referred to the violent Hong Kong mobs who threw petrol bombs and smashed stores "beautiful sight", I wonder what she would call this guy who just paid a visit to her office, not looking that violent at all?' (Figure 18).[70] *Global Times* editor-in-chief Hu Xijin used similar language (Figure 19).[71] Similar articles were also posted on *Qiqis.org* using the 'beautiful sight' terminology (Figure 20).

Figure 18: China Daily EU bureau chief Chen Weihua tweet, 8 January 2021

Source: online.

Figure 19: Tweet by Hu Xijin, editor-in-chief of the Global Times

Source: online.

Figure 20: A Qiqis.org article

美国前总统奥巴马为此也站出来发声，他说今天发生的"国会大厦"被攻击事件，是"由现任总统煽动的"，是美国"巨大的耻辱和蒙羞时刻"。

示威者在洛佩西办公桌前摆拍

更讽刺的是，美国众议院院长洛佩西曾称，示威游行是"一道美丽的风景线"。如今，美丽的风景线涌向洛佩西，她却跑了。

Translation: Demonstrators posing for photos at Pelosi's desk. Ironically, Pelosi, the President of the US House of Representatives, once called the demonstrations 'a beautiful sight'. Now, the beautiful scenery flocked to Pelosi, but she ran away. Source: online.

A 'beautiful sight' has become a key phrase used to criticise the flaws in American democracy. According to The China Media Project, 'a beautiful sight to behold' (美丽的风景线) was first used in the *People's Daily* on 27 August 2019, in a piece titled, 'Double standards with no bottom line'.[72] Since then, it's also been used to highlight perceived hypocrisy in how protests in the US and Hong Kong are considered. The phrase has been mentioned repeatedly in *Global Times* articles since the beginning of 2021, including articles that spotlighted US hypocrisy over the Black Lives Matter protests, for example.[73] Between March 2020 and March 2021 on Facebook, among public pages with administrators based in China, CrowdTangle data shows that a 10 January 2021 post by *Xinhua* news agency that used the phrase 'a beautiful sight' to similarly comment on perceived double standards received the most interactions—more than 30,000 likes, comments and shares.[74]

Those comments attempt to draw moral equivalence between the political systems of the US and China, and demonstrate the Chinese Government's attempt to stifle calls for democracy in Hong Kong by pro-democracy Hong Kongers and commentary by US-based media. One *Qiqis.org* article describes the inconsistency between using the words 'protestors' and 'pro-democracy protests' to describe the Hong Kong demonstrations while the Capitol Hill event involved 'riots', 'thugs' and 'mobs' (Figure 21).

Figure 21: Qiqis.org article titled 'Called a "thug" in the United States, and a "protester" in Hong Kong? What a double standard'

在美國叫"暴徒"，在香港叫"抗議者"？好一個雙標

by qiqinews 1月 8, 2021

"香港大规模逮捕政治人物和激进分子违反了《中英联合声明》！""中国在利用国安法误导世界！"
当地时间1月6日，英国外交发展大臣拉布在英国外交部的官网上如此表态。

英国对香港事务指手画脚也不是什么稀罕事了，而且几乎每次都是拿《中英联合声明》说事。中方也不只在一个场合谴责过英国的此类行径。

Source: online.

This key narrative was also supported by Chinese diplomatic accounts and English-language Chinese state media, including the *Global Times*, *China Daily* and *People's Daily* (Figure 22). On 8 January 2021, for example, foreign ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying commented on Twitter that the Capitol Hill rioters should be prosecuted to the fullest extent.[75] 'This shows that even in the #US, freedom is not limitless & there's a price to pay for abusing it,' she added. 'Then why should things unacceptable in the US be acceptable in #HK?'

Figure 22: Tweet by Lin Jing, the Chinese Consul-General in Cape Town

Source: online.

Content analysis: *Au123.com*

Our analysis of *Au123.com* content showed that its coverage of the Capitol Hill riot was more subtle than the coverage by overtly CCP-aligned media. Only 10 *Au123.com* articles identified in the 3 January to 10 January 2021 period focused on the Capitol Hill riot. Most of them were republished stories from *CNS* or *CCTV News*, Chinese state media outlets. One piece was authored by the *Australian Red Collar* (澳洲红领君), which is a youth news and opinion blog, and only one piece was authored by *Au123.com*.[76]

The decline of American democracy remained a common theme in *CNS* articles republished on the *Au123.com* website (Figure 23). One article read:

> With shooting, violence, and bloodshed as the main plot, with politicians, Trump supporters, and agents as the main actors, this 'big drama' clearly shows the fact that the self-made image of the United States as the 'beacon of democracy and freedom' has collapsed.[77]

Other articles quoted Republican Senator Mitt Romney and UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson to emphasise that the incident was 'shameful'.[78]

Figure 23: Au123.com article titled ‘After the chaos, will the US finally certify that Biden’s victory in the magic show will end?’, 8 January 2021

混乱后美国会终于认证拜登胜选 魔幻大戏何时结局?

2021-01-08 13:04:57 来源: 中新网

原标题：混乱后美国会终于认证拜登胜选魔幻大戏何时结局?

当地时间1月6日，美国华盛顿，支持特朗普的抗议者发起抗议示威。（图/中新网）

中新网1月7日报道，2021年开始不过几天时间，全世界见证了又一部美国政治“魔幻大片”的诞生。以枪击、暴力和流血为主要情节，以政客、特朗普支持者、特工为主要演员，这出“大戏”，向人们清晰地展现了一个事实，即“民主自由灯塔”美国自我塑造的形象，已经崩塌；从戴着“让美国再次伟大”帽子的民众打碎玻璃冲进国会的那一刻起，美国政治制度，失去了最后的体面。

Translation: Chinanews.com reported on January 7 that within a few days of 2021, the world witnessed the birth of another “magic blockbuster” of American politics. With shootings, violence, and bloodshed as the main plot, with politicians, Trump supporters, and agents as the main actors, this “big drama” clearly shows the fact that the “beacon of democracy and freedom” America’s self-made image has collapsed; from the moment the people wearing the hat of “make America great again” broke the glass and rushed into Congress, the American political system is in decline. Source: online.

Conclusion

ASPI ICPC and DoubleThink Lab’s joint investigation demonstrates how computational linguistics can offer a valuable approach to the analysis of online content distribution in which the framing of events is shaped by financial or ideological interests. In this study, we used open-source research to identify the incentive structures that drive content distribution on both the Qiqi network and *Au123.com*, as well as computational linguistics to analyse bias towards CCP messaging and choose avenues for further analysis. This novel combination of approaches provides a methodology to detect and investigate the outsourcing and obfuscation by state actors of propaganda distribution through commercial content farm operators. Analysing empirical data in this way can inform evidence-based assessments of foreign interference and information operations and the analysis of disinformation ecosystems.

3. How do content farms operate in the Asia–Pacific?

Jason Liu

In the six months before Taiwan's 2020 presidential and legislative elections, content portraying China favourably or supporting the Chinese Government's narrative on issues such as the Hong Kong protest movement bubbled up in Taiwanese LINE[79] groups. For example, content included news of Chinese 'flying trains' that could reach speeds of 4,000 kilometres per hour (three times the speed of airplanes) or high-speed trains with carriages made of bamboo. Taiwanese internet users could easily find this type of content on social media and messaging apps with links to content-farm websites.

This chapter explores the impetus and operations of a content-farm website owner who publishes controversial political content for pro-China politicians in Taiwan. The chapter is based on a month-long investigation consisting of interviews with two content-farm website owners, two political marketing agencies and members of political parties based in Taiwan, Singapore and Malaysia.[80]

As noted in the previous section, a content farm (or content mill) is a website that specialises in producing high-traffic articles, videos and images with very little original content. The business model is based on the generation of revenue via advertising or the contracting out of services to drive internet traffic and shape public opinion. The truth behind content farms' claims are often difficult to verify, and their creators use various legal and illegal means to create content. Content farms don't proactively manage content, and much of what they do violates copyright, is plagiarised or is minimally rewritten. However, due to the popularity of social media and messaging apps, content farms have a surprisingly large impact on some segments of the online audience in Taiwan.

In October and December 2019, Facebook aggressively targeted Taiwanese websites for 'content violation'. Hundreds of content farms were removed for violating Facebook's community guidelines. Among them was the small but well-known website called *Mission* (密訊) noted in the previous section. In April 2019, *Mission* set a record for the most shared website by Facebook users in a single week. Today, *Mission* continues to make waves in the 'pan-blue' community, which is more favourable to closer ties with mainland China.[81]

According to one of the owners of an international content-farm website, there are at least six major content farms operating from mainland China. There are also at least three major content-farm companies in Taiwan. The interviewee told me that one of the three Taiwanese companies could reach an audience of more than 100 million via Facebook fan pages and private social media groups.

I had successfully registered to be one of the contributors to two Chinese-owned content-farm websites before the Taiwanese presidential election in 2020 in order to understand how political content circulates for profit. Content-farm production websites are like blogs for thousands of people, providing a robust set of tools for users to create drafts, monitor revenue and view statistics. Each day, users on the platform make money by separately sharing content on their own social media pages and groups, allowing for wide dissemination.

There are two ways to make money on the platform. The first is for a user to share existing articles via his/her social media account. For a new contributor on the platform, the first step on many content-farm platforms is to share a certain number of articles before being able to create their own. A user can receive around 10 Singapore dollars (around A$10) for every thousand article views via his/her social media account. The second way is to write articles. What's unique is that there's a mechanism for authors to adjust the 'profit sharing ratios', which determine how much of the advertising revenue goes to the user who created the content versus the user who shared it. The profit model is inspired by the direct sale model, which incentivises the wide sharing of content.

Among all the contributors to the content-farm website, I met A-Hua (pseudonym), who works in an electronic component company but earns extra income from writing political posts online, running Facebook pages and managing content farms for advertising revenue. He said that he earns up to US$2,000 per month. Although it's very competitive and risky to run content farms in Taiwan now because of the Taiwanese Government's close attention to the issue, he's planning to contract an engineering team from China for NT$500,000 (approximately A$22,600) to build a video website—video being the latest popular format for content farms.

A-Hua was a participant in the White Justice union Facebook page opposing the 2014 Sunflower Movement. In 2016, he joined the pan-blue association called "Promotion of the Proper Direction for a Lawful Society in ROC". He also helped to create "Blue - White Slippers", a Facebook page which has over 30,000 followers and supports the KMT.[82] When talking about others in his line of work, he admits "sometimes you have to, you know, make things up".[83]

I talked to A-Hua by phone for nearly two hours in late 2019. He talked about key profitability factors for political content farms in Taiwan, different approaches to hiring cyber armies among major political parties, and how Chinese content-farm web platforms influence political messaging.

The content farm as a business

To create articles on his own content-farm website, A-Hua mostly copies news coverage from newsletters and mainstream media outlets, adds personal opinions, or includes untruthful information or controversial messages based on the target audience's political orientation. Then he shares the articles on social media. People share his content because it fits very well with their own ideology and perspective on developing news events. From his perspective, content farms often publish exaggerating or flamboyant comments to attract traffic from Facebook pages.

During the most profitable periods, he might earn more than his usual US$2,000 per month by updating more frequently and keeping up with the latest news. 'My Facebook page is always praising [KMT presidential candidate] Han Kuo-yu, claiming hundreds of thousands of people at his campaign events, and bashing [incumbent President] Tsai Ing-wen.'[84]

In the 2020 presidential election season, A-Hua claimed that there were some political parties that approached him to anonymously publish supportive comments online. However, he said, it was more difficult for amateur operators like him to profit from this election cycle because of the risk of suspension by the platforms during these periods of heightened scrutiny and content moderation.

Political parties and cyber armies

A-Hua claims that marketing agencies profit more than content farm operations. Certain 'political parties have commissioned campaign projects. Agencies collect online information and attack rivals. They earn up to NT$6 million [A$280,000] in each project, much higher than my website.' However, he wasn't interested in the business. 'I don't have a company,' said A-Hua, 'and I do not mobilise cyber armies.' A-Hua claims he rejects invitations from these political parties to campaign for them online.

People in the content-farm business often exchange information, he told me. A-Hua also claims that content farm owners will typically offer more favourable content to campaigns that align more with their personal ideology, despite receiving higher monetary incentives from other campaigns. 'Content farms operate with limited profitability. However, if you are louder (on social media) and extravagant to influence public opinions, [political campaigns are more likely to] approach you'.

Since online influence is a sensitive subject, politicians and their staff approach potential collaborators via agencies, friends or anonymous accounts, he alleged. 'They contact me proactively through emails or Facebook messages. These accounts are deleted regularly. If you are willing to work with them, they would meet with you.'

Author: In other words, you are not sure if money directly comes from these certain parties.

A-Hua: I don't really know … Those Facebook accounts are often from abroad.

Author: Will they offer money?

A-Hua: Not directly. They would invite me to campaign for them, and meet in person. The process is the same for both parties.

Author: Do these accounts still exist?

A-Hua: They are gone … They would send you notices to operate on current affairs topics, either on Facebook, YouTube or online forums, as long as you can influence public opinions.

The China factor

To run his content-farm business, A-Hua is using a specific online content-farm platform developed in China, but he's relatively conservative about China's information operations in Taiwan. He believes that the Chinese Communist Party's information manipulation has limited influence on Taiwanese elections. He also explains why content farms in the Chinese-speaking world rarely criticise the Chinese Government. Many content-farm operators come from Singapore or Malaysia, he says, and their information often comes from Weibo accounts in China. Besides information sources, many content farms are owned by Chinese people. 'These Chinese owners can easily delete posts if they are unhappy about content critical to China.' He started his own website partly because of censorship by Chinese owners, 'so I can criticise whoever I want'.

4. Disinformation production as big business in the Philippines

Dr Jonathan Corpus Ong

Disinformation production in the Philippines, particularly during elections, is professionalised and more financially motivated than ideologically driven.[85] A reality often missed in global media narratives and policy debates is that the country's disinformation ecosystem is driven by a range of incentives beyond political loyalties. The Philippines' political system is, after all, driven by 'weak parties / strong personalities'.[86] Unlike in other liberal democracies, where political parties are institutionalised and ideologically differentiated, political competition in the Philippines is driven by personal and factional issues.

Proposals to tackle disinformation in the Philippines have so far emphasised monitoring of foreign interference, fact-checking of false statements by social media influencers and support for media freedom.[87] At the global level, *Rappler* CEO Maria Ressa's lobbying for platform accountability has helped secure financial support and resources for embattled civil society and journalistic communities.[88]

Yet there's still minimal investigation of disinformation as big business in the Philippines, where:

- disinformation production is normalised and part of existing workflows within local creative industries
- high-level strategists acting as political consultants on short-term contracts operate with little oversight and strategically manoeuvre around regulations
- disinformation production follows distributed workflow arrangements rather than being centralised in the state or coordinated top-down by one firm or strategist.[89]

The Philippines is less than one year away from a presidential election. It's urgent that researchers, policymakers and the media deepen public understanding about the expansion and diversification of disinformation production, as politicians and their top strategic consultants have continued to evade accountability. It's also crucial that diverse pro-democracy actors collaborate more effectively, not only to pursue business-as-usual and siloed interventions from their various spaces, but to develop new tools to counter this problem and anticipate new challenges. Arguing for platform accountability should go hand in hand with developing technology regulation 'from below', including:

- election campaign laws
- advertising monitoring mechanisms
- industry self-regulation and oversight boards
- taxation mechanisms that could apply pressure to local disinformation entrepreneurs.

From platform accountability down to big business accountability

Pro-democracy campaigners arguing for platform accountability highlight the role of Facebook's Free Basics program in creating audiences primed for disinformation:

> In countries like the Philippines, Indonesia, Myanmar, when you get your cellphone, Facebook is automatically a default. That is your internet because it's free. So what happened in 2016 after the propaganda machine is fully formed is that they can so easily manipulate the people who are on Free Basics because all they see is the headline, and they can add anything on top of that headline. And when you click it, you have to pay, so Filipinos won't click it. They can't afford to. That then made it even easier to spread this information—forget it—to spread lies … Not just in the Philippines, in a lot of countries in South and East Asia, and a lot of countries in the global south, where the dangers are far greater than in the West because, in our countries, people are dying.[90]

The impact of Facebook on democracy in the Philippines and parallels to Trump's victory in the 2016 US presidential election are valid points of analysis, however President Duterte's 2016 election victory exploited real grievances and anxieties that ordinary people have with a political system controlled by a set of oligarchic elite families—grievances that Duterte's campaign promises recognised and exploited.[91] The Philippines' highly commercialised media system—because it comes with minimal government regulation and self-regulatory audit mechanisms—gives entrepreneurs low barriers of entry to the business of political campaigning.[92] They also have access to a surplus of cheap digital labour.

Strategists help politicians in the Philippines, both in and out of election cycles, by mobilising inauthentic social media profiles and seeding false narratives.[93] Digital campaigners' objectives can include:

- attention-hacking, which means generating false engagement in social media to influence the mainstream media and broader public agenda[94]
- undermining trust in the traditional 'elite' establishment, the political system, scientific and academic institutions, and mainstream media.[95]

Social media campaigners are often seasoned veterans in engineering viral campaigns for popular soft drink and fast-food brands in the country. They merely transpose tried-and-tested techniques of corporate attention-hacking into the political realm. They also personally benefit from fanning the flames of distrust against mainstream media figures, as they can assert themselves as agenda setters, including to the politicians and corporate brands they seek to enlist in their client portfolios.[96]

In some cases, campaigners are rewarded with prestigious political appointments, such as important government positions, making them even more difficult to challenge in regulatory battles. In other cases, campaigners benefit from politicians introducing them to corporate cronies. Many of those transactions are also designed to give politicians a level of plausible deniability. Sometimes strategists don't directly interface with the politician, and instead work through brokers or even businesspeople funding the politician's war chest.

Disinformation work models in the Philippines

The Philippines is distinct in the disinformation space because of the diversity of disinformation work occurring in the country. The disinformation industry in the Philippines is embedded within the political system and the creative industries. Many troll accounts featured in the media are low-level influencers or fake account operators. It's more challenging to demand political accountability from the high-level strategists orchestrating such campaigns. A few of those strategists are in fact happy to take credit for the electoral victories of their clients and actively seek publicity.[97]

Disinformation work models aren't mutually exclusive and, depending on the campaign being waged, can be deployed in various combinations. For example, state disinformation producers or political strategists may collaborate with specialists operating clickbait websites, just as local PR firms worked with Chinese business entities to promote specific political candidates in 2019.[98]

Another understudied feature of the Philippines disinformation ecosystem is the psychological and moral justifications of the diverse workers behind these shady campaigns. Most disinformation work in the country isn't ideologically driven, so many workers are able to distance themselves from the content they produce and the consequences of their campaigns.[99] The short-term and project-based nature of some campaign tasks also indicate that few people are employed as full-time trolls.

Developing coalitions to lobby for tech regulation 'from below'

We need a whole-of-society approach to the Philippines' disinformation industry, which engages content-farm workers, the social media platforms and the political establishment and deserves higher levels of transparency and accountability. Civil society groups, researchers and journalists can also help to engage private industry and work as independent auditors to have open and honest conversations about the ethics of their work and identify vulnerabilities in the current system. In recent multi-stakeholder meetings attended by the author along with other academics, civil society and private industry actors, younger professionals spoke up about unsavoury practices of their own PR firms in the most recent election cycle. There's potential here for broad pro-democracy coalitions that can include industry 'champions' who advocate for reform and better self-regulation systems and practices. For this to move forward, pro-democracy allies and foreign donors need to lend support to local civil society groups and researchers to advocate for tech regulation 'from below' through interventions such as the facilitation of industry self-reflection and self-regulation or investments that rechannel the Philippines' surplus of cheap digital labour into more productive forms of value creation. Interventions of that nature may tip the balance of digital production away from the powerful businesspeople who are invested in keeping the current system in place.

5. How Jokowi won the internet: influencers, buzzers and reducing opposition voices online

Dr Ross Tapsell

Social media and Jokowi's rise

To understand the rise and co-option of political influencers in Indonesia, you must first understand the role social media played in bringing Joko Widodo (otherwise known as Jokowi) to the presidency. Jokowi's rise as a 'polite populist' coincided with the rapid growth and ubiquity of social media usage among young, urban, middle-class Indonesians.[100]

In 2012, the year Jokowi became governor of Jakarta, Indonesia's capital was given the title of 'the world's most active Twitter city',[101] and Indonesians were the fourth largest nation population on Facebook.[102] The Jakarta election campaign was characterised by the emergence of social media volunteers, organised under the name JASMEV (the Jokowi Ahok Social Media Volunteers). Managed by public relations professionals, JASMEV was the start of a new form of campaign labour that later morphed into political 'buzzing' in Indonesia. In buzzing, political groups employ teams of social media campaigners who all work together as producers of political material to support a candidate or attack an opponent's credibility via numerous online platforms.[103]

This landscape has evolved into one in which funds flow freely to influencers and true 'grassroots' online campaigning and online voter backlash are reduced. Research by Indonesia Corruption Watch in 2020 found that the Indonesian Government has spent US$6 million to pay influencers to promote government policies on social media.[104] In response, the government said that those funds were used more broadly for public relations, not only for paying influencers. But, as the recent Omnibus Bill example showed, it's now standard practice to nurture, fund and direct certain influencers.[105] This is most evident in the significant funds going to the Indonesian National Police to frame public opinion online[106] and in the use of buzzers to support Indonesia's handling of the Papuan provinces, where a separatist movement is also using social media to promote its cause.[107]

Although former Indonesian president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono regularly engaged with social media (as did his wife), Jokowi's election victory in 2014 signalled the beginning of a more professional social media approach by political entities, in which public relations and advertising figures began to earn significant money advising and implementing social media strategies. Those strategies weren't just about promoting a candidate through their formal social media pages (although that was part of the work), but included fervent and direct attacks against their opponents, sometimes created 'organically' by supporters but encouraged by those more underground or 'subversive' elements, such as creating fake news sites online or producing and disseminating memes and infographics that are visually captivating and scandalous and thus spread widely on Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp.[108]

Soon, a political candidate's greatest fear was a smear campaign against them. The hiring of social media 'volunteers' became an essential part of an election campaign 'in order to counter' slanderous material.[109] Practices led by these PR firms and media strategists include managing multiple social media accounts, producing pseudo news pages and recruiting networks of prominent social media influencers who comment regularly on political affairs. Online campaign teams began to be known as

'bats' and 'tadpoles', finding a hashtag to promote each day and using multiple accounts to drive social media discourse in certain directions. If you could get celebrities with significant followings to promote those hashtags, all the better. Hashtags during a presidential debate, for example, may be driven by campaign teams saying their candidate has 'won' the debate, even before the debate has started.[110]

Countering opposition online

The election of Jakarta's Governor of 2017 was seen as a crucial precursor to the national elections that occurred two years later. For that election, the social media world for Indonesian politics took on a far more hostile form, as discourse was focused on race and religion, particularly given that Jakarta Governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, or 'Ahok', was accused of blasphemy. Various groups broadly defined as the 'Muslim Cyber Army' pushed identity politics agendas and were countered by aggressive pro-Ahok supporters online. Merlyna Lim described the discourse during this election as 'the freedom to hate'.[111] Ahok lost the election and was jailed for blasphemy during a campaign that saw the largest street protests in Indonesia in 20 years.[112] Ahok was also an ally of Jokowi, and much of the material spread by Muslim-themed accounts (including fake and slanderous content) was also directed at Jokowi.[113]

A campaign based on debates over the role of Islam in Indonesian politics and society meant that certain prominent male Islamic preachers[114] (and many female Islamic groups)[115] with large social media followings grew in power and influence in the aftermath of the Jakarta election. Preachers Abdul Somad and Felix Siauw, for example, have 4.7 million Instagram followers each. The rise of an 'oppositionist Islam' online presented a problem for the President and his parties, who considered themselves more 'pluralist' and were concerned about the impact these groups were having in discrediting the administration.

Security forces regularly and very publicly arrested members of the Muslim Cyber Army, often on the charge of violating Indonesia's 2008 Information and Electronic Transactions Act, which was created before the rise of social media and was fast becoming a *de facto* 'anti-fake-news' law.[116] Those actions were in many ways encouraged by Western media discourse, which portrayed such groups as a 'fake news operation',[117] as 'cyber-jihadist'[118] and as 'weaponising'[119] religious sentiment in Indonesia's cyberspace. This process of winning over critics also included ensuring that Islamic groups within universities were no longer encouraging students to join those online networks, which involved arresting some lecturers and even removing certain vice-chancellors.[120] Once among the most powerful online groups in Indonesia, by the time the 2019 election year began they were all largely arrested, broken up, or had seen their capacity to influence online conversations minimised greatly.

Islamic preacher-influencers were encouraged to stay out of politics. Ustadz Abdul Somad, for example, declared his neutrality in 2018 'for fear of being implicated in spreading hoax and hate speech—perhaps because the police seemed to be increasingly targeting religious preachers from Prabowo's camp on hate speech and defamation charges'.[121] But in some cases they were encouraged to be part of the pro-Jokowi team, even by making them think they could be Vice-President.[122] By the time the 2019 election campaign was in full swing, most of those preachers had either endorsed Jokowi or at least didn't publicly oppose him.[123] At the same time, various 'moderate' online sites had been explicitly set up to target Muslim voters and to counter the influence of the Islamic preachers. One example is Islami.co, which was created by the Muslim organisation Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), which also owns *NU online* (www.nu.or.id). Indonesia's current Vice-President, Ma'ruf Amin, was the chairman of the NU, and NU support was considered crucial to Jokowi's 2019 election victory.

The NU-run sites were praised by Westerners for promoting a tolerant Islam and 'fighting fake news', and indeed they do.[124] However, their purpose isn't independent journalism, so criticism of the current administration's policies on those sites remains rare.

But it's not only Islamists that the Jokowi administration has sought to negate online. In 2019, student protests erupted in Jakarta (the largest since the Jakarta election demonstrations described above) driven by anger against sweeping changes to labour laws and other agendas in the so-called Omnibus Bill. Again, the 'carrot' was given to influencers to promote the bill. Despite the administration's initial denials, 22 celebrities were paid between US$100–650 (in funds that weren't publicly disclosed) to promote the bill.[125] And the pro-government buzzers got to work, driving the #Indonesiabutuhkerja or #Indonesiansneedswork hashtags.

The 'stick' was applied to leading student activists. The government, including the President himself, placed much of the blame for the protests on hoaxes and disinformation spread on social media, in what's been described by Australian National University political scientist Edward Aspinall as a 'contemporary twist' to a 'similar script' of past repressions of student movements.[126] Activists began to complain that their accounts were being hacked. Journalists wrote that Indonesian cyberspace was becoming 'a dystopian nightmare'.[127] Again, it seemed to work. As the Covid-19 pandemic raged, the bill was passed in 2020 without further disruptions.

The Indonesian Government's efforts to reduce dissent online from various Islamist groups and student protesters involves a network of law enforcement to locate and prosecute individual critics and even in extreme cases hack activist accounts. At the same time, the administration has looked to drown out dissenting voices via social media 'buzzer' teams and paid influencers.

Jokowi has seemingly 'won' the internet in Indonesia, but at what cost?

The consequences of 'winning' the internet

The Indonesian case shows us important conclusions that have global repercussions for online political discourse. One of these is the ability of so-called 'pro-democratic' candidates to easily use anti-democratic methods online. Faced with backlash from citizens via new digital technologies, Jokowi's government ever-so-quickly used a more securitised approach to online discourse. The mobilising of 'teams' of social media campaigners beyond an election period and continuing throughout the presidency to promote government policy and counter dissenting views suggests a government highly sensitive to any form of criticism. Despite having incorporated opposition leader Prabowo into Jokowi's coalition (and in 2020, Prabowo's running mate, Sandiaga Uno), the Jokowi administration still seems highly concerned with negating—and arresting—online 'opposition' voices. Perhaps in response to concerns about those developments, and in a sign that the approach had worked, in February this year Jokowi announced that he would ask the parliament to look into revising the Information and Electronic Transactions Act and ordered the national police chief to be more 'selective' in responding to violations of the law.[128] It remains to be seen whether any action is taken further.

As the surveillance of the digital realm by authorities becomes more widespread, the online nexus of power will shift increasingly to closed group chats and tighter online networks.[129] What might look like a lack of opposition in public online spaces could mask the discontent found in closed groups on Facebook, WhatsApp and other messenger apps. As the pandemic spreads, unemployment grows and bills get passed without meaningful debate in parliament, it's hard to see these elite social media influencer voices distracting Indonesians for long.

Recommendations

Commercial influence-for-hire services will continue to proliferate for as long as there's a market for them and cheap digital labour to deliver their services. This creates risks for societies that aspire to meaningful democratic participation and opportunities for foreign interference. A manipulated information environment doesn't serve democracy well. It's particularly harmful to societies that are emerging from historically more authoritarian forms of governance, have weak democratic governance, fragile civil societies, or any combination of those factors.

To ensure that the information environment and digital economy best align with democratic forms of governance, we recommend the following:

Multi-stakeholder 'whole-of-society' approaches

The disruption caused by digitally enabled political participation can be managed most productively by bringing together stakeholders to find partnership-driven solutions. An adversarial approach between governments and the companies that provide the infrastructure for the digital economy will constrain the benefits of innovation, while an entirely market-driven approach won't mitigate social disruption. Policy innovations and societal and regulatory norms can best be co-created through structures that bring together government, industry and civil society to engage with the shifting relationship between state and citizen created by digital disruption.

Capacity building focused on civil society and democracy

Democracies and industry must partner to fund capacity-building programs that bolster civil society organisations in emerging democracies in the Asia–Pacific region. Civil society organisations can work to apply transparency to state manipulation of the information environment. The region is diverse and contains countries along a spectrum of democratic development. Democracy, however, is under pressure in the region from the contest of values emerging from great-power competition, from digital and economic disruption, and from the health crisis and social pressures created by the Covid-19 pandemic. These activities can emphasise how social media can play a valuable role in engaging citizen participation in elections and political decision-making. Such programs can assist in delineating acceptable boundaries for political campaigning, state-funded public messaging campaigns and foreign interference.

An Asia–Pacific centre of excellence in democratic resilience

An Asia–Pacific centre of excellence in democratic resilience could provide a vehicle for public–private multilateral partnerships designed to maintain the health of the region's online public sphere. Such a centre could be supported at the government level by the ongoing Quadrilateral Security Dialogue between Japan, India, Australia and the US.[130]

Political commitment

A healthy online public sphere requires political will. Political candidates should formally commit to treating campaigning as a mode that's distinct from engagement with citizens when in government. Transparency about government funding of public messaging when in office would allow citizens and civil society to engage with trust in the digital public sphere. Political representatives should commit to not using networks of inauthentic, fake or repurposed social media accounts to manipulate political discourse.

Platform accountability

Platforms could implement country-specific oversight committees to manage prominent account bans, to ensure the consistent application of content moderation policies to capture inauthentic behaviour, and to participate in mandatory transparency reporting.

Stronger collaboration between governments and industry

Government and industry could work together to develop policies and initiatives that offer digital entrepreneurs pathways beyond low-cost content-farm work and that reward ethical content creation. The influencer economy could be encouraged to self-regulate through the development of codes of conduct.

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62 Word choice bias, or n-gram bias, is similar to entity bias but instead considers n-grams, which are two- or three-word phrases. Unlike entities, n-grams may include adjectives and other descriptive words that indicate how an entity is portrayed. We selected the top 1,000 most frequent entities in our analysis and compared the frequency of the most popular n-grams/ phrases used in the articles containing those entities for the two news outlets and CCP text.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CEO	chief executive officer
CNS	*China News Service*
CUPP	Chinese Unification Promotion Party (Taiwan)
DPP	Democratic Progressive Party
EU	European Union
JASMEV	Jokowi Ahok Social Media Volunteers
KMT	Kuomintang
MPOC	Malaysian Palm Oil Council
NGO	non-government organisation
NU	Nahdlatul Ulama
Pacific Media	Australia Pacific Media Group
UK	United Kingdom

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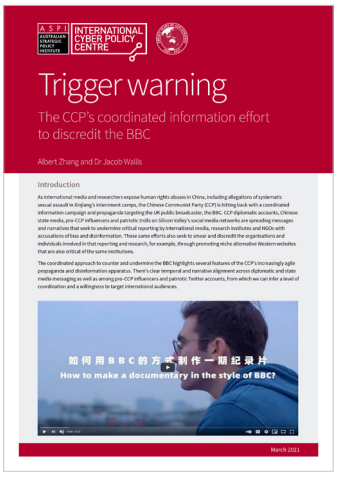

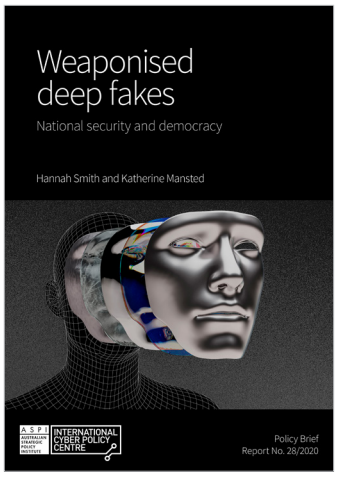

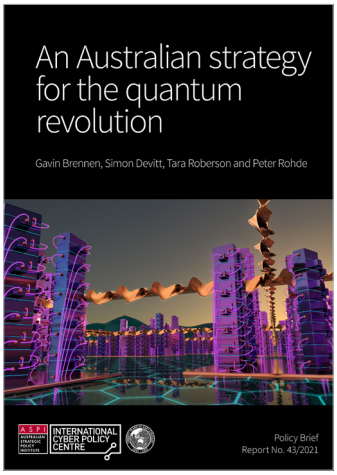

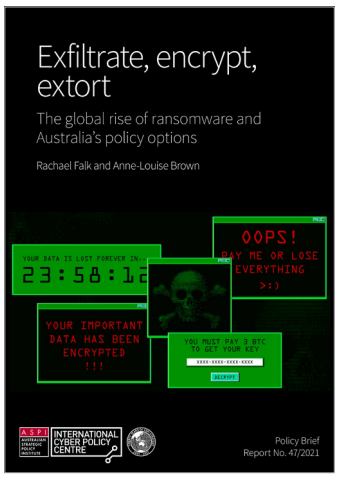

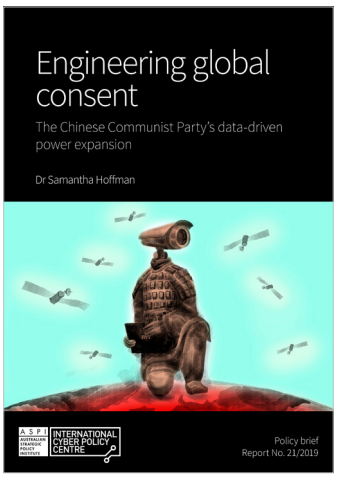

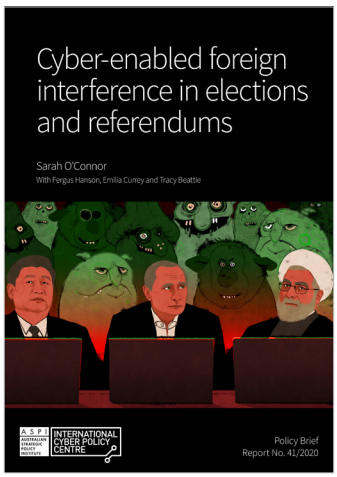

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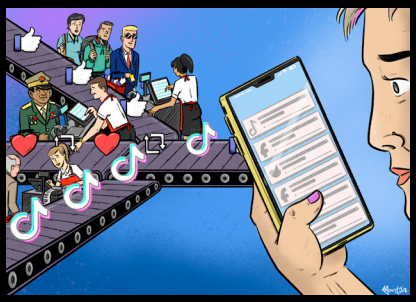
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