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# POLITICS AND PROFIT IN THE FAKE NEWS FACTORY

## FOUR WORK MODELS OF POLITICAL TROLLING IN THE PHILIPPINES

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# **POLITICS AND PROFIT IN THE FAKE NEWS FACTORY**

**FOUR WORK MODELS OF POLITICAL TROLLING  
IN THE PHILIPPINES**

” This report synthesises findings based on over three years of ethnographic research, during which we gained unprecedented access to authors of fake news and producers of disinformation campaigns.

## 1. Introduction

The Philippines represents a national context where disinformation is becoming ever more entrenched into the political system, in spite of global attention and investment in the fight against fake news. Three years ago, a toxic election campaign headlined by misogynistic rape jokes, false papal endorsements, and imposter news websites ended with a surprise outcome that upended the entire political establishment. In the May 2019 midterm election, new interventions such as platform bans, fact-check partnerships, and digital advertising rules were introduced to curb the spread of similar tactics.

Recent research discovered, however, that the digital disinformation industry has only further expanded and flourished, with digital operators controlling a more substantial chunk of the political campaign war chest.

As the Digital Disinformation Tracker project found from its monitoring of the 2019 election,<sup>1</sup> influence operations in the Philippines have intensified and diversified: both administration and opposition candidates mobilised their click armies, national and local races were affected by fake scandals insinuated by conspiratorial YouTube channels and seeded in Facebook closed groups. Even Instagram celebrities promoted politicians in between posts endorsing clothing brands or holiday destinations.

Worryingly for the rest of the world, recent reports suggest that the fast-growing digital disinformation industry in the Philippines is set to export its services to a more global clientele.<sup>2</sup> The May elections showed that the more entrepreneurial actors in the country’s disinformation industry have



learned to play cat-and-mouse games with platforms and fact-checkers, evading detection while maximising profits from opportunistic clients. If these disinformation workers go on to offer their services as consultants, producers, and click army suppliers for politicians elsewhere in the world, their damaging effects would be amplified globally.

As the Philippines is at the forefront of digital innovation for political trolling in today's polarised and contentious political environment, it is crucial to reflect on lessons gleaned from that experience to help us anticipate, and possibly mitigate, the continued evolution and expansion of disinformation in other democracies. As one Facebook executive said, the Philippines is 'patient zero' in the global disinformation epidemic,<sup>3</sup> and many election integrity interventions have been tested here with the aim of exporting them to other countries.

This report synthesises findings based on over three years of ethnographic research, during which we gained unprecedented access to authors of fake news and producers of disinformation campaigns who provided long-form interviews.<sup>4</sup> The main aim of this report is to shed light on the variety of work arrangements of digital political trolling that continue to hide in plain sight.

We concentrate on three organisational models of disinformation production we observed in our research, namely 1) the in-house staff model, 2) the advertising

and PR model, and 3) the clickbait model. We also reference the features of a fourth model of disinformation production—the state-sponsored model of disinformation—drawing on secondary data from journalistic investigative reports on digital campaigns used to promote state policy, delegitimise dissenters, and attack opposition figures.

Mapping out the work arrangements and financial reward structures used by the disinformation industry enables us to understand the spectrum of political and commercial motivations that fuel fake news campaigns, which in turn allows us to generate policy recommendations to counter digital disinformation. Such policies must involve insights not only from national institutions, but also civil society groups, the media, big tech, and academia.

Our study reveals political trolling as an ever-expanding and financially lucrative industry with established work hierarchies, reach and engagement metrics, and monetisation strategies that do not require a dark web to support a black market. The fake news industry in the Philippines is thriving because of the complicity of politicians and industry players in the political consultancy business, advertising and PR firms, and the digital influencer industry. Taking this broader perspective enables us to zoom out from present-ist explanations that attribute the fake news epidemic in the Philippines to the current administration or certain villainous personalities as the main 'purveyors of fake news'.<sup>5</sup>



” Ultimately, this report argues that disinformation is not produced in a vacuum with a centralised chain of command.

Ultimately, this report argues that disinformation is not produced in a vacuum with a centralised chain of command; it requires collaboration and competition among various types of workers in distributed labor arrangements that offer clients and strategists a level of plausible deniability regarding responsibility for the real consequences of their hateful speech or conspiratorial messages. Just as the studies it builds on, this report takes a production studies approach to digital disinformation—examining this phenomenon as a ‘culture of production’,<sup>6</sup> paying attention to the cultural roots, creative industry logics, and political system vulnerabilities that have enabled ‘fake news’ innovations and angry populism to land on well-prepared ground.

We listened to fake news producers describe their intentions and experiences in their own words. They shared the stories of how they came to work in the digital underground, which provided some insights into how they could sleep at night knowing

the work that they did. We compared their accounts with our own observations of the conditions in which they work, including pay structure, work hours, and the locations from which they operated their troll accounts—from call-center-like offices to five-star penthouses. This allowed us to build models of disinformation production that are inherently social, underscoring how the different workers drew on institutional knowledge, professional skills, and interpersonal relationships as they innovated techniques of political deception.



” The country has been labelled ‘patient zero’ of the global epidemic of disinformation.

## 2. Political Campaigning in the Context of the Philippines Today

The perfect storm that has led the Philippines to become one of the world’s most cutting-edge testbeds for digital disinformation can be traced to the confluence of three factors: (1) the country’s image-based political system, (2) the rise of its entrepreneurial and digitally savvy, yet precariously placed workforce, and (3) the growing resentment of populist publics towards the political establishment.

**Image-based politics.** As is the case today in most electoral democracies, contemporary politics in the Philippines is strongly image-based.<sup>7 8 9</sup> The country’s political contenders, who mostly come from elite backgrounds, do not and cannot differentiate themselves

based on ideology or issues. Instead, they seek to cultivate the ‘right image’—branding themselves to resonate with the masses.<sup>10</sup> Because of the intense pressure to secure a popular base and discredit the opposition, political campaigning in the Philippines is firmly rooted in the unscrupulous and well-entrenched practices of political spin and promotional marketing, now largely through digital disinformation.

**Digitally savvy workforce.** The rise of the Philippines’ digitally savvy workforce has also inadvertently contributed to digital disinformation in the country. As one of the leading producers of digital disinformation in the country put it, having so much human



talent at their disposal is like sitting on 'stockpile of digital weapons'.<sup>11</sup> The country has now become one of the world's premier business capitals—not only for business process outsourcing (BPO) but also for online platform labor.<sup>12</sup> In recent years, the Philippines has expanded its inventory of digital expertise to include jobs such as web design, digital marketing, and data analytics.<sup>13</sup>

Unfortunately, many of the digital workers in the Philippines face precarious labor conditions, which makes workers vulnerable to slipping into the digital underground and finding themselves party to unsavory digital political operations. The country's digital labor sector is especially plagued by the mismatch between its highly educated and young workforce and the low-prestige and low-skilled occupations that are available to them.<sup>14</sup> Not only are these jobs 'based on a narrow job description and offer only limited opportunities for acquisition of knowledge and skills replicable in other professions', but they also offer poor prospects for long-term employment.<sup>15</sup>

**Resentment of populist publics.** The rise of digital disinformation in the Philippines must also be understood in light of the unprecedented increase in the intensity

of resentment against the political establishment expressed by the country's populist public.<sup>16</sup> As mentioned earlier, the country has been labelled 'patient zero' of the global epidemic of disinformation, as the world's so-called social media capital<sup>17</sup> saw the proliferation of fake news and trolling months ahead of the more talked about events of the 2016 US presidential elections and Brexit vote.

Many commentators link the toxicity of today's Philippines social media with the success of national-level politicians who have played up their populist political style to great effect.<sup>18 19</sup>

They say that the political atmosphere created opportunities for organised, paid trolls to do the work of amplifying this populist style. Such rhetoric has found fertile ground among many Filipinos, who harbour genuine discontent about the fact that, despite repeated promises of political reform, the country continues to be mired in an oligarchic elite rule.<sup>20,21</sup> Digital disinformation has greatly contributed to legitimising uncivil political expression online and to unleashing that toxic incivility on social media in the Philippines at a level we have never seen before.

## FACTORS THAT HAVE AFFECTED DISINFORMATION SPACE IN THE PHILIPPINES



Image-based politics



Digitally savvy workforce



Resentment of populist publics





” Each of these models occupies a place on what we call the ‘politics-profit spectrum’, from those that are primarily state-driven to those that are primarily commercially driven.

### 3. The ‘Politics-Profit Spectrum’: Organisational Models of Political Trolling in the Philippines

Drawing on our analyses of the digital campaigns in the 2016 Philippines national elections and the 2019 Philippines midterm elections,<sup>22</sup> this chapter presents three emerging disinformation models we personally observed: (1) the in-house staff model, (2) the advertising and PR model, and (3) the clickbait model. We show that each of these production models occupies a place on what we call the ‘politics-profit spectrum’, from those that are primarily state-driven to those that are primarily commercially driven. We also discuss a fourth model of disinformation production: (4) the state-sponsored model, which we extracted from mainstream media reports on how the current government generates its own fake news.<sup>23</sup>

At the onset, **it is important to emphasise that the three digital disinformation production models are not mutually exclusive.** Depending on the campaign being waged, they can be deployed in various combinations. For example, state disinformation producers or political strategists may collaborate with specialists operating clickbait websites.

It is also worth saying that our shortlist of organisational models is by no means exhaustive. If the 2019 midterm elections were any indication of future trends, then rapidly increasing proliferation and innovation in the weaponisation of digital disinformation is set to continue, at least into the near future.



Four emerging disinformation models:



	State-Sponsored Model	In-house Staff Model	Advertising and PR Model	Clickbait Model
<b>Politics-Profit Mix</b>	Political.	Political.	Both political and profit-driven.	Primarily profit-driven.
	<i>Strategists' authority or job positions are dependent on maintaining popular support for the current administration</i>	<i>Staffers sometimes take on fake account operations as an add-on to their primary work, sometimes with no additional pay</i>	<i>Chief strategists can be rewarded with official government positions and an expanded social network of powerful political and business figures</i>	<i>Revenue is dependent on advertising technology measuring pay-per-click and web traffic</i>
<b>Leadership and Strategic Direction</b>	Controlled by the chief of communications	Controlled by the chief of staff	Controlled by chief strategist, enlisted as an outsourced project-based consultant	Commercially driven, guided by social media 'engagement' metrics
<b>Client</b>	The Philippine state	Incumbent politician or political contender	Politician, party, or political donor	No direct political clients initially, but campaign partnerships developed over time
<b>Revenue Stream</b>	Government funds	Government funds if incumbent; politician's and donors' funds if contender	Corporate and political projects	Advertising technology (Google AdSense; Facebook Instant Articles; YouTube Ads)
<b>Categories of Workers</b>	Lead Strategist; Writers	Chief of Staff; Administrative Workers	Strategists; Influencers; community-level Fake account Operators	Administrators and a creative team of Researchers, Writers, and Social Media Community Managers
<b>Main Objectives</b>	Discredit opposition voices;  mobilize support for administration policy	Defend their politician against attacks;  attack opponents; create illusions of support and engagement for a politician	Image-building; avert scandal; divert public attention; engineer virality; hack public attention	Maintain high engagement to articles via likes and shares; grow follower base of social media page; generate revenue from ad tech
<b>Data Source</b>	Rappler reports <sup>24</sup>  Vera Files <sup>25</sup>	Architects of Networked Disinformation <sup>26</sup>  Digital Disinformation Tracker <sup>27</sup>	Architects of Networked Disinformation <sup>28</sup>  Digital Disinformation Tracker <sup>29</sup>	Digital Disinformation Tracker <sup>30</sup>



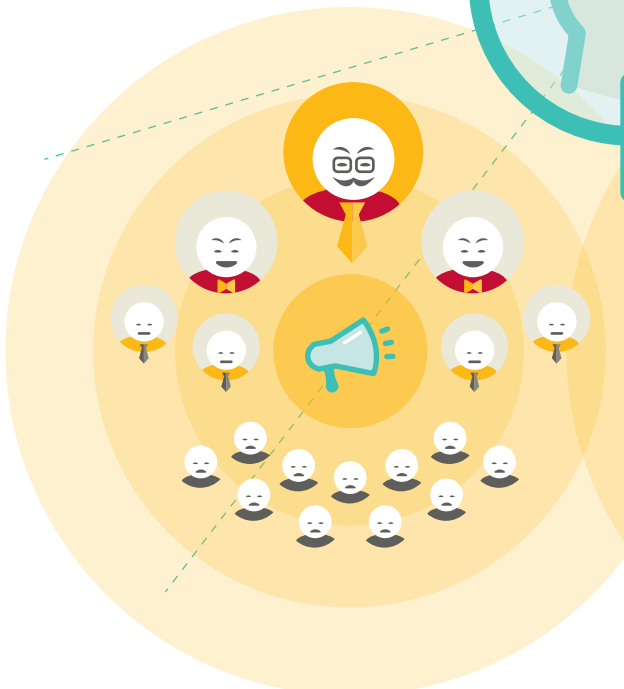
State-sponsored model



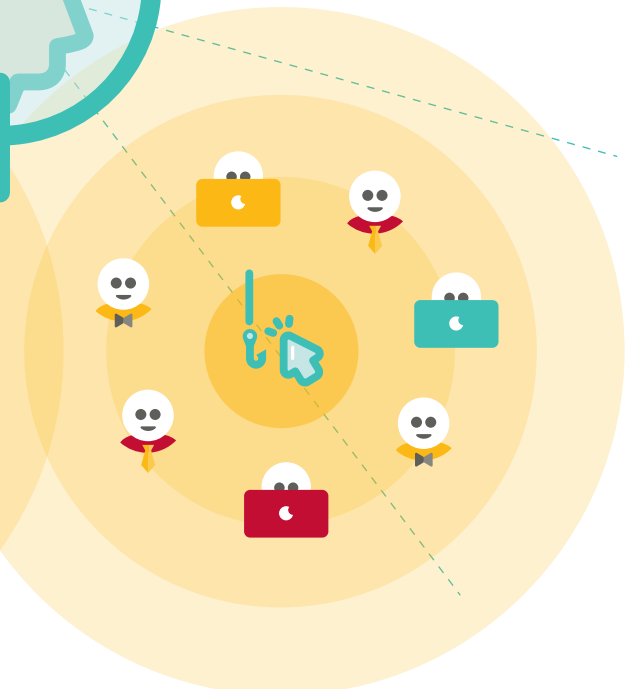
In-house staff model



Advertising and PR model



Clickbait model



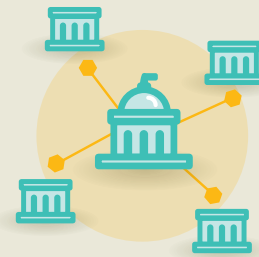
# The State-sponsored Model of Disinformation Production



**Background.** The state-sponsored model of disinformation often reported on by news agencies such as Rappler is a top-down model of disinformation production with a centralised chain of command; it involves cooperation among various government agencies to consolidate political authority and legitimacy while muffling opposition voices.

**Structure.** The state-sponsored model and its techniques of formal intimidation and digital bullying lead to silencing, self-censorship, and chilling effects among dissenters and the public at large. Journalistic reports about the state-sponsored propaganda model assume intentionality from the President himself to intimidate and harass his critics. His message is taken forward by a so-called 'keyboard army',<sup>31</sup> consisting of hyper-partisan political pundits, social media influencers, and fans who call themselves diehard supporters'.<sup>32</sup>

**Consequences.** State-sponsored propaganda has chilling, far-reaching effects that come about through official intimidation as well as online trolling and harassment. Executive powers have been used to intimidate media practitioners, opposition figures, and activists, block the re-licensing of television networks, and ban individual journalists and outlets from attending official functions.



## Background

A top-down model of disinformation production with a centralised chain of command. The model involves cooperation among various government agencies to consolidate political authority and legitimacy while stifling opposition voices.



## Structure

Model assumes intentionality from the President to intimidate and harass critics. His message is taken forward by a so-called "keyboard army" hyper-partisan political pundits, social media influencers, and so-called fans.



## Consequences

Far-reaching effects through official intimidation as well as online trolling and harassment. The state-sponsored model leads to silencing, self-censorship, and chilling effects among dissenters and the public at large.

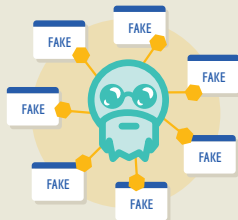


## The In-house Staff Model



### Background

The most common model. The chief of staff in a politicians' office typically leads an in-house staff to conduct disinformation campaigns.



### Structure

Consists of confident veterans of political campaigning and chiefs of staff who usually lead by example. The chiefs of staff require their team to take on additional troll work, regardless of their official designation and without extra pay. They usually take a stick-over-carrot approach.



### Consequences

This model leads to a normalisation of online political trolling, and it forces compliance from the junior in-house staff.

**Background.** Situated at the heart of the offices of many local and national politicians, the In-house Staff Model is the most common kind of political trolling arrangement we saw in our research. Supported primarily by government funds for incumbents and by personal or donor funds for challengers, it is also the least commercially-oriented model, and the most politically motivated.

This model is typically led by the chief of staff in a politicians' office. Such individuals are battle-hardened from their years of experience in the dirty work of traditional media campaigning—from political mudslinging to astroturfing media materials to bribing journalists.<sup>33</sup> Bringing their traditional media savvy to online campaigns, they use digital disinformation as a shadowy extension of their official online pages. To help with this work, a chief of staff will compel their administrative staff to maintain a handful of fake Facebook accounts to boost support for their candidates, to parry critiques against them, and to attack their opponents.

**Structure.** Confident veterans of political campaigning, chiefs of staff usually lead by example in the In-house Model. They maintain at least a couple of fake Facebook accounts to bolster the social media image of their political principals and to troll the accounts of their political opponents.



They then require the administrative staff working under them to do the same. They also require these staff to do offense and defense work for their principals in the closed Facebook groups that they have infiltrated.

The chiefs expect their staff to take on this additional trollwork, regardless of their official designation and without extra pay. To ensure this happens, they usually take a stick-over-carrot approach. The staff is told that this work is a precondition for promotion. They are reminded that doing this work shows they possess the prized Filipino traits of *pakikisama* [ensuring smooth interpersonal relationships] and *utang na loob* [fulfilling the debt of obligations]. This strategy is especially effective for motivating younger staff members who are fresh out of university and are eager to play a bigger role in Philippine politics.

Many staff members do take on such work. One interviewee told us that their chief of staff's own disinformation work emboldened them to troll an opposing candidate's Facebook page with a witty hashtag that exaggerated his ineptitude in managing the city's disaster response program. The more idealistic staffers, however, find that their hearts and spirits are broken by this kind of work. One young staffer could not say so directly, but her stories indicated that she fought against this disinformation work by intentionally sabotaging her own fake account. Unlike her other colleagues who maintained 'bikini troll' accounts luring

500 new friends with overtly sexual profile pictures, her account only had twenty Facebook friends.

**Consequences.** The dynamics cultivated among political office staff in the In-house Model normalise political trolling online. Because a chief of staff knows how dirty campaigns in traditional media can be, he has no compunction about wallowing in the dirty tactics of social media politicking—it's just the latest iteration of what has always been done. More dangerous, however, is that digital disinformation work becomes necessary for junior staff to advance through the ranks. As one interviewee said, they do their best to cope with the work environment through humorous banter, making light of their situation. Those who cannot cope are then forced to leave their jobs. The younger staffer we talked to put it this way: 'It was like a roller coaster ride I didn't sign up for!'





# The Advertising and Public Relations Model



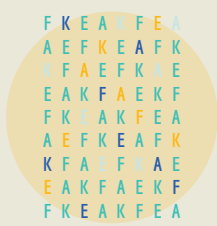
## Background

Politicians and their private donors outsource trolling jobs to disinformation consultants for hire who are motivated by commercial interests.



## Structure

Hierarchical, but loosely networked, ad hoc digital disinformation teams. The team generally consists of three tiers of disinformation producers.



## Consequences

The producers can minimise and displace any moral responsibility for the social media toxicity and democratic decay to which they contribute.

**Background.** The commercial imperative for political trolling comes to the fore in the Advertising and PR Model. In this model, politicians and/or their private donors outsource trolling jobs to disinformation consultants for hire. These consultants are invariably ad and PR experts at the cutting edge of weaponizing industry techniques for the political arena.<sup>34</sup> Although they profess to be working more passionately for clients whose politics align with theirs, they can work simultaneously with people from opposite political camps or even switch mid-stream from one camp to another. These consultants are adept at catapulting the image of their clients to public prominence. And they are also experienced in torpedoing the public reputation of their clients' opponents. These consultants often head local 'boutique' agencies, smaller PR firms handling mostly national or local accounts that are also more flexible to taking 'dark money' from political clients. In the shadows of their legitimate corporate and celebrity campaigns, they assemble a team of political disinformation producers who work together on a per project basis.

**Structure.** In the Advertising and PR Model, political trolling is done through hierarchical but loosely networked ad hoc digital disinformation teams. Our research shows that each of these teams generally consists of three tiers of disinformation producers.

At the helm of this hierarchy are the consultants or 'chief disinformation architects', who play two key roles in disinformation work.



The first is to strategise and orchestrate the transposition of tried-and-tested industry techniques such as reputation-building and spin into digital disinformation campaigns for their political clients. This includes crafting branding-oriented ‘campaign plan designs’ and media plans for ‘click army mobilisation’. The other is to use their professional image to lend an aura of respectability to political troll work as they broker deals between their political clients and the disinformation producers who collaborate with them. In this role, they deploy corporate marketing terms such as ‘supplemental pages’ and ‘digital support workers’ to describe what is otherwise known as ‘fake news sites’ and ‘paid trolls’.

Occupying the second tier of the hierarchy are the ‘anonymous digital influencers’— usually aspirational middle-class digital workers moonlighting as operators of anonymous accounts that command 50,000 or more followers on Twitter and Facebook. These digital influencers do the promotional labor for their lead consultants, translating conceptual strategies into actual social media posts that can mobilise public sentiment in the favour of their political clients. They pepper their messages and memes with popular vernaculars—from local pop culture references to snarky gay humor to gutter language—in order to make their clients’ campaigns trend on Twitter or go viral on Facebook.

Those at the lowest tier of the hierarchy are the ‘community-level fake account operators’. They are precarious workers from the middle-class whose task is to share and amplify core campaign messages in the online communities and Facebook groups they have

infiltrated, creating illusions of engagement that fan the zeal of the actual supporters of their political clients.

**Consequences.** A key manifestation of the strong commercial orientation of the Advertising and PR Model is the competition both within and among the digital disinformation teams. In a bid to impress political clients, the lead consultants use a matrix of reach and engagement to incentivise the digital producers under them to do whatever it takes create the most trending and viral campaigns. The unfortunate effect of this is that the producers sometimes create digital content that can be, among many other forms of vitriol, misogynist, racist, and classist. During the course of our research, one meme went viral by tapping into the Philippines’ strongly conservative and patriarchal brand of Catholicism, slutshaming a political operator for her past career. Another popular meme banked on the country’s deep-seated postcolonial racial hierarchies as it attempted to humiliate a politician for having dark skin.

One other manifestation of this model that prioritises profit over politics is that the digital disinformation producers involved find it easy to dissociate themselves from the work they do. The cross-political and ad hoc nature of the disinformation projects enables these producers to claim that they are first and foremost corporate marketing professionals or digital workers just doing their jobs. The pernicious consequence is that they are able to minimise and displace any moral responsibility for the social media toxicity and democratic decay to which they contribute.







## The Clickbait Model



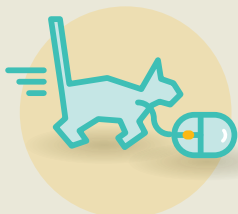
### Background

The most politically agnostic and commercially driven model of digital disinformation is financially motivated by the 'cost per click' economy.



### Structure

Creative staff divided into three teams—research, writing, and social media community management. The teams form strategic collaborative alliances with political clients to generate revenues from political clickbait.



### Consequences

The 'cat-and-mouse game' of manipulating platform algorithms to optimise the reach and engagement of salacious news headlines led to the proliferation of defamatory content appealing to the worst interests and instincts of online users. The financial incentives have established a perverse commercial infrastructure for fake news.

**Background.** The most politically agnostic and commercially driven model of digital disinformation production is the Clickbait Model. Its primary source of revenue is the advertising technology inherent to web and social media platforms themselves, such as Google's AdSense and Facebook's Instant Articles. These digital infrastructures financially reward content publishers based on ever-changing metrics of web traffic and user engagement, usually measured by platforms, third-party intermediaries, and advertisers in terms of 'impressions' and 'cost per click'. The term clickbait thus refers to the emotionally arousing and salacious headlines strategically crafted by publishers to lure visitors to their websites and thus generate the necessary impressions so meaningful to advertisers.

In the Philippines, the Clickbait Model is best exemplified by the case of Twinmark Media Enterprises, whose 220 Facebook pages, 73 Facebook accounts, and 29 Instagram accounts were shut down in a high-profile platform takedown right before the start of the 2019 election season. Facebook banned Twinmark for violating its misrepresentation and spam policies—irrespective of the quality or trustworthiness of their actual content.

Previously, the news agency had linked Twinmark's fake news website Trending News Portal as the 'top source of news' of pro-Duterte influencer and (for a time)

” clickbait websites are so profitable from ad tech alone that political pundits and influencers are happy to cash in by sharing emotionally appealing but factually misleading stories.

Assistant Secretary for the Presidential Communications Operations Office Margaux ‘Mocha’ Uson,<sup>35</sup> known for disparaging opposition political figures. But, contrary to suspicions that Twinmark Enterprises were contracted by Uson or the state as part of a centrally organized, top-down propaganda machine, an ABS-CBN investigation and our own personal interviews with ex-Twinmark employees revealed that Twinmark’s operations were primarily driven by advertising profit rather than by political ideology.<sup>36</sup> We learned that Twinmark Enterprises’ revenue from Facebook and Google advertising technologies could have earned the company as much as EUR 7M (PHP 400M) over four years. We also learned about the ad tech-led money trail, where Twinmark had actually paid Uson and other popular celebrities and influencers to repost salacious headlines from their clickbaity news sites in an effort to lure more followers and generate greater ad revenues. In other words, clickbait websites are so profitable from ad tech

alone that political pundits and influencers are happy to cash in by sharing emotionally appealing but factually misleading stories.

**Structure.** Officially registered as a digital marketing group, Twinmark Media Enterprises’ creative staff were divided into three teams—research, writing, and social media community management. Researchers were in charge of monitoring social media for the most popular talking points and viral entertainment content; writers were responsible for crafting an effective mix of shocking innuendo and for the breezy, accessible tone of their articles; and social media community managers designed attractive thumbnails for the stories they would strategically share across a selection of Facebook and Instagram pages. While writers were fresh graduates, usually of journalism programs from prestigious universities, and compensated with monthly salaries of approximately EUR 229 (PHP 13,000), researchers and community managers often worked in precarious conditions, earning as little as



” Whether driven by political or commercial imperatives, political chiefs of staff, advertising and PR consultants, and technopreneurs have come to normalise, professionalise, and rationalise disinformation work.

EUR 106 (PHP 600) per month with no benefits.

The three teams that comprised the creative staff worked alongside the administrative team measuring website performance. Together they played cat-and-mouse with Facebook and Google ad tech platforms to learn and manipulate the algorithms for advertising revenue. In their infancy, Twinmark’s websites and social media pages primarily curated celebrity and entertainment content by repackaging or plagiarising various stories and video clips from social media. In a prescient business move, Twinmark partnered with talent agents and social media community managers for high-profile movie and television stars: Twinmark paid placement fees to have entertainment-related content from their websites reposted to generate impressions and ad revenues (e.g. one website they managed, Chismix.com, translates roughly to Gossipmix.com). Cooperation between clickbait websites and entertainment celebrities became the model

by which they forged collaborations with politically-oriented influencers.

According to our respondents, Twinmark’s focus on creating political and pro-Duterte content around the time of the 2016 election was a result of commercial experimentation. They observed that in the heat of a loud and vitriolic political campaign, pro-Duterte content organically generated many more clicks, likes, and shares for their websites compared to content featuring his rival presidential candidates. Initially suspected of being hired by the government, Twinmark employees actually enlisted political commentators on social media to repost the salacious political headlines they authored. But according to ex-Twinmark employees we interviewed, **Twinmark eventually forged more formal strategic collaborative alliances with political clients in the wake of successful revenues from political clickbait.** In late 2016 in the aftermath of Duterte’s surprise election, the company pitched its ‘fake news’ services to political clients and purchased Facebook groups and



pages with high follower counts in order to expand their political portfolio. Eventually, they grew so greedy and obvious with their coordinated posts that they attracted the attention of Facebook's cybersecurity monitors.

**Consequences.** The 'cat-and-mouse game' of manipulating platform algorithms to optimise the reach and engagement of salacious news headlines led to the proliferation of slanderous content appealing to the worst interests and instincts of online users. Appealing to the anger and resentment of Duterte's populist supporters towards the political establishment, Twinmark's fake news sites generated content that slandered and slutshamed political opposition figures. For instance, headlines touting visual evidence of sex scandals and drug charges involving a opposition senator were shared across Twinmark's network of websites and pages. The gamification—and resulting in immediate financial incentives—of generating viral content with no regard for social and political cost has established a perverse commercial infrastructure for fake news. The story of greed and gamification that led to Twinmark's rapid expansion and eventual takedown is important to understand as it sheds light on how the platform infrastructures creates reward systems for media producers for the quantity of engagement without any regard of the quality of content and interactions fostered by these pages or groups.

## The Trajectory of Digital Disinformation Work Models

The emergence of four disinformation work models across the politics-profit spectrum powerfully signals that fake news production is becoming ever more entrenched in the very fiber of contemporary politics. Beyond the disturbing reality that these work models are often deployed together in ever more complex combinations, they reveal an alarming trajectory at the heart of digital disinformation in the Philippines: Whether driven by political or commercial imperatives, political chiefs of staff, advertising and PR consultants, and technopreneurs have come to normalise, professionalise, and rationalise disinformation work. This has enabled them to downplay the political and moral consequences of what they do, which makes it easy for them to carry on fashioning themselves as nothing less than pioneering explorers shaping the frontier lands of digital politics. This may very well feed a desire to take the next step and go global.

The trajectory of digital disinformation in the Philippines also signals an equally problematic future for the country's many young and savvy digital workers. Enticed with promises of promotion or extra income, young Filipinos increasingly find themselves creating fake news and doing political trolling on the side rather than continuing to search for more rewarding and stable work. No matter how much they accept or resent this, they are being stockpiled as digital weapons for a growing disinformation industry ready to take on the world.



## 4. Other Disinformation Actors for Hire

Alongside the digital disinformation producers engaged in the various work models discussed in the preceding chapter, there are also other freelance actors who get roped into disinformation projects. These highly skilled specialists increase the scale and effectiveness of digital campaigns.

This chapter describes who these actors are and underscores that, regardless of whether these actors are politically or commercially driven, digital disinformation production has become completely entangled with the broader creative industries. Political disinformation has had a long history of murky ties with media and communications professionals, and digital disinformation is also very clearly strongly networked with professional and freelance digital experts.



Role	Task
<b>Search Engine Optimisation Specialists</b>	<p>They facilitate reputation management for their political clients and/or tarnish the reputations of their clients' rivals. This involves studying and reverse-engineering the constantly changing algorithms of search engines in order to upvote positive news and downvote negative news about their clients. Politicians rarely declare their engagements with SEO specialists in the campaign expenditure declarations required during elections.</p> <p>The 'black hat' techniques of search engine optimisation include discreetly paying webmasters who maintain popular websites to include links to a politician's webpage, thus boosting its Page Rank on Google. As one SEO specialist who worked for national and local politicians in the recent elections told us: 'If you're an SEO worth your salt, you know you can't live off white hat operations. You should be prepared to offer black hat services too.'</p>
<b>Hackers/ DDoS (Distributed Denial of Service) Attackers</b>	<p>Hackers offer diverse services to politicians, including shutting down social media accounts and/or websites of political rivals and media agencies. One way they do this is via Distributed Denial-of-Service (DDoS) attacks, which can take websites or servers offline.</p> <p>Hackers can also wreak all sorts of havoc, such as remotely controlling accounts or websites, defacing them, or linking rivals' pages to pornography websites to trip security settings.</p> <p>Recently, DDoS attackers shut down the websites of alternative/ independent media groups critical of the Duterte administration (e.g. <i>Altermidya</i>, <i>Kodao Productions</i>, <i>Pinoy Weekly</i>, and <i>Bulatlat</i>).<sup>37</sup> One hacker we interviewed suspected that, unlike other mainstream media agencies with financial investment in online security, these websites' security settings were vulnerable to hacking.</p>
<b>Data Analytics Firms</b>	<p>They mine big data from social media to provide data-driven insights about political clients' brand health and/or target audiences' attitudes and behaviors towards these clients. They also advise on how to craft micro-targeted communications based on geographic information.</p> <p>While many larger PR firms and consultancies offer data analytics services, smaller data analytics firms have mushroomed in recent years and compete with cheaper rates, technological hype, and business bundles with other white and black hat services. Data analytics specialists trade on the hype of big data analysis, modeling themselves after the Cambridge Analytica portfolio.</p>
<b>Digital Influencer Agencies</b>	<p>Digital influencer agencies operate as intermediaries that link brands and larger advertising firms with social media influencers. Managing a portfolio of mega-, micro-, and nano-influencers, they assemble the right mix of influencers that resonate with their communication and brand objectives.</p> <p>Influencers lend 'authenticity' to political messages, having cultivated intimate relationships with their fans and followers. Influencers prey on regulatory loopholes and rarely disclose their posts as actual paid ads and formal collaborations.<sup>38</sup> The lack of self-regulation around influencer marketing in the PR industry circumvents campaign finance regulations in the context of elections.</p>
<b>Corrupt Journalists For Hire</b>	<p>They rely on traditional methods of dirty media politicking, such as astroturfing media campaigns to cover up their sources and doing 'envelopmental journalism' to sell news stories for envelopes of politically tainted money.<sup>39</sup> These news stories, in return, provide credibility and media mileage to online disinformation campaigns because they have been covered by mainstream news agencies. Journalists/editors can also help 'kill' political scandals afflicting their clients by withdrawing media coverage.</p>



## 5. Conclusion: Process-Oriented Policy Responses to Digital Disinformation

Because of the complexity of the problem of digital disinformation, fighting back and inoculating democratic politics from its toxic effects cannot be achieved with a one-size-fits-all solution. There must be global initiatives that address the problem, including, for instance, creating oversight committees that can foster transparency and accountability in the content governance for tech platforms such as Facebook and Google.<sup>40</sup>

Beyond these global moves, however, we also need bespoke solutions heedful of the kinds of digital disinformation production that emerge in specific local country contexts. For example, in the case

of the Philippines process-oriented rather than content-oriented policy responses would be most effective. This means that interventions should not be about speech regulation and censorship, which could potentially inflict myriad harms to free speech. Instead they should be about ensuring greater transparency and accountability in campaign finance, platform bans, fact-checking, and industry regulation.<sup>41</sup> **Policy should also focus on putting social safety nets in place for the many precarious digital workers who are constantly exposed to the risk of being pulled into the digital underground.**<sup>42</sup>



## PROCESS-ORIENTED RESPONSES SHOULD INVOLVE:

- 1** Sustaining the public conversation about the scale of digital disinformation and how deep these incentives go, leading to **industry self-regulation** amongst local advertising and PR practitioners and, equally important, amongst digital influencers.
- 2** Pushing for legal reforms that support initiatives surrounding campaign transparency and accountability, such as **updating electoral laws** in the Philippines to regulate the finances of campaigns that are increasingly shifting to social media for their operations.
- 3** Enabling credible fact-checking partnerships amongst the media, academics and specialists, and technology platforms, which do not compromise free speech or fall into political partisanship. This can be done by **creating inclusive oversight committees** that inform social media firms of local standards and concerns around 'harmful' and 'inauthentic' content.
- 4** Encouraging transparency in platform bans by **opening the decision-making process social media platforms currently have in place to evaluation and audit**, particularly to those communities with whom they aim to collaborate.
- 5** Ensuring that working conditions for creative workers—especially young creative professionals—does not make them vulnerable to slipping into the digital underground by **enacting industry standards for the digital workplace and by encouraging industry mechanisms that reward professionalism and ethical practices**.





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