

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Mr Yang Razali Kassim, Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

Influence-for-Hire: Southeast Asia's Shadow Economy?

By Sean Tan

SYNOPSIS

Influence-for-hire operations are spreading in the region while commercial agents are taking on an ever more prominent role both domestically and internationally. They not only help to obscure clients' motives but also make such operations more accessible to an even broader set of threat actors.

COMMENTARY

THE RISE OF influence-for-hire – the buying and selling of influence online – has wide-reaching implications for the global disinformation economy, particularly in Southeast Asia. Anti-misinformation actions taken across Southeast Asia are predominantly designed with the objective to prevent the spread of online falsehoods in mind, in line with broader principles of political accountability.

In the Philippines for example, an '[Anti-False Content Bill](#)', outlining penalties for the spread of misinformation on online and social platforms, was introduced in the Senate in 2019. In Singapore, the government has introduced the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) also in 2019. However, a recent [contribution](#) to an Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) report reveals significantly more complexities with regard to accountability in the region than policymakers perhaps assume.

Private Influence-for-Hire Operations

Contrary to traditional assumptions about ideologically-driven online disinformation, the ASPI report crucially observes the preeminence of commercial rather than ideological interests in influence operations. This is because hired agents often take prominence over the main actors responsible for organising the actual campaigns.

The report by ASPI, a strategic policy think-tank based in Canberra, cited two examples to illustrate the spread of influence-for-hire operations in the Asia-Pacific.

In the first, ASPI, together with the Taiwan-based civil society organisation, DoubleThink Lab, analysed a Chinese-language content farm and a news outlet targeting audiences in Australia and Taiwan. The two online entities are Au123.com, a Chinese-language news outlet based in Australia, and Qiqis.org, a content farm that targets Taiwanese audiences. Both platforms regularly published articles that favoured Chinese government policies and narratives thus influencing perceptions of geopolitical events.

In the second, the ASPI report examines how a hired online campaign in Indonesia in November 2020 flooded Twitter with hundreds of tweets aimed at countering reports in the West that the Indonesian palm oil industry aggravates deforestation. The overseas reports had alleged that fires in Papua in eastern Indonesia had been deliberately lit to clear forests for palm oil plantations. The major players in the sector have consistently denied the allegations.

Palm oil industry players in Indonesia and Malaysia – the world’s two largest producers – have planned to jointly counter EU criticism of deforestation in the two Southeast Asian economies. The EU criticism is seen as motivated to protect Western vegetable oil competitors to palm oil.

According to Jacob Wallis of ASPI, online content farms are becoming an important part of the digital landscape in Asia Pacific countries where cheap digital labour is abundant. This is part of a wider global trend in influence operations, particularly as influence-for-hire becomes increasingly intertwined with monetary incentives. The potential expansion of the Southeast Asian influence-for-hire economy is especially concerning.

Global Trend in Influence-for-Hire Operations

While content farms primarily churn out a plethora of low-quality false articles, influence-for-hire tends to be more sophisticated and incorporates a wide range of hired agencies such as PR firms and established publications, with greater profitability.

While some content farmers are observed to be [motivated by a shared ideology with their clients and readership](#), professionalised agents are noticeably more inclined to [dissociate from their clients’ political motives](#). Initially associated with [North Macedonia-based operations in American elections](#), commercially-driven influence operations have also emerged in the Asia-Pacific, and have been dubbed as a regional [‘online shadow economy’](#).

In Southeast Asia, PR industry professionals in the Philippines are observed to not only detach themselves from these motives, but also provide threat actors themselves with a certain degree of deniability. This includes, for example, making payments and benefits to threat actors via brokers.

Additionally, an increased supply of agencies willing and capable of spreading disinformation would simply mean more options for threat actors to choose from when

looking to boost their campaigns. Further, the professionalisation of influence operations may allow such operations to avoid detection during crucial periods, such as elections.

It enables sophisticated actors to conceal their role behind campaigns, as well as the exact origins of their funding. Hiring professional organisations to carry out operations is also advantageous for actors with no prior hands-on experience or expertise in running operations- [as long as they provide suitable financial backing](#).

Why Southeast Asia?

While North Macedonian content farms first demonstrated how profitable disinformation can be, today's influence-for-hire industry necessitates a far greater degree of global interdependence, as [Europe-based service providers increasingly rely on Asia-based contractors](#).

The rapid expansion of Southeast Asia's digital economy makes it especially appealing to shrewd influence-for-hire operators in search of more refined services from teams with relevant knowledge of local conditions. The region's status as a low-cost, fast-growing labour market is also favourable to Southeast Asians in search of a valuable extra source of income.

While poorly-translated Balkan content farm articles may be easily spotted due to language disparities, the significant presence of the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia may allow regional influence-for-hire operations to circumvent linguistic, contextual and cultural barriers in the region more easily. This, alongside the use of visual storytelling techniques (including video-based disinformation), creates an altogether more compelling message for broadcast.

This raises the question as to whether the region will become a burgeoning market for influence-for-hire. The above factors not only make influence-for-hire more accessible to a wider range of threat actors, but perhaps also distinguish the market and its activities from more rudimentary operations elsewhere.

Additionally, it is worth considering if the diversity of the region as a whole may contribute anything unique to the influence economy, or provide commercial agents with even more advantages — or threat actors with more opportunities for disinformation.

Sean Tan is a Senior Analyst with the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS) at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.
