

'Influence for hire' networks are manipulating online discussions in the Philippines, Indonesia, Taiwan and Australia | Coda Story

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Commercial “influence-for-hire” services are increasingly manipulating online discussions by promoting government policies in countries throughout the Asia Pacific region, according to the new report published this week, by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), an Australian-based think tank.

ASPI’s research analyzed online behavior in the Philippines, Indonesia, Taiwan and Australia and found evidence of financially driven content farms, coordinated websites and social media accounts producing unoriginal, low quality articles and videos to drive traffic and revenue.

One of the starkest examples highlighted in the report examines how a hired online campaign in Indonesia in November 2020 flooded Twitter with the hashtag #AdaApaDenganBBC (“What’s up with the BBC”). The campaign involved hundreds of tweets aimed at discrediting a BBC article that suggested recent fires in Papua in eastern Indonesia had been deliberately lit to clear forests for palm oil plantations, benefiting a Korean company that had been buying local land.

Researchers analyzed hundreds of tweets using the hashtag and found that a coordinated network of accounts, mainly created in 2020, regularly posted screenshots from Indonesian news articles that contained criticisms of the BBC’s palm oil deforestation story. Twitter has since suspended many of the accounts.

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