The Political Use of Encrypted Messaging Applications: Evidence from Southeast Asia and its Implications for the Global Public Sphere

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Abstract

This study relies on qualitative, semi-structured interviews with both makers and trackers of political content on EMAs in order to facilitate free-flowing conversations in which the insight of these interviewees can be uncovered. The interviewees consisted of activists, experts, fact-checkers, journalists, politicians, and producers of disinformation to glean insight from members of civil society (fact-checkers, organized activists), the state (politicians and propagandists), and the public (experts who spoke on the general public). We began by contacting experts, fact-checkers, and politicians in each region and then utilized snowball sampling to contact hard to reach populations, such as activists and disinformation producers. We conducted 16 qualitative interviews from June 2021 to October 2021 virtually of interviewees in, from, or knowledgeable about the spaces of Myanmar, the Philippines, and Indonesia. Our interviewees in the Philippines consisted of two presidential communications employees (one of which was a social media specialist), a political manipulation researcher, a former Facebook public policy director for global elections, and a politician/cybersecurity expert. Our five interviewees in Indonesia consisted of an OSINT journalist, an academic, the founder of a fact-checking organization, an employee of a fact-checking organization, and an employee of a “public relations” firm, who we identified as a producer of political propaganda. In Myanmar, our interviewees consisted of a Burmese journalist forced to flee the country, a journalist knowledgeable about current events in Myanmar, an academic, and three activists fighting against disinformation produced by the Tatmadaw: one founder of an organized activist network, and two individual activists. The University of Texas at Austin Institutional Review Board granted approval for this study [20190900940]. We obtained and recorded verbal informed consent in each interview and maintained strict anonymity by using pseudonyms and encrypted storage for personal identifiable information.

Interviews were analyzed using open coding, whereby to the best of our ability we allowed theory to emerge from a close reading of the data. Although we sought to further understand the nature of the global public sphere through these case studies, we allowed trends and themes to emerge from the data itself. Referencing interview recordings, interview memos were written following each interview to summarize the key takeaway observations from each interview. After three interviews in a region were conducted, thematic memos were written to connect themes across interviews. The process of memo writing allows for the consolidation of findings to identify trends or dissimilarities across regions of interest.

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