

Unraveling Information Operations on Social Media in Thailand

Sanittawan (Nikki) Tan

Master's Program in Computational Social Science

The University of Chicago

sanittawan@uchicago.edu

Thesis advisor: Susan Stokes

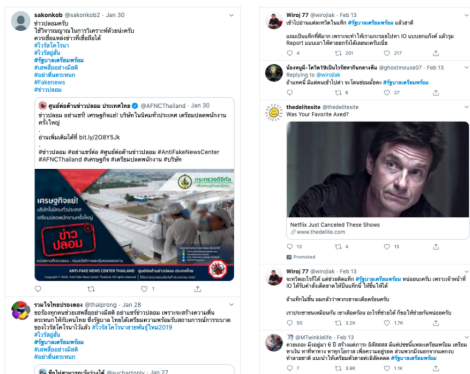
Tiffany and Margaret Blake Distinguished Service Professor

Department of Political Science

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Background and Motivation

- Suspicious hashtag, #rathaban triamprom (translation: #ThaiGovernmentisGettingReady) appeared on Twitter between late January and early February, 2020



Information Operations (IOs)

- A military concept which uses information as a tool to manipulate the perception of the “target” and to “coerce that person, or group of people, into doing or not doing a certain action” (Armistead 2010)
- IOs employ a wide range of strategies including deception, psychological operations, *flooding* and astroturfing
- Thai military used IOs against the communist movement in Thailand during the Cold War

Censorship, *Flooding*, Astroturfing

- Censorship obstructs access to information
- *Flooding* as a means to inundate traditional and social media with coordinated information with the aim of distraction
 - King, Pan, and Roberts (2017) “How the Chinese Government Fabricates Social Media Posts for Strategic Distraction, not Engaged Argument”
- Astroturfing is a strategy that employs a large number of users posing as citizens to spread (favorable) information about the government

Research Questions

- ① How are information operations conducted on social media in Thailand?
- ② Is the aim of *flooding* only to distract?
- ③ What did accounts suspected to be part of IOs tweet about?
- ④ What does the network among IO accounts look like?

Data and Methods

- Collected 3,431 Twitter tweets from Jan. 28th to Feb. 20th, 2020 that includes the hashtag
- Labeled a subset of the data set and built a mixed classifier
- Filtered only suspected IO accounts and applied topic modeling to their tweets
- Used follower-following data to study their network

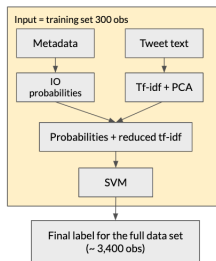


Figure: Model Building Process

Lack of Ground Truth and Data Labeling

- On Feb. 25th, 2020, several memoranda on IOs were revealed by the Future Forward Party which corroborate characteristics of IO accounts
- “...operators should have multiple fake accounts in case some were reported as spam...and should have no relationship with operators’ personal accounts”
 - “...share news media articles and comment under posts/tweets that are favorable towards the military and the government”
 - “...operators have to report the results of their mission [posting, liking, retweeting etc.] before 5 pm daily...” → most tweets have timestamps during work hours

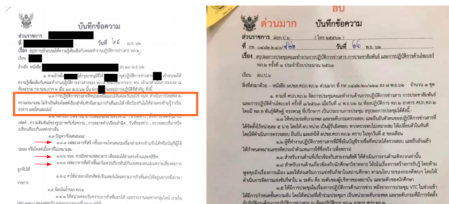


Figure: Leaked Thai Army memoranda on IOs from Future Forward Party Website

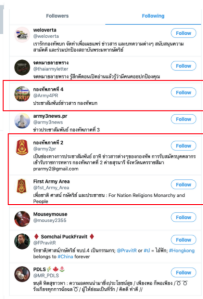
Classification Result

- The model classified 375 tweets (out of 3,431) as coming from IO accounts
- Further, manually classified owners of the identified tweets based on the following criteria:
 - ① anonymous and have low number of following-followers
 - ② recently joined Twitter (late 2019)
 - ③ gibberish Twitter handles
 - ④ Content-wise, overwhelmingly pro-government/military/monarchy messages; absence of tweets about daily life or other interests like TV shows, movies etc.
- Found 11 accounts that are suspected to be part of IOs, only 7 are still active

Example of IO Users



User 1: trueman



User 2: Chai Sukkai Sabaijai



What did suspected IO users tweet about?

- A narrow set of topics
- Verbatim tweets by different users a few minutes apart

	Topic 1 coronavirus + news	Topic 2 mass shooting incident + army chief	Topic 3 military + monarchy
1	ไวรัส โควิด	จน คร ราช สีมา	กองทัพ ภาค ที่ 2
2	ข่าว จริง สปริง นิวส์	อภี รัช ต์ คง	สาย ตรง ผบ ทบ
3	จริง สปริง นิวส์ springnews	ต คง สมพงษ์	ภาค ที่ 1 โดย
4	โควิด นา สายพันธุ์	รัช ต์ คง สมพงษ์	กองทัพ ภาค ที่ 1
5	โร นา สายพันธุ์ ใหม่	พลเอก อภี รัช ต์	เพื่อชาติ ศาสน์ กษัตริย์
6	นา สายพันธุ์ ใหม่ 2019	พลเอก ณัฐพล นาคพาณิชย์	พระบาทสมเด็จพระเจ้าอยู่หัว
7	โควิด 19 covid	คง สมพงษ์ ผบ	จน คร ราช สีมา
8	เป็นที่พึ่ง ของ ประชาชน	สมพงษ์ ผบ ทบ	ไวรัส โควิด
9	ประชาชน ใน ทุก โอกาส	ที่ จน คร ราช	ขบวน พยุหยาตราทางชลมารค
10	via มติชนออนไลน์	ต่อ thaipbs covid 19	24 กุมภาพันธ์ วันรบ

Figure: Quadgram Result (top 10 words per topic)

What topic modeling did not capture...



“Let me ask a question. Between Thanathorn [the former head of the Future Forward Party] and Thammanat [Thammanat Prompao, deputy minister of the Agriculture and Cooperatives Ministry of Thailand whose close aid was accused of illegally hoarding and selling surgical masks.], didn't Thammanat do anything wrong? Can we really live with this [lie]? #thegovernmentprotectswrongdoer #itpunishesinnocentpeople”

- Explanation: a strategy to make the account look more like a “normal” user

Network of Suspected IO accounts

- No direct relationship among the 7 accounts
- Closeness centrality shows that the network of these accounts is highly ideologically homogeneous and related to the military

account name	account information
thaiprong	suspected IO account in the data set
Rachadaspoke	official page of the current deputy spokesperson
ThaiRoyalFamily	unofficial fan page of the Thai monarchy
political_drama	anonymous political commentator, conservative leaning
3xyZNKEO9sfe0eb	a page that only retweets
RedBuffaloFre	anonymous political commentator, conservative leaning
tigeryellowlive	a normal user who has conservative leaning
nitituy	suspected IO account not in the data set
trueman98587845	suspected IO account in the data set
thestandardth	prominent online newspaper

Table: Top 10 Accounts with Highest Centrality Values

Key Takeaways

- The goal of *flooding* is not just distraction but also agenda-setting
- The Thai government employed a number of fake accounts to conduct astroturfing on Twitter, easy to recognize them
- The conduct of IOs on social media in Thailand seems very sloppy