
On the rising phenomena of Troll Farming: Electronic Committees and the Exploitation of Digital Labor in the Middle East

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Abstract

The rise of "electronic committees" () and "electronic flies" () has become a defining feature of the digital political economy in the Middle East. These organized groups of individuals-sometimes volunteers, but increasingly paid workers-are mobilized to flood digital platforms with comments, posts, and coordinated campaigns to promote political figures, attack opponents, and manipulate public opinion. While often treated as a matter of disinformation, this phenomenon also represents a form of digital labor exploitation.

This paper seeks to reframe trolling and coordinated online propaganda as precarious labor within the broader dynamics of platform economies in the Global South. Drawing on media reports, testimonies, and secondary literature, it examines how young workers are recruited-sometimes under the guise of "patriotic duty," sometimes through opaque subcontracting arrangements-to perform repetitive, low-value digital tasks. These include writing hostile comments, creating fake accounts, copy-pasting scripts, and amplifying hashtags. Workers often face poor working conditions, lack of recognition, and surveillance, while employers-political parties, business elites, or state-affiliated actors-reap disproportionate benefits.

Methodologically, the study uses a desk-based review of Arabic- and English-language sources, supported by illustrative case studies from Egypt and the Gulf. It highlights three key findings: (1) trolling is not an informal leisure activity but organized digital labor ; (2) this labor is marked by precarity, anonymity, and moral ambivalence, where workers are stigmatized even as their contributions sustain political campaigns; and (3) the exploitation of "troll labor" reveals new intersections between authoritarian governance, disinformation economies, and platform-mediated work in the MEA region.

By situating trolling within the framework of digital labor studies, this paper contributes to understanding how disinformation industries depend on cheap, precarious digital workforces. It also calls for expanding labor-centered perspectives in debates on algorithmic governance and political communication. Recognizing trolling as work-albeit stigmatized and exploitative-allows us to interrogate its implications for worker rights, regulation, and collective organizing in the digital economies of the Middle East and Africa.

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