
The Social Production of Disinformation: Labor, Ideology and Patriotism in Iranian Troll Farms

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Abstract

The present research explores the production culture and daily operations of Iranian troll farms through the lens of production studies, focusing on the working conditions of paid troll without making judgments. I employed qualitative methods to delve into the inner workings of Iranian troll farms. Between March 2022 to July 2024. I conducted semi-structured interviews with eight disinformation workers at both managerial and staff levels, as well as a Saudi journalist interested in the same topic. At the outset of this research, I approached disinformation work in Iran as a distinct form of digital labor, often viewed as a "black box" that is very difficult to access. However, as my research progressed; I came to realize that Iranian troll farms are very distinctive as they are not as opaque as initially thought. Moreover, working in these environments fosters a sense of pride and patriotism among employees, who see themselves as "digital soldiers" engaged in an information warfare. This research represents the first in-depth study of troll farms in Iran, and it contributes to a deeper understanding of disinformation practices beyond Western-centric analyses; it situates these activities within the broader digital media industry in Iran and offers a detailed examination of the unique features that set Iranian troll farms apart, offering a more comprehensive view of this growing phenomenon.

Keywords: Iranian troll farms, Arab troll farms, computational propaganda, disinformation, production studies, Iran, digital soldiers, information warfare, qualitative research

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