



# UPDATE ON THE INFORMATION DOMAIN

## Issue 02/24 (February)

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## Disinformation for Hire

### INTRODUCTION

1. As the saying goes, “Everything is for sale, if the price is right”. This includes the sale and purchase of commercial disinformation services for a fee, customised to fit the needs and objectives of individual clients. The threat of ‘Disinformation for Hire’ is a pertinent challenge for authorities worldwide.

2. The *Centre for International Media Assistance* defines Disinformation for Hire as “a booming industry in which private marketing, communications and public relations (PR) firms are paid to sow discord by spreading false information and manipulating content online.” The number of such PR firms have grown, and they almost function like a ‘shadow industry’ to the mainstream ones.

### Key Characteristics of Disinformation for Hire

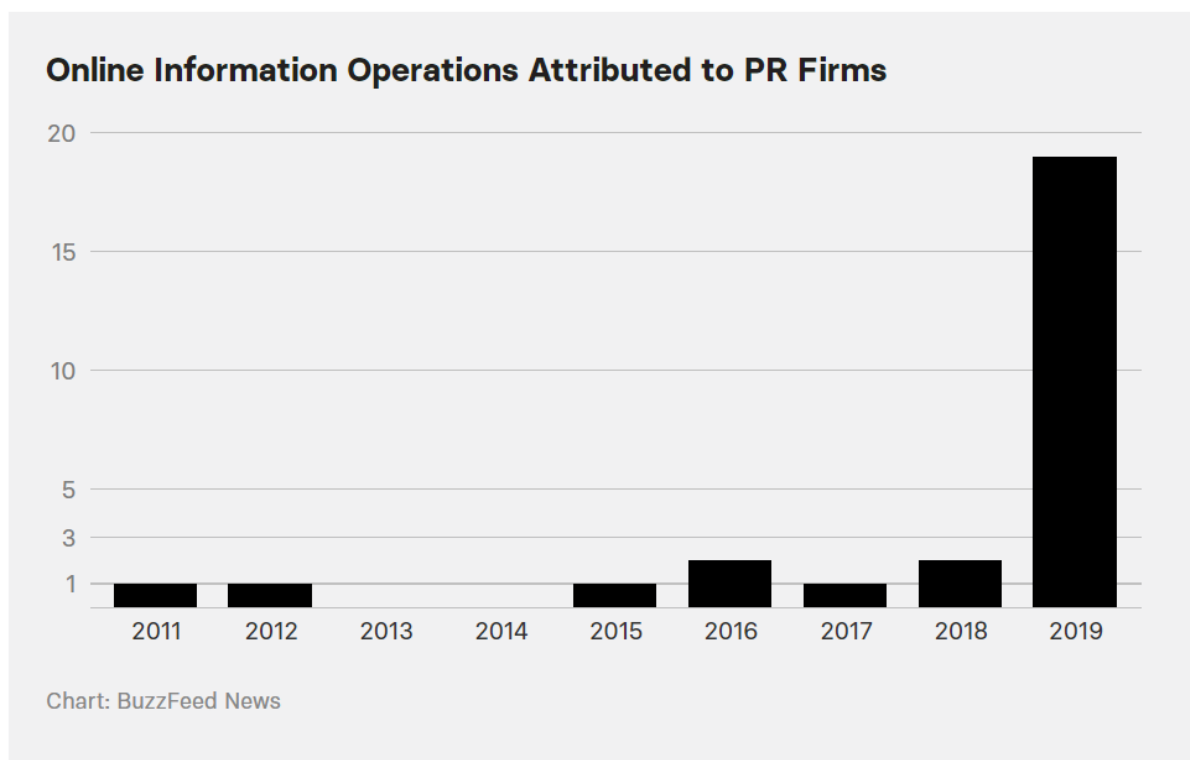
#### *Commercialisation of Falsehoods*

3. Many of the PR firms that provide Disinformation for Hire services exist outside the boundaries of the wider PR industry and operate primarily on the dark web. Commonly known as “dark PR firms or agencies”, they produce misleading and false information for

whoever is willing to pay for it. They may also have access to a large pool of data that can be used to push out strategically developed content to target audiences, questioning their deeply held values and beliefs. *Grohmann and Ong* reported that the pharmaceutical, alcohol, and extractive industries are amongst the industries where misleading or false information were produced.

4. In the absence of regulations on the content shared on social media, groups with financial resources are able to commission these firms to produce customised narratives according to their interests. *Buzzfeed News's* research attributed 27 online information operations to PR firms between 2011 and 2019, with 19 such cases in 2019.<sup>1</sup> It is also reported that there is a global increase in the frequency, complexity and scale of information operations.

Figure 1: Online Information Operations Attributed to PR Firms



Source: BuzzFeed News, 7 January 2020

<sup>1</sup> The full research can be found at:  
<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1qoxtiT9pU13uRUwyS6fm80ac/htmlview/>

### *Tailored Disinformation Campaigns with Anonymity*

5. By engaging dark PR firms, malicious actors are able to make use of the tools and resources within these firms to develop comprehensive and complex disinformation tactics that are customised to fit their target audience. As these actors remain anonymous by outsourcing their operations to dark PR firms, it becomes more difficult to detect and to trace these disinformation operations back to their source.

6. Bots are also a medium to push out disinformation. Malicious actors can also make use of bots, which are scripts of code that are able to click automatically and generate fake IP addresses to spoof their location. Typically, these bots operate in bot farms, and are used to simulate large following and support for their published posts. In some cases, bot farms can consist of human-curated accounts, in addition to fake-automated accounts. As an example, the Cyber Police Department of the National Police of Ukraine destroyed a Russian-affiliated bot farm responsible for creating thousands of bot accounts. These bot accounts disseminated pro-Russian propaganda and supported the Kremlin's pro-invasion stance.

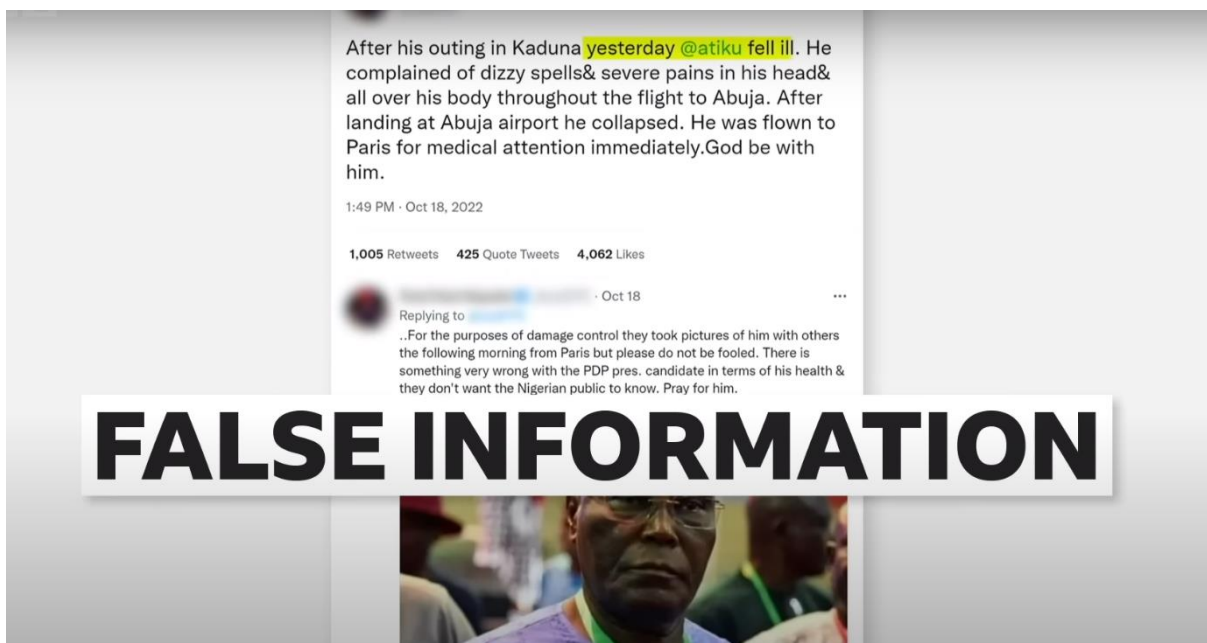
### **Consequences of Disinformation for Hire**

7. Malicious actors are able to stir up existing dissent in domestic populations, through the hiring of influencers and automated bots to push out their desired narratives, to destabilise governments, undermine public policies and cause social unrest. By leveraging their large follower base to endorse ideas, brands and people, public opinion can be influenced, especially during politically sensitive periods such as elections.

8. A 2023 investigation by the *BBC* showed that political parties in Nigeria had hired influencers on social media to spread disinformation against their opponents during the elections (see [Figure 2](#)). For their services, politicians offer these social media

influencers anything from monetary compensation to prominent positions in government. These influencers use emotionally divisive topics like religion, ethnic and regional differences to spread disinformation over social media. Big tech companies in Nigeria, are limited in their capacity to enforce platform regulations due to dwindling manpower. The *BBC* reported that X (formerly Twitter) shuttered their continental headquarters in Ghana and axed almost all of its staff, raising concerns about the company's capability to enforce platform regulations on X. The threat of providing Disinformation for Hire extends to terrorist groups like Boko Haram and other malicious actors, which are destructive to Nigerian society and the government.

Figure 2: Screenshot of the BBC's YouTube video on Disinformation for Hire in the Nigerian Elections 2023



Source: YouTube, 18 January 2023

<https://youtu.be/T-jqH9nB4Go?si=FidLeimthErlxifN>

9. Dark PR firms that offer Disinformation for Hire can also be commissioned by states to counter the influence operations of rival players. In October 2023, *The Washington Post* reported that Roch Marc Kaboré, the former President of Niger, had contacted Percepto International, an Israeli firm that specialises in 'cyber solutions' for hire, to help counter pro-Russian propaganda via Russian-affiliated bot accounts. These bots were highly active on platforms like X,

Whatsapp and Telegram and were vital in expanding the reach of pro-Russian propaganda to the masses. For example, Russia has allegedly used the rise in anti-French sentiment in the Sahel region to project itself as a more reliable ally to the French. Local support has gradually tilted in favour of a pro-Russian stance. Today, five countries in the Sahel region, including Niger, have seen their historically pro-French governments toppled. This shows that the information battlefield can have an impact in shaping regional geopolitics.

10. The world is beginning to learn more about firms offering Disinformation for Hire as more disinformation campaigns are uncovered. *The Guardian* reported on ‘Team Jorge’, an Israeli firm offering Disinformation for Hire (made up of former intelligence operatives) that claimed responsibility for manipulating “more than 30 elections around the world using hacking, sabotage and automated disinformation on social media” (see Figure 3). Team Jorge use a software package, Advanced Impact Media Solutions (AIMS), that allow them to maintain and control a bot army of over 30,000 profiles, spread over multiple social media channels.

Figure 3: Screenshot from The Guardian’s Exposé on Team Jorge



Source: The Guardian’s Youtube channel, 15 February, 2023,  
<https://youtu.be/UheOilps2zQ?si=6lI1wkqUGbqBDp4A>

## Conclusion

11. It is important to recognise that Disinformation for Hire poses a significant threat to the integrity of our information ecosystems, including possible impact on our social cohesiveness. Their main value resides in offering deniability to actors who use their services. Disinformation for Hire is challenging to root out because there is a demand, and there is commercial revenue to the dark firms. Coordinated responses from governments, the private sector, civil society and individuals will serve to mitigate the adverse effects of disinformation in order to safeguard our national interests. Enhancing information sharing and digital literacy are also important to build trust to prepare and sensitise personnel to the growing sophistication and nature of such threats.

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## CONTACT DETAILS

All reports can be retrieved from our website at [www.acice-asean.org/resource/](http://www.acice-asean.org/resource/).

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