RESEARCH REPORT

NAVIGATING THE INFLUENCE OPERATIONS LANDSCAPE IN INDONESIA DURING THE 2024 ELECTION

CSIS Indonesia

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CENTRE FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

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Navigating the Influence Operations Landscape in Indonesia during the 2024 Election

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Introduction

The goal of a political campaign is to win as many votes as possible for the victory of the supported candidate. In the 2024 Election, Influence Operations (IO) moved dynamically to achieve this goal. IO is defined as a focused effort to understand and engage its target audiences in order to create, reinforce, or perpetuate "conditions" that favor particular parties or candidates.

This is done through the coordinated implementation of programs, messages, and products. IO conditions interactions with the aim of influencing audiences to change their opinions and/or behavior[4]. This operation has several objectives: affecting psychological aspects, hurting morals, affecting public awareness, and weakening the control and ability of the audience to understand norms and moral ways of life.[5]

IO covers three domains: physical, digital (social media), and cognitive. While operations conducted in the physical and digital domains aim to achieve instant effects, the main goal of IO is to achieve greater influence in the cognitive domain. This cognitive domain is crucial.[6] IO must trigger a learning process in the audience:

the operation must successfully "influence" people's political choices. This is because Influence Operations are designed to change the norms and preferences of the target audience, which is the voters in the election.

Studies have shown that there are several stages of how IO is performed. The first stage is to determine the purpose of the operation. This is done by promoting a particular candidate or figure, strengthening their image, increasing their electability, or conversely, conducting operations aimed at attacking or weakening the opponent, and creating negative public opinion about the opponent. The second step is to determine the scope of the target audience: whether the target is the general public, a small influential group such as election organizers, or an audience based on gender, age, race, or a particular religion that is deemed most suitable for the purpose. All of this can be called micro-targeting'.

The third step is to select the social network or forum where the IO is operated and determine the media chosen. Whether the IO is conducted via social media, mainstream media, ground campaigns, and so on. The fourth step is to determine the tools to spread the message: whether through

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[4] Raphael Meier. "Social Media Influence Operations." *arXiv preprint arXiv:2309.03670 (2023).*
[5] David Tayouri. "The Secret War of Cyber Influence Operations and How to Identify Them". Cyber, Intelligence, and Security, Vol 4 No 1, March (2020)
[6] DIIS Policy Brief October 2018. Trying to get what you want: Russian Influence Operation

creating fake profiles, paying influencers, or through bots and trolls[7]. The fifth step is to design an appropriate message and determine a strategy to spread it intensively, in accordance with the objectives and the targeted audience.[8]

This report discusses the application of IO, starting from the conditions that make it possible, how this strategy is carried out, the actors involved and what kind of relationships they have, up to the reasons that encourage IO actors to operate during the 2024 Election. The entire exploration is conducted with reference to the five steps previously explained, and the final section of this report attempts to present conclusions from our observations on the IO landscape in Indonesia.

Influence Operations Trend: The Framework of Supporting Rules and How Actors Work

The use of IO as a campaign strategy is based on a simple logic: electoral. Relevant actors in elections see this tactic as the most reliable influence machine capable of manipulating public opinion in a short period of time and as an attempt to influence the outcome of elections. The conditions surrounding IO, such as the regulatory framework and procedures as well as its implementation, then become elements that determine whether or not this tactic works in Indonesia.

After discussing the points that support the existence of IO, we continue the discussion

by identifying a series of distinctive characteristics related to what and how this strategy is carried out, as well as who and how IO actors involve themselves directly in executing IO wrapped in political campaigns.

Political Actors and Infiltration of Interests

Although regulation is considered to be one of the upstreams of IO, it is clear that in the midst of this complexity there were interests from political actors. Such actors secured interests from the moment laws were made and implemented, as well as regulated how the election organizers performed their functions.

Based on the interviews with informants, it was revealed that problems could already be identified starting from the recruitment process of members of the General Elections Commission (KPU) and the General Election Supervisory Agency (Bawaslu), which were vulnerable to intervention and co-optation of political interests. Individuals who eventually serve as members and chairpersons of the election organizing institutions had been "mapped" or conditioned in advance to meet the interests of political actors in relation to electoral issues.

This form of intervention and co-optation was expressed in a variety of ways, and these practices supported IO.

First, the regulation that required the KPU to consult with the House of Representatives (DPR) in the drafting of the KPU Regulations (PKPU) ultimately reduced the KPU's independence in making its decisions. A judicial review of this article had been filed, and the Constitutional Court (MK) partially

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[7] Raphael Meier. "Social Media Influence Operations." *arXiv preprint arXiv:2309.03670 (2023).*
[8] David Tayouri. "The Secret War of Cyber Influence Operations and How to Identify Them". Cyber, Intelligence, and Security, Vol 4 No 1, March (2020)

granted it. In the end, the KPU is still obliged to consult with the DPR, but the input received is non-binding. Ironically, the reality on the ground shows that the KPU remains subject to the interests of the DPR.

There was a setback experienced by the KPU and Bawaslu in the 2024 Election because they tended to obey the interests of political actors and did not dare to fight back. They served the interests of the DPR and political parties more than the interests of the general public. Therefore, integrity and professionalism issues are at stake.

Second, IO also operated because of the KPU's permissive actions triggered by the "instructions" of political actors. For example, the verification of political parties (parpol) participating in the election should be done by checking ID cards (KTP) and membership cards (KTA) directly. But now it can be performed through a video call. Another example was the obligation to expose the identity of legislative candidates (caleg) through their CVs was canceled by the KPU, considering personal data concerns.

Third, IO could ideally be eradicated if there is cooperation and effective coordination among election organizing institutions. Ironically, this is very much not the reality. The practice of IO had actually ruined the synergy of election organizing institutions, for example, between the KPU and Bawaslu. Cases were found where the KPU and Bawaslu often argued in responding to certain events under the excuse of "different perceptions or interpretations". This difference in perception is not merely a matter of technicality and substance, but the result of the intrusion of the interests of the political actors involved in it.

This practice has the potential to produce a bias in the case handling process. This attitude suggests that the election organizers

are also indicated as part of the IO, because they legitimize violations.

The lack of coordination was also shown by the KPU's "antipathy" when supervised by Bawaslu. In fact, Bawaslu's task was to monitor the technical implementation of the election. This antipathy indicates the KPU's fear of their foul play being discovered by Bawaslu.

Fourth, IO operated by providing space for law enforcement efforts or decisions to be annulled. For example, Bawaslu once disqualified a regent candidate due to dynastic politics and violating election rules. The case was filed with the State Administrative Court (PTUN) as an attempt of appeal by the candidate, and was granted, so the candidate could still participate. On the other hand, Bawaslu believed that it had carried out its duties in accordance with the law.

Fifth, IO also operated to ensure that the election organizers comply with their interests by being "silent" or "disobedient" to judicial decisions. Many cases were experienced by Bawaslu, who tried to enforce the law but were intervened by political parties with instructions to "not to investigate'. Bawaslu's integrity in choosing to act or remain silent became crucial. However, in the context of the 2024 Election, Bawaslu often chose silence.

Sixth, in line with the "silent" attitude above, the role of civil society is crucial to weaken the movement of IO through advocacy. The community actively reported forms of violations that had occurred formally to the Election Organizer Ethics Council (DKPP), KPU, Bawaslu. However, these reports tended not to be followed up. If the case was brought to the MK and the Supreme Court (MA), and it was decided that there was a violation, the KPU would not take any action,

claiming that it had "consulted" with the DPR and the government. This fact shows the distance between civil society and election organizers. Apart from that, the civil society's "resistances" were also often confronted by the "rival" civil society, which actually supported the problematic election organizers.

Seventh, IO movements also overtook the main duties and functions of election organizers such as DKPP and Bawaslu. These institutions only wait for reports without being proactive. Their passivity further fostered the IO's existence. On the other hand, civil society often faced intimidation, which has the potential to weaken the willingness of community members to report, due to fear. In addition, the rules for enforcing the law have become ambiguous, as demonstrated by the DKPP case, in which

warning letters were issued to the KPU several times but did not lead to legal clarity.

The Application of Influence Operations

The circumstances that allow IO to exist make the process of identifying these actors and strategies feasible. After collecting data through in-depth interviews with relevant IO actors and referring to the stages of IO implementation discussed in the Introduction, a number of characteristics were identified that illustrate how IO operated in Indonesia during the 2024 Election. IO trends were grouped into four broad themes: Narrative and Content; Construction; Showcase and Motivation; and Manipulation Technique. These themes were translated into a number of characteristics that helped identify IO during the 2024 Election.

	Characteristic	Campaign Team	Political Party
Narrative and Content	**Establishment** The mechanism of narrative creation	More flexible in the formation process. Executed variously according to the relationship between the campaign team and the narrative disseminator.	Structured and limited to specific divisions. Involves one or more relevant divisions in shaping the narrative.
	Type Form of narrative created	Either aggressive or programmatic targeting voters' emotions or rationality.	Normative use of official party accounts. Aggressive role played by accounts that are not officially affiliated.
	Audience Profile of the narrative recipients	The composition is divided by differences in location, age, gender, and the voters' choice of social media usage.	

	Target Objective of narrative dissemination	Public knowledge of the candidates that leads to changes in voter behavior towards them.	
	Platform and Format Channel and narrative form options	• Facebook and Twitter for text-based content; • YouTube for long-duration video content; • TikTok for short video clips; • Instagram for images or videos with explanatory text; • WhatsApp for distributing narratives directly or spreading links from other platforms	
	Strategy How to apply the narrative	Experimental and adapting to existing discourses while constantly trying to create new conversations or trends in public space.	
Construction	**Form** Narrative dissemination group structure	In the form of distributed networks and some of them are ad hoc	Sustainable as part of the party structure
	Interaction Coordination medium for the narrative disseminators	Daily coordination is done through groups on instant messaging platforms	In addition to groups on instant messaging apps, work-related interactions are also carried out through cloud computing-based platforms
	Distribution Narrative dissemination mechanism	Carried out openly or secretly by the disseminators of the narrative	Using party resources to spread the narrative
	Affiliation Relationship of the narrative disseminators with the candidate	Through the coordinator: 1) directly affiliated to the campaign team and candidate; 2) only	Part of the structure of the political party supporting or endorsing the candidate

		affiliated to the candidate; 3) not affiliated to the campaign team	
	Recruitment How to gather and form an army of narrative disseminators	More accessible to anyone who wants to get involved. Recruitment is both organic and planned.	Recruitment is more private, because: 1) the division's posture is not large; 2) some division members are cadres
	Inter-Election Activity of narrative dissemination groups after the election	Experiencing adjustments based on networks relations with election participants.	Continuing its role as multimedia or social media division in official political party structure.
Showcase and Motivation	**Status** Position of the narrative disseminators	Involvement is divided into three forms: 1) fully voluntary; 2) fully paid professional; 3) voluntary with incentives at certain times	Involvement model: 1) being a task force as part of political party; 2) indirectly affiliated with a political party
	Demography Profile of the narrative disseminators	Members of campaign team, students, office workers, housewives, and disabled groups	Cadres and non-cadres who officially work under the management of political parties
	Reporter Utilization of the news sector	Journalist sector workers are involved because: 1) assigned to attach to the candidates and campaign teams; 2) know political party cadres; 3) seek additional income	
	Incentive Form of reward obtained by narrative disseminators	Receive rewards from the campaign team or network coordinator	Receive salary from the party
Manipulation Technique	**Exploitation Method** Technique and tool used in implementing influence operations	Some identified means of exploitation: anonymity or fake accounts, imitation of organic user behavior, coordinated behavior, and creating multi-accounts.	

		Support tools fall into two categories: hardware and software. Hardware acts as a working tool, while software provides the opportunity for operations to take place.
	Vulnerability Loophole that Influence Operations actors capitalize on	A number of vulnerability notes: platform detection on non-bot accounts, which is more difficult to execute and the ease of Influence Operations actors to obtain hacked National Identification Numbers (NIK)

Narrative and Content

- **Narrative formation was influenced by the structure and relations among Influence Operations actors that were not the same between the campaign team and political party.** The fact that there were members of the campaign team who also acted as the coordinator of the Influence Operations actor gave rise to three scenarios of narrative formation: 1) Narrative disseminators who were not officially part of the campaign team received the brief made by the coordinator; 2) Narrative disseminators worked on the brief from the campaign team delivered by the coordinator; 3) Narrative disseminators involved in shaping the narrative. This is different from the narrative-making in political parties, where the division of labor is simpler and limited to certain divisions. These divisions have various names, for example, public relations, communications, or think tanks.

- **Programmatic campaigns and negative campaigns were both used in the 2024 Presidential Election.** The absence of rules prohibiting negative campaigning justified its use as a campaign strategy. An aggressive negative campaign, which presented the flaws or mistakes of the opponent, was considered to have a positive impact on well-informed voters. However, this strategy resulted in a declining level of public trust in democratic institutions filled with publicly elected officials[9]. Meanwhile, smear campaigns were not considered to provide similar electoral incentives due to the potential negative voter sentiment that could arise when the falsehood of the information being spread can be proven.

- **The audience targeted influenced the type of campaign chosen.** For example, discursive and programmatic issues were aimed at urban communities, while pragmatic issues with a one-way communication model were tailored to rural communities. The same categorization was also used for social media campaigns, where the demographic data of the users determined the most effective approach. The choice of approach

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[9] Bibigul Byulegenova, Muhammed Bolysbek, Indira Rystina, Marina Onychko, and Takhira Kamaljanova. "Negative campaigning in modern elections: Ethical and legal aspects." *Politics & Policy* 50, no. 2 (2022): 186-200. https://doi.org/10.1111/polp.12463

adjusted to the audience profile was not always accurate. There were some findings that showed the targeted groups were not exposed to the campaign narrative, or vice versa.

- **The goal of the Influence Operations strategy used was to change voter behavior, and attention was the first entry point.** The continuity of conversation about a candidate indicated whether or not a narrative should continue. For some informants, this matter shows public interest, which became a sentimental and electoral modality for the candidate. However, other informants overlooked the need for positive sentiment to achieve good electoral modalities for candidates.

- **The choice of campaign format varied in each platform, taking into account the key features and consumption behavior of the platform's users.** The attention span[10] and interaction model of social media users were factors that determined how a narrative was shaped and where it was posted. Meanwhile, the choice to use instant messaging apps - to increase the dissemination of narratives - was verified because the public most often obtains political information from platforms such as WhatsApp compared to other social media[11].

- **Campaign strategies were iterative in two different dimensions: substance and space.** The substance dimension means that the narrative was formed from the process of reading phenomena that were then processed into issues, or vice versa. Meanwhile, the spatial dimension means that narratives could be exercised in physical and digital spaces in a continuous and complementary manner. In general, there were three strategies used. The first is creating the wave, whose attempts were aimed at creating conversations in the public space. This creation began by generating a narrative in the digital space that then grew, or carrying out activation in the offline space where the conversation was amplified in the digital space. The second is riding the wave, which could stand separately or be a continuation of the first strategy. Besides trying to attract attention, this second strategy also targeted electoral incentives by showing the candidate's positive affiliation with the narrative being discussed. The third is the false wave, which could be a continuation of the second strategy. This strategy was carried out by allowing waves of conversations to emerge from anywhere, regardless of the sentiment that arises. This strategy was based on the belief that the existing conversations would provide electoral incentives, regardless of the sentiments that arise in the public.

Construction

- **There were two types of narrative disseminator groups: sustainable and temporary.** Sustainable groups are

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[10] Stephan Lewandowsky and Peter Pomerantsev. "Technology and democracy: A paradox wrapped in a contradiction inside an irony." *Memory, Mind & Media* 1 (2022): 1-9. https://doi.org/10.1017/mem.2021.7 and Microsoft Canada, (2015), *Attention spans*. https://dl.motamem.org/microsoft-attention-spans-research-report.pdf

[11] Department of Politics and Social Change of CSIS, (2023), *Proyeksi dan Mitigasi Penyebaran Gangguan Informasi dalam Pemilu 2024* [Data set]. https://saferinternetlab.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/PPT-Rilis-Survei-Nasional.pdf

generally not formed as the election period approaches; this type of narrative dissemination network has worked together more than once in electoral moments. Similar things are also found in the form of teams in political parties, due to their structurally attached positions. There were also groups that function on an ad hoc basis and changed into groups that perform other roles after the election moment is over.

- **In conducting interactions, the narrative disseminators used group features on instant messaging platforms.** Meanwhile, coordination related to the creation of narratives was done on cloud-based platforms, such as Google Docs, because it provides convenience in sharing prepared materials. The cloud-based platforms were not used in interactions involving multiple narrative disseminators, instead instant messaging platforms were more commonly used.

- **Campaign content distribution was done openly or privately, while parties used resources such as official accounts and cadre accounts spread across the central and regional level.** Narrative disseminators who revealed

their identity were more careful in campaigning to avoid risks. The same practice was also found in official accounts or those affiliated with political parties. More aggressive campaign content was carried out by networks owned by narrative disseminators in the campaign teams and political parties.

- **Compared to political parties, the affiliations of narrative disseminators within the scope of the campaign teams were more varied.** Narrative dissemination coordinators acted as nodes and were associated in three different scenarios. First, the network coordinator was directly affiliated to the campaign team and the candidate. This happened because the network coordinator was included in the structure of the campaign team. The second affiliation type only demonstrated the relationship between the network coordinator and the candidate directly, without making them part of the official campaign team. Meanwhile, the third affiliation demonstrated a coordinator who was not affiliated with election participants. This is partly because a narrative disseminator in a network could also have their own network, and in that group they act as a coordinator.
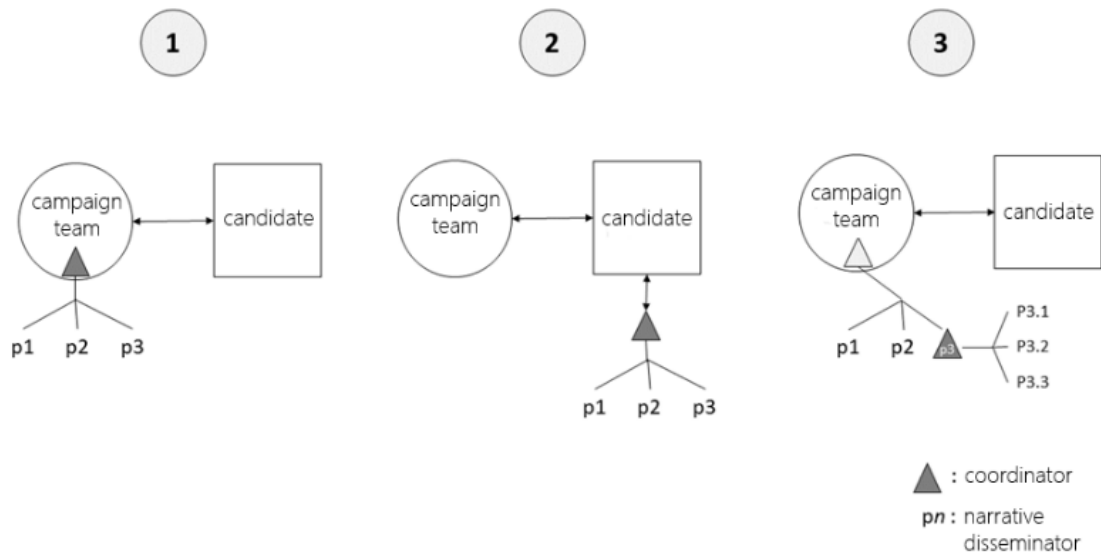
Figure 1. Variety of Coordinators' Affiliation with Election Participants

- **The recruitment patterns of narrative disseminators were more flexible in networks affiliated with campaign teams compared to political parties.** Two patterns were found: 1) The narrative disseminator became the party who actively sought entry into the network in order to work voluntarily or professionally; 2) The coordinator became the party who actively recruited potential narrative disseminators, for example, through social media training programs. Meanwhile, the more rigid posture of political parties means that the recruitment process is not carried out openly. The coordinators of narrative dissemination in political parties prefer to consider recommendations from fellow division members, who are generally cadres, in recruiting narrative disseminators.

- **There were two trends in the inter-election moment for narrative dissemination groups: 1) continuing to contribute to political discourse; 2) transforming the group into a social entity**. For example, one network of volunteer narrative disseminators transformed into a coordinating platform for their meetings. This is different from the activities of spreading narratives that continue to be carried out by members of social media divisions, public relations, or think tanks in political parties. We have not been able to detect any activity by professional messengers after the election period has ended.

Showcase and Motivation

- **Narrative disseminator status was divided into two types of involvement: voluntary and professional.** They worked on a part-time basis and have another main job. In the context of the campaign team, those involved on a voluntary basis were sometimes incentivized, in contrast to

professional narrative disseminators who worked and earned regular wages. However, we did not have the chance to investigate further the status of the group of professionally paid narrative disseminators. On the other hand, narrative disseminators from political parties held a clearer status because their involvement was part of their structural duties. Yet, it was found that there were also narrative disseminators who assisted from outside political parties, reflecting a model of involvement similar to that found in the campaign team.

- **Narrative disseminator profiles were represented by diverse components of age, occupation, and gender**. A network could feature people who have backgrounds that range from office workers, students, activists, housewives, to people with disabilities, taking into account their proficiency in operating gadgets and social media[12]. This was also found in the narrative disseminators in political parties, whose cadres also have different profiles. The flexible way of working and the ability to work from anywhere make the profession of narrative disseminators accessible to many groups of people.

- **Reporters were one of the key operators due to their field experience and national and local media networking**. Their involvement occurred due to three factors: 1) They were officially assigned by the office to be attached to candidates and to report during the campaign period; 2) They

knew political party cadres and are a non-structural part of political parties; 3) They sought additional income by offering services as communication consultants, social media admins, news release makers, doorstops, creating farm accounts and bots, and selling articles (paid per article). Article fees were charged by considering a number of factors: 1) Publishing (online or printed); 2) News coverage (national or local); 3) News exposure (headline or regular article); and 4) The journalist's ties or relationship with representatives of election participants.

- **Some narrative disseminators received incentives on a regular basis, and others received incentives at irregular time frames.** Incentives came from election participants or external parties, where the distribution was arranged by election participants or coordinators. We found that the group of narrative disseminators worked voluntarily, but the incentive mechanism with an indeterminate time was still provided by the coordinators as a form of appreciation, derived from the campaign team or other networks that had resources. Meanwhile, the incentives received by members of narrative disseminators in political parties came from salaries paid by the party on a regular basis.

Manipulation Technique

- **The tools supporting the manipulation tactics were divided into two: hardware and software.** The hardware and software used became

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[12] Wijayanto and Ward Berenschot. "Organisation and funding of social media propaganda." *Inside Indonesia* (online, 13 October 2021). https://www.insideindonesia.org/editions/edition-146-oct-dec-2021/organisation-and-funding-of-social-media-propaganda

client assets when the instruments used did not come from the IO tactics execution team, and vice versa. Examples of hardware were computers and mobile phones, while software manifested in accounts created, databases, and applications that supported Influence Operations tactics.

- **There were applications that could manipulate the existence of accounts within the same device.** One of the informants described how software was able to download the same 100 applications on one mobile phone, and each application could accommodate 5 to 7 accounts. This way of working made the behavior of the accounts not easily detected as odd. This technique was

used when an issue is to be developed in the public space and takes about 2 to 4 hours to complete one execution. According to the informant, only 1 percent of accounts were disabled by the platform (around 100 accounts) every time this action was carried out. We were unfortunately unable to track down the name of the software used. This method can also be done through a computer by opening more than one browser application, such as Google Chrome, Mozilla Firefox, Opera, and Microsoft Edge, simultaneously. This second method was not chosen by the informant because it was more time-consuming compared to using a mobile phone.
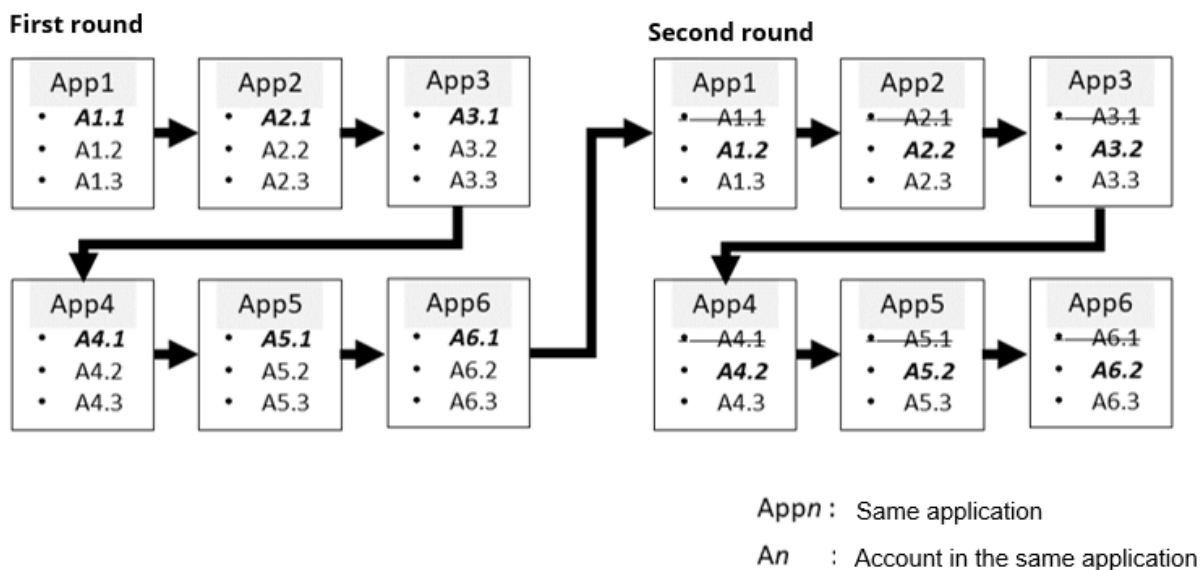

Figure 2. Mechanism of Narrative Distribution by Hundreds of Accounts

- **Poor protection of personal data was the upstream that enabled Influence Operations tactics to operate.** A manipulation timeline was possible because the actors of Influence Operations were able to access NIK sold on the black market. Meanwhile, the

second possibility results from the free sale of phone numbers. Owning an NIK and phone number qualifies the creation of a social media account, which leads to the creation of accounts that are managed to execute Influence Operations tactics. Careful

management, by crafting the behavior of these accounts to resemble real users, makes this manipulation technique difficult to overcome at the downstream level.

Conclusion

The above description of the implementation of IO strategies and actor structures during the 2024 Election helps us detect limitations and challenges in eradicating IO practices in the electoral domain. There are at least four shortcomings that have been identified: covert implementation of IO, lack of transparency of social media platforms, limited resources, and technical challenges of election implementation. The publication of a policy brief under the title *Towards a Collaborative Approach to Addressing Influence Operations in Indonesia* explores these points in more detail, with specific recommendations for each relevant actor, such as election participants, election organizers and other relevant government agencies, social media platforms, and mainstream media.