WHEN CENSORPSHIP IS NOT AN OPTION: INTERNET TROLLING OF NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY IN S. KOREA

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Extended Abstracts

In 2012, S. Korea national intelligence agency, National Intelligence Service (NIS) has conducted Internet trolling operation. During the course of presidential election campaign, the NIS secretly operated Internet trolling as a covert operation. It is known that at least 70 agents were carried their mission. The agency has set its goal to influence public discourse, in favor of the governing party and their presidential candidate. Since covert operation of intelligence agency is commonly illegitimate and rarely known, the case will provide us a unique opportunity to understand, how intelligence agency under authoritative regime uses its power and resources to manipulate public discourses and opinions.

The study is important in a sense that it extends our discussion about the government intervention and propaganda in the era of online media. The typical line of research on the government intervention and online media has been censorship research (e.g. Gill, Crete-Nishihata, Dalek, Goldberg, Senft, & Wiseman 2015). For example, a study has shown that, by preventing government criticism or mobilization cues such as collective expression, an authoritative government has been successful to control online public opinion as well as to maintain political stability (e.g. King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013). In other words, censorship is considered as a primary means to control the Internet and previous studies have been heavily focused on the subject.

In a certain context, however, there are far more advantages of employing trolling for controlling public discourses and opinions than employing censorship. As in the case of S. Korea, for instance, anonymity of the Internet makes it possible the government agents to disguise as ordinary citizens, and in turn, to manipulate public opinion (e.g.

Chen, 2015). Additionally, censorship is fairly easier to be detected by citizens, which constrains the actions of authoritarian government where institutionalized democracy is established. Furthermore, censorship is a passive measure of intervention whereas trolling is more active measure, enabling the government to create public noise or to manipulate public discourse – which causes more detrimental effects on democracy. Therefore, literature on online government intervention needs to expanded.

In order to answer this necessity, this study examines the trolling operation in S. Korea during the presidential election year in 2012. In doing so, the study suggests that the operation to manipulate public opinion is preferable over censorship practice where formal democracy of laws and regulations explicitly prohibit large scale censorship. In addition, the study also suggests that where technological and human resources to conduct censorship are limited – due to the prohibition by the laws and regulations – trolling operation is one of the most effective and efficient ways to intervene online public discourse though it is illegitimate.

The analysis document for this study are drawn from legal documents. First document we have used is the crime report of the trolling, released by Prosecutors' Office of S. Korea. This report is made for investigating NIS trolling activities and for prosecuting relevant individuals. The report has listed and contained the record of the time and site of trolling as well as the contents made by the NIS trolling team. We use this document to analyze the frame that NIS agency has used for trolling. Second, we have used the court ruling records and materials from the trials of the former NIS director. The court documents have provided us the whole picture of entire operation. These materials are used to reconstruct the organizational structure of the trolling team and how the operation is conducted by NIS agents. We have conducted document analysis and used the content coding made by the Prosecutors' Office. The Office has analyzed the contents of trolling whether it is interfering the presidential elections or manipulating public discourse.

Our analysis result is twofold. First, according to our analysis, trolling was the most effective and efficient tool that NIS can employ without technological resources. The automated software program is only used for Twitter trolling as a form of auto-bot. Other trolling activities were solely conducted by human power without any technological support. For instance, agents were moving around coffee shops for WiFi to avoid IP tracking and even they attempted not to be on CCTVs of stores they visited. Financial resource of operation is used for hiring external temporary agents to operate. Putting it differently, trolling was technically simple and manually-driven activities that fully required human resources. We believe one reason that trolling was mainly manually-driven operation is the necessities that their identity in the trolling sites should be disguised as ordinary users of the sites and that the sensitivity to avoid any doubt of other users is required. This is linked to the second, the manipulation of public opinion by intelligence agency usually used the two tactics. One is to eulogize the government's policy by fabricating foreign reputation. The other is to take the same ideological view of trolling sites on trivial issues but to criticize prominent politicians outside of the governing party. As mentioned earlier, the agents were well aware of the sensitivity of topic and sites when they trolled.

In sum, the study suggests that there are variety of pathways that government can actively interfere with public discourses and opinions. Although censorship is well-known government practice to intimidate freedom of speech, the political and technological constraints may influence the selection of other intervention measures even if it is illegitimate practice.

Although the venue of this research lies in political system and there are limitations, we believe the implication of this research can be extended into various areas of research. For instance, it is common practice that private companies hire professional agencies to control their online reputations. We believe future research can be directed into the comparison between government agencies and private entities.

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