

Australian Outlook

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Foreign State-Sponsored Disinformation in the Pacific Islands

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Disinformation stories are used by foreign states in an attempt to influence opinions and framing of foreign policy in the Pacific. Learning from recent experiences in the Pacific Islands may help identify shifts in the online environment that will have domestic and international ramifications.

Disinformation has been a prominent topic of global security research since accusations of Russian interference surfaced in the 2016 United States Presidential elections. Studies have been conducted on foreign disinformation campaigns in the United States, Taiwan, Ukraine and the EU. Comparatively, little has been written on state-sponsored disinformation in Pacific Island Countries (PICs).

Our review found only 13 academic articles and research reports on disinformation that study foreign disinformation in the Pacific, which we reviewed to determine what is currently known about foreign state-sponsored disinformation on public opinion. Disinformation can arise from state or non-state sources, and actually pinning a disinformation story to a state can be difficult to near impossible. However, we can surmise that disinformation that repeats and supports foreign state policy positions may arise from that state, particularly when the information seems disconnected from domestic issues.

According to studies we reviewed, China, Russia and Indonesia have been involved in disinformation in the Pacific Islands region. The most active spreader of disinformation was China, which uses disinformation as part of a broader influence campaign to boost its recent engagement with the Pacific. China is accustomed to using disinformation and influence campaigns within its borders, and most notably against Taiwan, which has been described as subject to the most disinformation in the world as well as the having some of the best counter mechanisms.

What is driving disinformation in the Pacific?

States have different motivating factors to disseminate disinformation in the Pacific. In the case of China, it seeks political influence and support on its position about Taiwan. Since 2019, three Pacific Island countries have switched diplomatic recognition of Taiwan to China, but three—Tuvalu, the Marshall Islands and Palau—maintain ties with Taiwan. Russia has no direct interest in the Pacific, but has engaged in disinformation campaigns globally to erode the United States' reputation.

One notable Chinese disinformation campaign occurred following the 2021 Honiara riots in the Solomon Islands. A series of articles were released by Chinese state-owned media outlet the *Global Times* falsely accusing the United States and Taiwan of inciting the riots. This narrative was amplified by Alfred Sasako of the popular *Solomon Star* newspaper and vice president of the Solomon Islands China Friendship Association, who published an article in the *Solomon Star* that claimed Taiwan had sponsored the violence.

In 2024, a similar disinformation campaign involved cooperation between Chinese and Russian state-sponsored media, with the Russian news outlet *Sputnik* announcing that it had found evidence of a US conspiracy to stage an electoral coup against pro-Chinese Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare. The article quoted what it claimed was an anonymous source from the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES). This article was picked up by the *Global Times* and the Chinese media site published six articles amplifying the false narrative. At around the same time as these publications, an anonymous source claiming to be from the IFES circulated an email claiming that, with US knowledge and funding, insurgent supporters of former Malaita premier Daniel Suidani intended to use petrol and dynamite to destroy critical infrastructure and attack the Solomon Islands government. To date there have been some prosecutions for arson and looting of Asian

businesses in Honiara but no evidence of pre-planned organised violence. Other analyses of the riots point to deep dissatisfaction with, and exclusion from, politics and economics, being key drivers, combined with a combustible moment of local protest, rather than foreign interference.

Indonesia's primary interest in the Pacific is to quell support for calls West Papuan independence and assert its dominion over the territory. Vanuatu has an active Free West Papua Association and its leaders have repeatedly called for West Papuan self-determination at international forums. Papua New Guinea, Fiji and Solomon Islands governments have not actively supported the West Papuan cause in recent times, and more broadly, Pacific states have shown waning interest in self-determination. An investigation in August 2019 found that an Indonesia-based actor had set up multiple Facebook pages masquerading as independent news pages that spread disinformation about Vanuatu's Special Envoy for the Decolonisation of West Papua to the Pacific Islands States. Indonesia has also been repeatedly linked to bot networks on Facebook and Twitter that "hijack" hashtags such as #FreeWestPapua and #Vanuatu by flooding the hashtags with pro-government comments and infographics. Pro-West Papuan independence activists have reported that their accounts are regularly targeted with verbal abuse and threats from a mixture of authentic and inauthentic accounts on Facebook and Instagram.

Does foreign state-sponsored disinformation work?

Determining the effectiveness of state-sponsored disinformation is challenging, as it rarely operates as a single source tool, and it is difficult to separate the impacts of disinformation from other forms of influence. Nonetheless, analyses to date suggest that foreign state disinformation campaigns in the Pacific have had little immediate impact on the populations they target. The original fake Facebook pages directed at ni-Vanuatu internet users were taken down following the *Daily Post's* report, and a 2022 investigation into China's disinformation campaign around the Honiara riots found that it failed to shift Solomon Islanders' sentiments about either China or the West. Our experience to date suggests authorship is important – so disinformation articles authored by Solomon writers known to be "for hire" rather than journalists with reputations for balanced reporting, or writers with names not known to Solomon audiences were flagged by Solomon internet users as likely untrue. The 2024 *Sputnik* article about election interference was reposted on Facebook by Sogavare's O.U.R. party, but may have been seen as politically biased rather than factual. Disinformation will need to get more sophisticated in order to "feel real", a task that may also be harder to do with artificial intelligence in the Pacific, due to diversity of languages and peoples not easily replicated with current tools.

These are short-term tactical failures, however, which should be set against longer term strategic interests. The interests of foreign states such as China and Indonesia in disinformation in the Pacific will continue and even intensify as conflicts unfold. West Papua has become increasingly militarised in recent years and election of former military general Prabowo Subianto, who has been accused of human rights abuses in West Papua and East Timor, is likely to lead to an escalation of tensions. Likewise, China-Taiwan tensions are high, and the Pacific also holds three of the 11 UN member countries globally that still recognise Taiwan, making them a battleground for the "One China" principle. Northern Pacific countries could be more adversely affected by a future conflict over Taiwan and currently China-linked cyber-attacks are common in Palau.

Longer term goals of foreign disinformation are to discredit individuals and institutions that speak critically—in particular, of Taiwan, Chinese influence, and West Papua—and to diminish the emotive or cultural ties people feel to these causes. Psychological studies have suggested that repeated exposure to false information makes people more receptive to disinformation narratives. Even if specific foreign state-sponsored narratives do not go viral in the Pacific now, trust of authorities, the media and critical thinkers could be dented by this disinformation and, so, it makes it harder to counter disinformation later. The dangers of disinformation do not just lie in the chance foreign state actors may sway public opinion, but in the certainty that they will shape the expanding epistemic environments of Pacific peoples.

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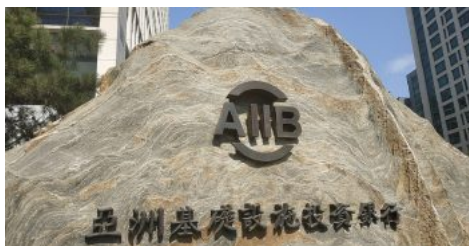


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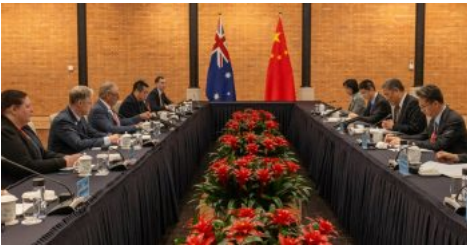


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