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Influence Operations as Brokerage: Political-Economic Infrastructures of Manipulation in the 2022 Philippine Elections

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This study conceptualizes influence operations (IOs), an enterprise that orchestrates manipulative and inauthentic activities to achieve political advantage, as a contemporary form of brokerage during elections. It investigates the empirical case of IOs engaged in covert political campaigning in the 2022 Philippine General Elections through qualitative field research. Drawing from 22 in-depth interviews with IO leads and staff, we define IOs' broker attributes, their brokerage processes, and the capital and value they generate through brokerage. We identify four mechanisms of brokerage by IOs: infrastructural capacity, reputation manipulation, relationship building at scale, and obscured accountability. These mechanisms complement the brokerage work by aboveboard campaigns and other brokers by compensating for their limitations and innovating

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campaign strategies. We argue that IOs are not extraneous deviations but are logical extensions of existing political infrastructures and should be understood as operating with other normative forms of political campaigning.

Keywords: influence operations, disinformation, trolls, elections, brokerage, Philippines, computational propaganda

Influence operations (IOs) are becoming pervasive in elections across the world. IOs are a covert form of propaganda that orchestrates inauthentic activities to manipulate public discourse and subvert information ecosystems for various political ends (Bradshaw & Henle, 2021; Fallorina et al., 2023; Udupa, 2024). A defining characteristic of IOs is its obscurity, which in the context of elections means purportedly being unaffiliated and separate from the official campaign and generally operating underground (Ong & Cabañes, 2019; Tapsell, 2020; Udupa, 2024). IOs use a range of manipulative tactics, from disinformation and hyperpartisan media to astroturfing or orchestrated "grassroots" campaigns and coordinated link sharing (Giglietto, Righetti, Rossi, & Marino, 2020; Keller, Schoch, Stier, & Yang, 2020; Starbird, DiResta, & DeButts, 2023). More importantly, they are operated by organized teams and funded by political actors through intermediaries (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018; Ong & Tapsell, 2022). IOs undermine democratic institutions by normalizing incivil and manipulative political communication (Howard, 2022), capitalizing on dark money (Gaw et al., 2025), and exacerbating existing asymmetries in the political playing field (Madrid-Morales & Wasserman, 2022)—all while systematically concealing these activities from the public.

IOs are subsumed under propaganda and disinformation studies. It became mainstream with the foreign interference of the Russian Internet Research Agency in the 2016 U.S. elections, and later by domestic disinformation campaigns in elections in Brazil (Bastos & Recuero, 2023), India (Udupa, 2024), Indonesia (Wijayanto, Berenschot, Sastramidjaja, & Ruijgrok, 2024), and elsewhere. It is generally characterized as an anomaly, a disruption from the democratic norms, characterized by concepts like "fake news" (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018) and "information disorder" (Wardle, 2017). However, historical accounts comprehensively document political campaigns' use of manipulative communication through third-party political and media consultants (Bakir, Herring, Miller, & Robinson, 2019). Deceptive, covert tactics are already part of the political communication playbook, and IOs operate more as an extension than a deviation of these practices. In other words, IOs are a normative part of political campaigns embedded in existing "electoral mobilization regimes" (Aspinall, Weiss, Hicken, & Hutchcroft, 2022. p. 5).

Within these electoral mobilization regimes, IOs perform a brokerage function like other brokers, such as political consultants, building relations between politicians and stakeholders (Nyhan & Montgomery, 2015) and community leaders bridging politicians and voters (Aspinall et al., 2022). The Philippines serves as an exemplary case of IOs as brokerage, where IO was pioneered in 2016 (Ong & Cabañes, 2019) as part of the larger pattern of brokerage that is both the source and the product of democratic backsliding. Operating within existing brokerage schemes, political actors, government offices, and private agencies all engage in IOs to manufacture political advantage on and off elections (Ong & Tapsell, 2022). As such, although IOs are covert, partial knowledge can be inferred from foundational investigations in the Philippines to elucidate their political-economic infrastructure and the constellation of interests and incentives that underpin brokerage processes.

This research conceptualizes IOs as a contemporary form of brokerage for political campaigns. It investigates IOs engaged in covert political campaigning in the 2022 Philippine General Elections through qualitative field research. Drawing from 22 in-depth interviews with IO leads and staff, we define IOs' broker attributes, their brokerage processes, and the capital and value they generate through brokerage. We identify four mechanisms of brokerage by IOs: infrastructural capacity, reputation manipulation, relationship building at scale, and obscured accountability. These mechanisms complement the brokerage work by aboveboard campaigns and other brokers by compensating for their limitations and innovating campaign strategies.

Conceptualizing IOs as brokerage situates it within the bounds of normative political communication, which brings to the fore its known and potential intersections with other conventional campaign components (i.e., political advertising, media debates). It also emphasizes the analytic utility of brokerage as a concept in political communication (Gaw & Soriano, 2025) with brokers facilitating and transforming political messages, voter mobilization, and campaign strategies, more broadly. This research builds on the foundational empirical work domestically and internationally on covert disinformation operations using field and ethnographic methods (Ong & Cabañes, 2019; Udupa, 2024; Wijayanto et al., 2024) by also advancing its theoretical significance as a political apparatus. Its focus on the Philippines as an example of Global South democracies experiencing democratic backsliding also underlines the uneven and complex political-economic conditions that shape and are shaped by the brokerage of IOs (see Madrid-Morales & Wasserman, 2022).

Influence Operations as Brokerage

IOs are generally studied atheoretically, and this study intervenes by conceptualizing IOs as a form of brokerage not only because of their conceptual congruence but also because of their analytical latitude that situates IOs in contemporary political campaigns. However, brokerage as a concept is largely understudied in political communication (Gaw & Soriano, 2025) and thus the need to explicate it as the theoretical anchor of this research.

Brokerage is "the process of connecting actors in systems of social, economic, or political relations in order to facilitate access to valued resources" (Stovel & Shaw, 2012, p. 141). It is necessitated by opportunities that range from connecting previously disconnected actors to facilitating the flow of information, capital, or goods in contexts of uneven distribution of resources. Opportunities for brokerage arise from "informal, personal relationships" on a micro level where brokers are already embedded within social groups or networks, and "when two or more distinct social entities are both insulated and proximate" on a macro level where brokers mediate the relations given their social, cultural, or political situatedness (Stovel & Shaw, 2012, p. 140).

Brokers have two key attributes that equip them to perform brokerage. First, they are socially embedded within or between social worlds, allowing them to leverage their local ties and in-group identification. For instance, party members who are well-connected but are not in positions of power are best positioned for brokerage between partisan actors in government (Esteve Del Valle & Borge Bravo, 2018). Second, brokers are perceived to possess skills or knowledge that enable them as effective intermediaries between actors and groups. News media institutions, in the context of policy, have domain

knowledge and framing capacity for actors such as states and civil society to "acquire, interpret, and apply policy-relevant knowledge" (Yanovitzky & Weber, 2019, p. 197).

IOs as brokers have their precedence in the contexts of politics and communication. Political brokers such as moderate political parties (Carty & Cross, 2010) and political consultants (Nyhan & Montgomery, 2015) mediate between political stakeholders, negotiate agreements or resolve conflict, and bridge informational or strategic gaps. Examined to a lesser extent, but increasingly salient, are brokers in communicative roles. These brokers curate information from disparate sources, translate knowledge to outsiders, and mediate relations using persuasive communication strategies (Soriano & Gaw, 2022; Yanovitzky & Weber, 2019). Across these contexts, brokers not only facilitate connections and relations but also generate change and innovation in the range of possible social, political, and economic actions (Bräuchler, Knodel, & Röschenthaler, 2021).

The Philippines is a representative case of brokerage operating in a political patronage system (Hicken, Aspinall, & Weiss, 2019). Political parties are proxies of patronage structures composed of "local machines" run by disparate political families that build opportunistic alliances to control national and local government offices (Aspinall et al., 2022). These local machines are operated by political brokers at two levels: political consultants orchestrating national or regional campaigns among allies, and community leaders mobilizing local communities to elicit votes. These brokers leverage the socioeconomic conditions of the public through short-term monetary gains (Hicken et al., 2019), as well as their sociopolitical sensibilities by promising power and resources postelections (Aspinall et al., 2022). Social media also paved the way for digital brokers who appeal to these same dispositions and aspirations (Soriano & Cabalquinto, 2022) by using content strategies, platform affordances, and social media to harness political support. Within political systems of patronage, brokers are enmeshed in a larger system of politicians distributing rent and favors to those who helped them be elected to office.

IOs in practice fit the framework of brokerage. IOs engage in funded covert activities on digital media aimed at producing political advantage for their clients, like most political brokers, through disinformation, media manipulation, and other inauthentic tactics. It is designed to elicit participatory responses often from unwitting audiences and is attuned to new media logics such as platform affordances and algorithms (Giglietto et al., 2020; Soriano & Gaw, 2022; Starbird et al., 2023). Some political campaigns also use manipulative strategies such as negative campaigning that makes salient damaging information about their opponents or divisive rhetoric. However, IOs are concealed by design, from their strategists and operators to their clients and funding organizations (Ong & Cabañes, 2019) and thus cannot be associated with the candidates and shielded from public scrutiny. IOs are performing brokerage in the shadows, generating political value through strategic but problematic political communication in exchange for a portion of under-the-table campaign financing.

Elections in most democracies, except in highly advanced democracies (Feldstein, 2021) have contributed to the rise of IOs (Giglietto et al., 2020; Keller et al., 2020; Ong & Cabañes, 2019; Udupa, 2024), wherein brokers conventionally play a central role in building alliances, mobilizing voters, and mediating between politicians and voters (Aspinall et al., 2022; Carty & Cross, 2010; Nyhan & Montgomery, 2015). In the Philippines, IOs have evolved across three election cycles from 2016 to 2019 and 2022 (Fallorina et al.,

2023). Extant research has documented how using crude tactics of fake news and trolling have expanded to microtargeting and social media influencer mobilization both to legitimize the political candidate and to delegitimize media, academics, and other liberal elites (Fallorina et al., 2023; Gaw et al., 2025; Ong & Cabañes, 2019). IOs also cultivate asymmetrical political polarization, which has not existed historically in the Philippines between administration and opposition coalitions despite the wider competitive field, making proadministration supporters more susceptible to manipulation (Deinla, Mendoza, Ballar, & Yap, 2022).

Ong and Tapsell (2022) identify four "work models" of IOs, two of which are within government—state-sponsored and in-house staff—and the other two operate commercially through advertising and PR and clickbait operators. The advertising and PR model is the dominant model during elections as political candidates in multilevel races employ third-party industry professionals to run IO campaigns. The other models are for specific political projects, such as state-sponsored antimedia campaigns (Soriano & Gaw, 2022) and historical disinformation (Mendoza, Elemia, Recto, & de Castro, 2023). We build on this foundational empirical work by integrating a theoretical framework from which to understand IOs as not only an antidemocratic project but also fulfilling a political function within existing power structures through brokerage.

At its core, IOs perform brokerage by bridging information, relations, and support in democratic contexts of fragile political institutions led by populist strongmen: Disinformation campaigns mobilized support for former President Duterte's strongman politics in the 2016 Philippine elections (Ong & Cabañes, 2019), IO astroturfing promoted nationalist policies against minorities in the 2019 Indian Elections (Yadav Riedl, Wanless, & Woolley, 2023), and the WhatsApp-focused manipulation instigated calls for coup d'état to challenge the results of the 2022 Brazilian elections (Bastos & Recuero, 2023). In all these cases, IOs were not an accessory but central to electoral campaign strategy to bridge the gap between actual and potential dis/approval of candidates, issues, and platforms. As such, IOs should be understood as part of a larger "electoral mobilization regime" (Aspinall et al., 2022, p. 5) through the lens of brokerage.

Methodology

The research investigates IOs as brokerage from a political economy lens, underlining the entanglement of political and economic incentives of brokers engaged in IOs. Elections in the Philippines are historically inundated by corrupt practices emblematic of the region such as vote buying, system failures, and political violence (Aspinall et al., 2022). IOs introduce a new dimension in efforts to undermine election integrity, spreading from the Philippines to its neighbors like Indonesia and Malaysia (Tapsell, 2020) and the West (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018). The 2022 Philippine elections also mark the maturity of IOs with its political-economic infrastructure expanding from Duterte to current President Marcos Jr. and to both their allies and opposition (Fallorina et al., 2023), emphasizing the transferability of IO strategies across candidate, electoral race, and time. These developments necessitate investigating IOs not only as a political campaign innovation but as a new form of political brokerage across actors and their various interests.

We traced the political-economic infrastructure of IOs through a comprehensive qualitative field study of IOs running political campaigns in 2022 from 22 in-depth interviews with individuals who are or have been involved with and compensated for IO work. The secrecy surrounding online IOs makes them notoriously difficult to study. Apart from the lack of documentary evidence for the existence of IOs (i.e.,

office address, contracts, invoices, and so on), previous research such as that of Ong and Cabañes (2019) points out that people involved do not openly admit their involvement and are reluctant to identify their political clientele. IO work, however, became common during the 2022 election season (Fallorina et al., 2023), expanding our potential entry points to the field. As such, the study enlisted six qualitative field researchers connected to adjacent fields to IOs (i.e., governance, marketing, and business process outsourcing) to find IO workers and conduct in-depth interviews.

The researchers leveraged the trust of their immediate networks, who bridged the initial interactions between the researchers and informants. We employed a two-step verification process to confirm the prospective informants' involvement in IOs: (1) an initial interview to determine if they worked on a political campaign and used nonconventional tactics such as trolling and disinformation and (2) an interview proper to confirm that they received regular financial remuneration. Out of the 27 interviews conducted, 22 interviews were with individuals confirmed to be carrying out paid work in IO campaigns (Table 1).

Table 1. Profiles of Informants.

Category	Role	Pseudonym	Partisanship	Level
IO Leads (n = 8)	Strategist	Antipolo	Multiple	Local
		Maasin	Multiple	Local
		Laoag	Multiple	National
		Oroquieta	Proadministration	National
	Coordinator	Escalante	Opposition	National
		Valencia	Multiple	National
	Campaign Manager	Tangub	Multiple	National
		Toledo	Proadministration	Local
IO Staff (n = 14)	Troll manager	Bayawan	Proadministration	National
	Trolls	Isabela	Undisclosed	Undisclosed
		Malaybalay	Proadministration	National
		Ilagan	Proadministration	National
		Quezon	Proadministration	National
		Dumaguete	Opposition	National
		Iloilo	Opposition	National
		Valenzuela	Opposition	National
	Content contributor	Naga	Proadministration	National
		Baguio	Opposition	National
		Kabankalan	Undisclosed	Local
		Ligao	Opposition	National
	Content creator	Calamba	Proadministration	National
	Microinfluencer	Butuan	Proadministration	National

The researchers used a semistructured interview guide[2] that covered multiple themes, including the worker's background, day-to-day activities, communication strategies, and the organization of the IOs. We focused the interview on certain themes that correspond to the background and perceived extent of knowledge of the informant. Most of our interviews were recorded on audio and transcribed upon securing consent. In cases where interviewees expressed discomfort with recording, detailed notes were taken. Following our ethical considerations to protect the informants, all interviewees were anonymized, and specific details that could potentially identify them were omitted. The participants were provided a $10 gift card (around PhP500, less than the minimum wage) for their time. Our interview data were analyzed using Atlas.ti, and a thematic analysis was conducted through abductive coding to identify patterns in the data.

The heightened sensitivity and secrecy of IOs present limitations in our data, such as potentially not accounting for other roles in the IOs, comparative dynamics of IOs between national and local races, and relationship of IOs with other campaign components that would differentiate their brokerage tasks. The researchers have developed strategies to address these limitations within the scope of the research by expanding our recruitment for four months, constantly comparing interview backgrounds and notes, and establishing data saturation to ensure a diverse and sufficient representation of actors.

Findings

Examining IOs in the 2022 Philippines elections uncovers underlying characteristics that correspond to traditional brokerage, such as performing tasks that bridge candidates and their political message to voters online. The mechanisms by which they perform brokerage, however, are new and specific to IOs. In this section, we delve into the attributes of IOs that facilitate their role as brokers, the strategies they employ that enable the brokerage processes, and the capital and value that they generate.

Broker Attributes

IOs in the Philippines are composed of individuals in a team who have designated roles under two key categories: IO leads who focus on strategic planning and campaign management, and IO staff who carry out specific tasks such as content development and content deployment. They exhibit different but complementary attributes that allow them to perform their respective roles and achieve their campaign targets.

Skills

The IO leads are political consultants, campaign managers, or government workers who have a purview of the election campaign landscape. They exhibit multifaceted skills that allow them to navigate politics alongside traditional and new media, which help in identifying gaps and opportunities where IOs can intervene. They analyze data on the political use of digital media platforms and determine how they can synergize with other subteams in the campaign. Antipolo (Strategist), who works for various political candidates who ran local and national elections, explains this dynamic: "You have to coordinate with the

[2] https://osf.io/yzwe7/?view_only=1c585b39b4f44f1e8be96c0fa3f9d7b8

mother PR and then send the reports to validate the work done. We have to provide the reports and show which ones made an impact—trolls or engagements."

The IO staff come from diverse backgrounds but are hired under a basic requirement: familiarity with the affordances of the social media platforms that allow them to create content, post, and comment on the content, or expand its reach through reposting or sharing. They are also expected to exhibit basic digital skills, including the use of spreadsheets and messaging apps to relay updates and information to the team. Bayawan (Troll Manager) described their tasks and the skills involved as part of a troll farm:

> When I started, I managed 50 accounts, different troll accounts, and then I listed them in spreadsheets. Then I used sim cards to register [new accounts]. We use sim cards as a mode of registration, easy access, and then we use a burner phone to check updates, the details, and the messages on Facebook. Then we build a persona and a character for every account.

Connections

The leads have two strategic connections that enable them to do IO work: relationships with the political candidates or their respective intermediaries, and connections to media practitioners, particularly those in the field of public relations, advertising, or digital marketing. Such connections afford them the discernment to execute campaign strategies as they see fit.

> My involvement with Influence Operations and trolling is part of the unofficial capacity. The strategy is that you have messaging from the top which will be granulated by what we call in the industry as brand advocates. From the overall messaging, the brand advocates, connected to another group, granulate the messaging with the leeway to play with the message, and can write the message in a way that feels natural to the group that we want to engage. (Escalante, Coordinator)

Connections are valuable for IO staff only in their capacity to recruit people into the team. They use their immediate or secondary networks, such as friends, family members, and peers of friends, to recommend people they trust to join the covert operations. Malaybalay's (Troll) was recruited through a friend who "gave me the name of a dummy account [that] informed me of what needs to be done and how to get paid."

Upon recruitment, the IO staff are assigned to clients who contracted them for their work, both political clients running electoral campaigns and issue campaigns, and nonpolitical clients for their business needs. This tells us that ideological alignment is not a prerequisite for IO involvement, as the IO staff may work under certain campaigns that are not aligned with their political beliefs. Meanwhile, for the IO leads, their political leaning matters, and political and campaign knowledge is valued during recruitment. The compromise is mostly around campaign strategy when clients insist on pursuing a specific direction for the IO campaign despite disagreements from the IO team.

Broker Processes

Brokerage by IOs overlaps significantly with other brokers in the campaign, but they have distinct resources that alter how they engage in brokerage processes. We identify three key strategies that underpin these processes: brokering public reputation, bridging gaps in relationships, and leveraging opportunities for brokerage.

Brokering Public Reputation

The aboveboard campaign may promote the candidates' political "brand," but IOs bridge the gap between this ideal image and the actual reputation of candidates in media and public opinion. This is achieved through seeding "organic" conversations about the candidate, in the form of "word of mouth," which includes "all the things that you did, all the things that make you famous as a politician" (Antipolo, Strategist).

Contrary to the use of disinformation and black propaganda that was documented in earlier research (Ong & Cabañes, 2019), IOs in the 2022 election cycle have shifted their focus on positive campaigning, which ranges from boosting the accomplishments of candidates and making them relatable and authentic (i.e., personal, nonpolitical, and entertaining topics) to creating myths around them. These digital campaign materials usually come in the form of edited photos or videos, and sometimes memes, that capture the public's attention and portray the candidate they handle in a more positive light compared with their opponents. Oroquieta (Strategist) cited an instance where they engaged in mythmaking:

> There was this video content that the team made about seeing this political candidate as the second coming of Manuel Quezon (former Philippine President). You know, we have to make Manuel Quezon a mythological figure who brought the Philippines to something great. And the candidate, being someone who's a look alike, to make a reincarnation like that. I know it's stupid but you have to do it right? So that's what I did.

The manipulative aspect of IOs lies in their amplification of this aspirational persona. This involves cultivating "troll" profiles on social media that mimic real people and creating engaging posts based on data and trends. This is echoed by Bayawan (Troll Manager), who creates accounts that are "good enough to be perceived by others as a real account" by using photos and names of people he knows and trying to build a following of 10,000.

Bridging Gaps in Relationships and Information

IOs engage in data-driven targeting to build relationships between the candidates and the voters. Teams familiarize themselves with their target and peripheral audiences and use social media analytics to understand their behaviors and preferences. They also use social media listening tools to gauge audience sentiment and evaluate which political narrative works for their candidate. The same techniques not only help them identify target communities but also allow them to tailor-fit their social media accounts to the communities' preferences.

> Let's fan the fire; the networks are ready to amplify. The operators are ready to engage. Our activated communities, they also fan the messages important to them. How do we see this? We have digital data people looking into behavior and engagement, not just the reactions of the people. (Escalante, Coordinator)

Surveys are also employed not only to capture the audience's behaviors and preferences but also to create a facade that they are being heard. This relationship building goes further by emphasizing the participatory capacity of the voters, mobilizing them to campaign for their preferred candidates through posting and reposting, or engaging with content on social media.

> I would say that Influence Operations would not be successful without the understanding of the lived struggles, shared hopes and dreams and frustrations and anger of the community that they want to engage. Influence Operations should have a clarity of who their target audience is. If you have a clear target audience, you should know their fears, their problems in life, and that's how you fix them. (Escalante, Coordinator)

IOs also use data to evaluate their effectiveness through engagement metrics, which build up to helping their candidates win their respective races.

Leveraging Opportunities

IO teams are always up-to-date and receptive to shifts in the political landscape. They are "activation ready" (Escalante, Coordinator), prepared to identify opportunities to promote or protect the candidates they work for. IO staff are tasked to counter criticisms, whereas IO leads focus on managing bad press. In general, IOs strive to be in the loop of both political issues and the cultural zeitgeist. Antipolo (Strategist) underline this disposition with their line of work:

> You should always be aware of the news. You should be vigilant, with public profiles open on your end. When the iron is hot, that's the time you strike. You observe what they say and what they show. You have to observe and try to create a narrative out of it.

IOs also leverage existing communities that support their candidates and involve them in the campaign. Maasin (Strategist), discusses that their approach to communities is to "remind them that, number one, they're present. Number two, they're part of the community. Number three, they personified how their fellow citizens are choosing to live."

Broker Value Generation and Access to Capital

IOs are not a one-off, and they build on their capital and produce unparalleled value that other brokers are not able to provide. These include manufacturing support, establishing infrastructure, and maintaining covertness.

Manufactured Support as Value

IO brokers convert voters to supporters by manufacturing a perception that their candidates have overwhelming support online. They create this illusion by setting quotas of new accounts to be created and engagement to be reached for each of their posts.

> We use this type of method, like everyday [*sic*] we need to do three accounts per day, to be able to not get caught by Facebook. And then every three accounts, three hours is the interval time to do that. So you need to work faster to be able to do 50 accounts, especially in campaign season, we do this like, I need to make 1,500 accounts before. I think 500 accounts is worth PhP 100K ($5.6K). That's a lot of money. (Bayawan, Troll Manager)

Laoag (Strategist) adds that IOs also offer "like guarantors" that ensure the generation of an agreed-on number of likes, shares, and comments in exchange for payment to simulate traction.

Part of manufacturing support is eliciting procandidate narratives online from supporters, sometimes in exchange for "care packages" in the form of small tokens such as food, money, or T-shirts. Tangub (Campaign Manager) explains that "you want other people telling your stories . . . sometimes the statement will just be good enough to spread on their own." It is also a way to provide supporters "a space in the conversation" where "[they] see the message, not the trolls" (Escalante, Coordinator).

Infrastructure as Capital for Brokerage

Although IO leads are primarily responsible for determining strategies and messages, IO staff have their own expert domain, broadly defined as follows: content creators in charge of content development, troll managers and troll teams boost engagement, and data analysts evaluate campaign performances and optimization. When needed, they also outsource some production tasks to graphic artists and video editors, as well as to microinfluencers to amplify reach. Calamba (Content creator) shares that "the protocols became more standardized" compared with when he first joined the team when it "didn't have a supervisor, (or) a director." Figure 1 illustrates the general organizational structure of IOs, provided that some IOs have variations given the client's requests and the financial resources.

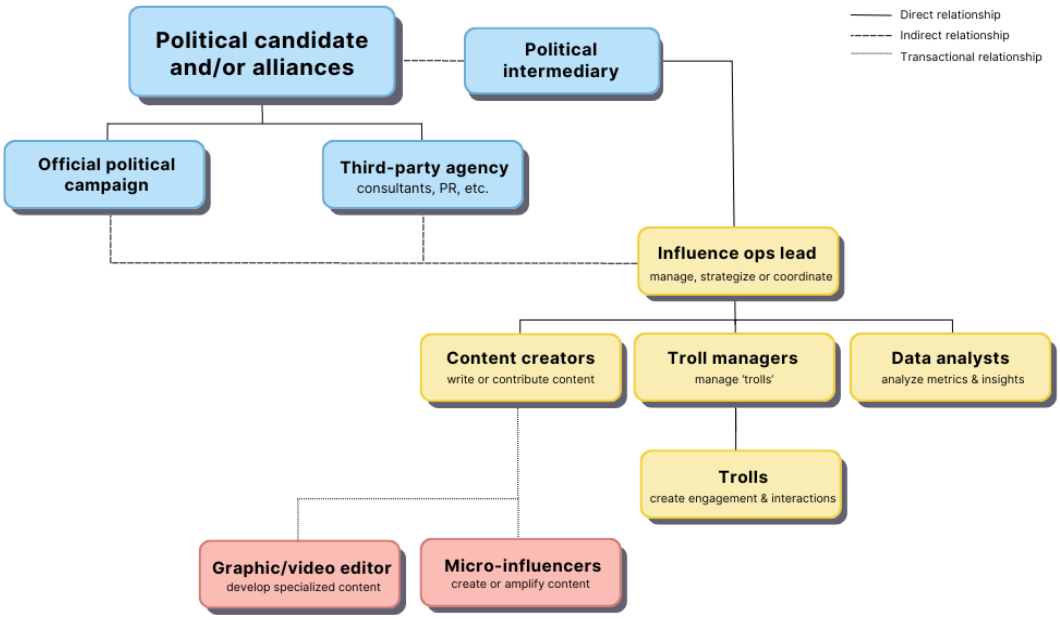

Figure 1. General organizational structure of IOs in the Philippines.

The IO organization can be characterized as having a parallel, but indirect relationship to the politicians' official campaign (blue), bridged by a political intermediary (representative on behalf of the politician) who will designate an IO lead among independent consultants or from third-party agencies. The IO leads organize small teams that they directly manage who have specific roles in the IO (yellow). The IO leads have direct relationships with the political intermediary as they provide key insights used in political campaign strategizing, whereas the IO staff have no direct engagement with clients. Some specialized tasks are outsourced outside of the IO team (red), and their relationship is on a transactional, per-need basis. The organization of IOs displays a certain hierarchy, and higher positions mean closer engagements with the clients.

The infrastructure is also malleable to simultaneously serve various political and/or economic ends and is connected to different funders that range from political dynasties to religious organizations and business tycoons. This means that the IO team is not tied to serving just one political candidate in each electoral cycle. A team may serve multiple clients at a time and may even be part of the IOs at multiple levels of the government from national to local races. There are instances wherein the IO staff assigned to one political candidate's campaign are loaned to another when needed. Laoag (Strategist) describes the IO infrastructure as "not a linear process but it's an ecosystem" that is adaptable to different requirements and contexts.

Covert Operations as Value

The covert nature of IOs allows brokers to perform brokerage that evades accountability and scrutiny. Critical to the operations is siloing the operations to hide the paper or digital trail. On an operational

level, IO staff do not work together in an office and use dummy accounts instead of their personal accounts. Notably, the number of people involved and the structure of IOs for a candidate is obscured, masking the actual scale of the operations. This is afforded by the segmented nature of the operations within each team.

On a transactional level with clients, campaign teams, and other allied groups, IO teams create "make-believe firms to act as agents in order to hide the paper trail" (Oroquieta, Strategist).

> In actual law, all of this is tracked, ideally. However, if you're smart enough, you can find ways to not be traceable. For example, if your speciality is in negative campaigning, or character assassination attacks, of course you don't want it to be directly linked to your political candidate. So they will create a make believe agency, and when they're done, that agency will be dissolved.

Although the operations have recently displayed a more structured organization, remunerations vary. IOs hired by the official campaign team or third-party agencies sign a temporary contract and become part of the organization's regular payroll paid directly to their bank accounts, masked under an "official" role. Meanwhile, IOs hired by other political intermediaries do not sign documentary agreements and have less structure in terms of salaries. Although there is no universal range of compensation, the factors that influence remuneration include but are not limited to their role in the IO, their scope of duties, and their clients—whether it be the candidate and the level of their office and/or the intermediary company who employs them. Although no informant mentioned nondisclosure agreements, they have displayed a commitment to secrecy, especially in naming their clientele. This commitment, however, may have been partly because of their fear of being judged about whom they work for, or a recognition of the power and network of their clientele. There is also recognition among the IO workers that their engagement is only seasonal and that termination is possible at any time.

With the secrecy from the operational level to the transactional level, the IOs circumvent election regulations as there are no openly identifiable institutions and workers under this pursuit. Since IOs cannot be directly tied to the politicians they work for, politicians are further distanced from black operations that used to be common in the previous elections.

Influence Operations and Its Mechanisms of Brokerage

Contemporary political campaigns are buttressed by brokerage—brokers orchestrating aboveboard campaigns to promote competitive advantage (Nyhan & Montgomery, 2015), brokers mobilizing ground campaigns to build proxy relationships between politicians with voters (Aspinall et al., 2022), and now, brokers running covert IOs to manipulate public perception and leverage residual political opportunities. These three categories of political brokers fundamentally fulfill similar roles of brokering votes and loyalties through strategic exchanges, but the third departs from the traditional brokers in three ways.

First, IOs' political turf is social media, which surpasses the local reach of traditional brokers. The Philippines is one of the world's social media capital (We Are Social & Meltwater, 2024), and brokers who can navigate this social arena for political ends are critical for the success of any campaign outside of digital

advertising. Second, although traditional brokers are trained on best practices from political consultancy (Nyhan & Montgomery, 2015), IOs have a more hybrid skill set that integrates consultancy with fast-moving industries like digital marketing and public relations (Ong & Cabañes, 2019), leveraging the digital cultural milieu, data analytics, and platform algorithms.

Third, all brokers have an eye for opportunities, and IOs are built on political-economic opportunities particular to their country context. IOs in the Philippines exploited a trifecta of opportunities: a saturated media environment that begets alternative influence strategies (Soriano & Gaw, 2022), a network of gig workers armed with basic digital skills (Soriano & Cabalquinto, 2022), and an election regulation policy inattentive to nonadvertising social media campaigning (Fallorina et al., 2023). These structural conditions, which are present in other political contexts (Feldstein, 2021), provide IOs the sustained resources for political mobilization. These departures introduce distinct capacities that allow for IOs to engage in four mechanisms of brokerage.

The first mechanism of brokerage of IOs is its infrastructural capacity. Community brokers usually work on their own or in a group, tapping into informal networks and using their context-specific knowledge and skills (Aspinall et al., 2022). IOs as brokers de facto operate as an organization, following formal work structures and protocols. Our findings identify a clear hierarchy of roles, with the IO lead in a management role and the IO staff subject to the instructions of the lead, as well as task specializations that segment the team into strategists, coordinators, content creators, and data analysts. This chain of command structure was already in place in the early stages of IOs in the 2016 elections (Ong & Cabañes, 2019).

However, the IOs in the 2022 elections were more industrialized and specialized in their roles, capitalizing on social media data, vernacular content formats, and social media influencers. They had an established workflow and playbook of strategies, such that even when a new set of IO staff came in, they were promptly acquainted with the operations. This infrastructure was a product of multiple iterations of IOs across three election cycles (Fallorina et al., 2023), optimizing their organizational structure, recruitment tactics, and communication strategies in anticipation of diverse political requirements and the changing media landscape.

The infrastructural capacity of IOs as brokers makes their brokerage work scalable to multiple levels of political competition and transferable to contexts outside of elections and politics. IO brokers in the Philippines work on national and local electoral campaigns, during elections or in-between (Ong & Tapsell, 2022). In contrast, in more repressive contexts where IOs are exclusively controlled by the state—most notably in China—IO infrastructural capacity is inherently tied to the state itself, rendering the outlined brokerage mechanism far less relevant (Han, 2018). The distinct amalgamation of political interests and commercial logics in IOs in democratic but developing contexts expands its scope of brokerage not only domestically but also internationally, such as the wholesale transfer of disinformation strategies from the Philippine elections to the Brexit and Trump campaigns in 2016 (Silverman, 2019).

Political consultants as brokers, to certain extents, also have the same flexibility, but they are often restricted to several clients at a time, and their services are not as easily transferable given their focus on high-level strategies tailored to each client. IO brokerage infrastructural capacity to cater to varying needs

and bridge different levels are imprinted in their operations and not contingent on individual brokers' competencies. In other words, IOs are a kind of off-the-shelf broker adaptable to their client's specific circumstances and requirements.

IOs' second mechanism of brokerage is the manufacture of reputation. Traditional brokers "manage" the public image of politicians, with professional consultants deciding on the parties' branding for their tentpole campaign (Nyhan & Montgomery, 2015), and community brokers translating the politicians' publicly known character, accomplishments, and plans to appeal to local voters (Aspinall et al., 2022). IOs being covert have leeway in portraying politicians that not only manage but also produce a reputation not known or even against their known public identity, legitimized by purported "organic" support. Positive campaigning is a central strategy of IOs that both builds on the candidates' public stature by emphasizing accomplishments and personal narratives but also challenges the undesirable aspects of their reputation. This is in line with the increasing personalization of politics that heightens politicians' parasocial relations with the public (Esser & Strömbäck, 2013). Public reputations are also constructed by IOs to be responsive to topical or trending issues and interests, regardless of it being unrelated to politics.

This mechanism is a shift from reputation management approaches by traditional brokers who are limited to their client's existing reputation and have only a narrow allowance for communicating, framing, and translating the politicians' image. They cannot just invent or manipulate information to improve their clients' reputations, something that IOs can do and have done in the past. In particular, IOs have successfully brokered two deceptive narratives for two Philippine presidents now: false justification for Duterte's war on drugs election platform (Kusaka, 2022), and whitewashed history to reform the Marcos name for Marcos Jr.'s presidential run (Soriano & Gaw, 2022). The Philippines is by no means unique in this regard, as contemporary authoritarian rule heavily relies on manipulating the information environment toward creating perceptions of democratic rule (Guriev & Treisman, 2019) and promoting purported inclusive parties despite exclusionary policies (Jha, 2017). Acting as brokers, IOs have the latitude to bridge politicians' perceived reputation to their aspirational, potentially fabricated reputation through a combination of manufactured support through astroturfing and elicited engagement from supporters online.

The third mechanism pertains to IOs' unprecedented capacity to build relationships with voters. Traditional community brokers are trusted in their respective locales because of their social embeddedness (Stovel & Shaw, 2012), but they are often limited to the geographical area or social networks within their communities. IOs do not have that inherent connection in the communities, but they have the capacity to penetrate multiple digital communities bound by common interests and shared affinities identified through tools like social listening and data analytics. IOs attain vernacular authority (Howard, 2022) by accommodating online communities' diverse and dynamic cultural and political sensibilities through targeted and responsive messaging. Both traditional and IO brokers can mobilize voters for their political agenda, but IOs can do this en masse among witting and unwitting audiences (Starbird et al., 2023). Similar to the BJP's IT cell in India, which permeates the fabric of Indian society with a community-tailored IO approach (Jha, 2017), community mobilization has significantly aided Duterte, with his Facebook supporters actively spreading disinformation and attacking his opponents (Sinpeng, Gueorguiev, & Arugay, 2020). While IOs manufacture artificial support for candidates, they also generate real support from the communities they engage through bespoke messages and incentivized interactions such as the "care packages" mentioned in

the interviews. This results in a synergy of orchestrated inorganic support and mobilized organic support that creates a compelling illusion of political popularity on social media.

The fourth and last mechanism of brokerage is obscured accountability given the covert nature of IOs. Traditional brokers are often "known" to be hired hands by the politicians or institutionally linked to the party like super PACs in the United States, creating some expectation of "broker accountability" (Berenschot & Aspinall, 2019), while IO's "underground" nature enables evading scrutiny (Tapsell, 2020). IOs are both distant from politicians by being in the shadows but also linked to the larger political machinery through their complementary role (Udupa, 2024). IOs' covertness operates at three levels: covert relations within the IO team where their identities are masked from each other, covert connections with adjacent "black ops" teams who are cognizant of their output but are strictly mediated by intermediaries, and covert interactions with audiences as contrived grassroots supporters. Obscurity also manifests in the media channels that IOs use, such as the mobilization of extremist Trump supporters in alt-tech platforms like Parler (Rondeaux et al., 2022) and the use of encrypted chat apps to incite the 2022 Brazilian elections insurrection (Bastos & Recuero, 2023). The multiple levels of obscurity are by design, minimizing accountability among individual members of each team and across teams engaged in IOs, and reducing risks of exposure of their operations and vulnerability for their clients. This makes IO brokers unencumbered in their campaigning and afforded room for moral ambiguity with no industry norms to observe, media criticisms to consider, and community judgment to handle. In other words, brokerage by IOs can do whatever the campaigns cannot do publicly, and it creates a gray area that can influence political campaigning norms and practices.

IOs as brokers are often framed as malign actors that undermine democratic processes, but in many ways, they are also logical extensions of political infrastructures (Aspinall et al., 2022). IOs work with the rest of the political machinery (Udupa, 2024), albeit covertly and only linked by select political operatives. They complement the work of traditional brokers from the aboveboard to ground campaigning and compensate for their limitations or innovate their strategies (i.e., vote buying to account buying). More importantly, IOs persist postelections and are embedded in political structures of patronage, may it be as in-house PR (Ong & Tapsell, 2022), enterprises within party system (Udupa, 2024), or even as IO firms serving the global market (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018).

Conclusion

IOs are increasingly incorporated in electoral political campaigns, and this article investigates their role in brokerage between candidates and voters online. Juxtaposed to traditional brokers like political consultants and community leaders, IOs seek to achieve the same brokerage objectives but through new mechanisms. From our field investigation of IOs during the 2022 Philippine elections, we identified four new mechanisms of brokerage at play: infrastructural capacity for plug-and-play covert campaigning, broader latitude to manipulate reputation, expanded relationship building at scale, and mitigated risks because of obscured accountability. These new mechanisms not only complement other brokerage efforts for candidates but also innovate campaign strategies in ways that circumvent the limitations of other brokers.

This research has three key implications. First, by locating IOs as part of the political machinery, studies on political campaigns should take into account covert operations in their analyses to have a holistic view of their messaging, strategies, and impact. The normative approach to studying the communicative aspects of political campaigns involves examining political ads, ground campaigning, media engagement, and other overt campaign apparatuses (Esser & Strömbäck, 2013). Their effect on voter preference and mobilization is then measured through election polls and other kinds of surveys. With IOs also contributing to the campaign's political communication, albeit clandestine, there are potentially some missing variables that affect and confound results. However, this kind of integrated analysis requires responsive methodological toolkits that triangulate subtle and often scattered evidence of IOs, such as employing field methods and computational methods to trace the covert campaign from production to distribution (see Gaw et al., 2025). Further, IO strategies change from one election cycle to the next (or from one party to another), such as the shift from disinformation to inorganic positive campaigning in our findings, and thus the need for a long-term research program to capture the evolution of political campaigns (see Fallorina et al., 2023 for the Philippine case).

The second implication is the centrality of brokerage as an analytical tool in political communication research. Traditional political communication is either direct communication (i.e., websites and social media accounts, advertising) or through news media (i.e., press releases, interviews). Recent research indicates the rise of intermediaries in the field, such as trolls and social media influencers, and they serve as proxy communicators of political messages or agenda. Although brokers and intermediaries may be semantically similar, they are analytically different with brokerage being more conceptually developed (Stovel & Shaw, 2012) and leading to clearer, often transformative outcomes (Bräuchler et al., 2021). Brokers also have their self-interests in the process of brokerage in the form of compensation, favors, or other nonmaterial prospects that the term intermediary does not capture. The conceptual maturity and the quantifiable measures of brokerage make it more suitable for research than more generic constructs.

The third implication underlines the need to interrogate IOs to understand how political institutions in nonauthoritarian contexts use digital technologies to manipulate public discourses and amplify political legitimacy (Bradshaw & Henle, 2021; Fallorina et al., 2023; Udupa, 2024). Unlike the centralized IOs in authoritarian states, IOs in countries in a state of democratic precarity or decline operate as brokers to a wider set of actors vying for power and as such, are constantly evolving their playbook to cultivate leverage for their clients. Although automation like bots is prevalent, IOs in these contexts employ low-skilled, low-cost, but dynamic operatives that can generate seemingly more organic and more authentic networks and conversations (Fallorina et al., 2023). As such, an analysis of IOs as brokerage problematizes the various configurations of political value generated by the economic transactions between political actors and IO operatives. It also articulates the extent to which specific democratic structures and norms (or lack thereof) set the conditions for such brokerage processes.

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