



Illicit Economies of the Internet

Click Farming in Indonesia and Beyond

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Click farms are often considered either a form of fraudulent online marketing or as a type of exploitative digital labour based on an illegitimate business operation that produces ‘click spam’. There has, however, been limited research on how these entities operate, who the actors are, and how the market is organised. In an ethnographic spirit, this essay takes click farmers not as an aberration, but rather as a starting point for approaching the ‘like economy’.

Herman lives deep in densely urban Tangerang in the western part of sprawling greater Jakarta. With more than 30 million people, Jakarta is not only one of the largest urban agglomerations in the world, but also characterised by an increasingly intense use of social media. In 2012, it was named the world’s most active Twitter city (Lipman 2012). Today the same is true for Instagram Stories (Instagram 2017), a feature that allows users to post images and videos that disappear from view after 24 hours. Indonesians are among the world leaders in time spent on the mobile Internet—Internet services accessed from handheld devices—around four hours per day (Google Temasek

2017). For many people in Indonesia today, ‘connecting to the Internet’ means using social media platforms. As Merlyna Lim (2018, 163) puts it, ‘Facebook, in fact, is more popular than the Internet.’

Herman, who is in his early thirties, has lived through these changes. After dropping out of college he spent years teaching himself basic programming and money-making schemes, such as the sale of gaming accounts, in the Internet cafés that were pervasive in Indonesia before the rise of smart phones. With the advent of social media, he began to sell followers, first on Twitter around 2012 and more recently on Instagram, which is increasingly becoming the dominant platform in the country. With a handful of friends and neighbours he has developed a successful and illicit online business—using second-hand computers, a rotating proxy service, a Singapore-based server, and a software application that he rents from a programmer—in order to engage in the highly competitive and volatile market centred on manipulating ‘like’ buttons, views, follower counts, and popularity rankings. The main groups of buyers are online shops, influencers, and politicians. People like Herman, with an impressive digital and entrepreneurial competence, but faced with a limited labour market, are at the heart of an economy with low start-up costs that connects transnational chains of actors and technologies engaged in the production, distribution, and sale of followers.

Click Farms and Follower Factories

In recent years, it has become increasingly evident that there is a major global market for purchasing followers on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. So-called ‘click farms’, or ‘follower factories’ (Confessore 2018)—persons or companies selling likes, views, and followers via unregulated online marketplaces—are at

the centre of the controversy surrounding the digital ‘like economy’ (Gerlitz and Helmond 2013). Previous research by scholars and journalists suggest that the majority of click farms focussing on US social media platforms are based in Asian countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines, Bangladesh, and India, while most click buyers are concentrated in North America and Europe (Clark 2015, Farooqi et al. 2015).

Click farms have been considered either a form of fraudulent online marketing or as a type of exploitative digital labour based on an illegitimate business operation that produces ‘click spam’ (Casilli 2016; Clark 2015; see also Brunton 2013). Click farms or factories appear to localise and control ‘clickwork’. This has furthered the notion that ‘click farms are the new sweatshops’ (DePillis 2014)—and hence, a major problem of unregulated labour specific to the global South. Both views maintain that click farms operate out of a particular territory—‘offshore’ entities in geographical, legal, and socio-cultural terms—and need to be regulated, either because they harm industries or workers. Click farms thus appear as an ethically dubious other, outside of legal regulation.

There has, however, been very limited research on how these entities operate, who the actors are, and how the market is organised. In an ethnographic spirit, and in collaboration with media scholar Patrick Vonderau, I have attempted to respond to this popular perception of the ethical dubiousness of these entities through a form of ‘ethical inversion’, in which click farmers such as Herman are taken not as an aberration, but rather as a starting point for approaching the ‘like economy’.

Economies of Clicks and Likes

Beginning in Indonesia—a country where I have conducted extensive research—I have met and interviewed several dozen individuals

involved in the like economy. Using search terms such as *jual follower* (sell follower) reveal a wide range of sellers who can easily be contacted, for instance through WhatsApp. Among those I have interviewed, there is a large degree of geographical concentration in the Jakarta region, but some are based in larger university cities such as Bandung, Pekanbaru, Yogyakarta, and even one in Amsterdam in Holland. The great majority are young men in their late teens and twenties who are in college or have recently dropped out. The oldest, who have generally been around since Twitter boomed in 2011 (such as Herman), are in their early thirties. Most are from relatively stable lower middle-class backgrounds with parents who are entrepreneurs, office workers, or teachers. They are all self-professed *autodidakt* (self-taught), having learned how to sell followers using YouTube tutorials, Google Translate, and Internet forums. Many started out as teenagers, selling accounts for games such as World of Warcraft.

These individuals are part of an extraordinarily complex market that takes shape across national borders. Herman is at the very centre of it. He runs a website—let's call it *jualfollowers.com*—in which members register and then are able to log in. He has about 800 registered resellers, of which around 400 are active. He also sells directly to customers, but at a higher price. Once logged in, members can choose products from an extensive menu, which includes different kinds of Instagram followers at varying prices—female, Indonesian, Brazilian, etc. When resellers have made their choice and paid, usually through a top-up system, they can enter their customer's Instagram user ID and the followers are gradually transferred to that account. In the process, resellers make a profit, often of at least 100 percent. Much of this reselling can be done off of cell phones. Many who engage in the market do so temporarily or on the side, particularly on the level of resellers who buy from Herman.

Manufacturing Followers

Herman accesses followers in different ways. So-called *aktif* followers are real Indonesian accounts, which can be accumulated through exchange sites or sites that offer free followers in return for access to user IDs and passwords. Herman has a stock of several thousand *aktif* Indonesian followers, which he can resell. There is a significant risk, however, that the individuals who control these accounts will change their passwords or decide to unfollow the accounts to which they have been sold. So-called *pasif* followers, in contrast, are generated and developed by bots, software applications that run automated scripts, and are thus 'fake'. *Pasif* followers are of varying quality and are priced accordingly. For instance, those that lack photos and posts—and are easily identified as fake and thus at high risk of being shut down by Instagram—are cheaper than those that have a more elaborate identity and content, making them more difficult to identify as fraudulent. Herman purchases these followers from so-called SMM (social media marketing) websites such as JustAnotherPanel.com (JAS), which are located outside of Indonesia, much in the same way that his resellers do with him, thus engaging in a comparable form of arbitrage. Websites such as JAS have a so-called open API (application programming interface). Through a simple procedure that requires no programming skills, Herman can create an interface between his website and JAS that allows for a seamless integration so that followers can be purchased and resold automatically. This seamlessness is temporarily disrupted during Instagram's security updates, as the whole international market temporarily comes to a standstill.

Indonesian sellers such as Herman have limited knowledge of these international websites, but guess that they are also resellers and that the actual production of followers takes place elsewhere—perhaps in India, Russia, or Turkey, which have stronger programming and hacker cultures than Indonesia. A common

conspiracy theory is that Instagram itself is the source of the fake follower business and that the most successful players have help on the inside (I have not entirely convinced Herman that I myself am not a spy from Instagram). Many of my informants, who focus strictly on Indonesian buyers, mainly for lack of English-language skills, fantasise about scaling up and becoming part of an international market, with the promise of increased profits.

The Manual Labour of the Click Economy

Among significant sellers such as Herman—who has a fluctuating turnover of around 15,000 USD per month—there is an attempt to create forms of automation. As noted, this does not require significant programming skills, except when there are security updates. For this reason, sellers like Herman who do not have these skills need to collaborate with programmers who deal with these necessary updates, or rent their software applications. There are, however, also critical forms of manual labour. Herman has a team of eight people who work in shifts around the clock. One group engages in customer service with resellers and other buyers, primarily through WhatsApp, responding to pricing queries or dealing with problems concerning the transfer of followers. If more than 50 percent of the followers Herman has sold disappear within 30 days, he offers a free refill. A second group engages in marketing through the production of price lists and related information that is widely distributed on social media, for instance through a large number of Instagram accounts. In particular, they experiment with different ways of having top posts for hashtags such as #jualfollower. Like many of the larger actors on the Indonesian market, Herman mainly uses friends, neighbours, or family members as staff, who work on the top floor of his house. He pays them a salary and frequently offers bonuses in order to improve their work performance,

which pushes their salaries over the legislated minimum wage in the Jakarta region of around 250 USD per month. Most of the staff are also resellers and it is not unusual for them to move on and start their own businesses.

Engaging with current discussions about click farms and digital sweatshops through people like Herman allows for a degree of reconceptualisation. First, the labour that underpins click farming is not so much centred on ‘clicking’ as it is on developing new forms of automation that decrease the reliance on manual labour. Manual labour becomes necessary primarily with regard to customer service, marketing, and occasionally data-entry when automation breaks down. Although Herman keeps the bulk of the profits, he pays his workers relatively well. Rather than considering this as a strict form of exploitation—as a ‘sweatshop’—it may be more productive to understand these as evolving, but unstable forms of patron–client relationships that depend on certain forms of trust and intimacy. Second, there is a rhizomatic form to the market, with unstable chains of sellers and producers. Evidence suggests that followers are not produced in one site, but take shape in a process of assembly. Once the follower becomes a commodity in itself, it can be sold and resold along multiple levels of sellers and resellers. As such, the fake follower market is strikingly similar to other forms of transnational markets, which characterise contemporary supply-chain capitalism. ■