



Characterizing Pre-Election Facebook Activity of Papua New Guinean Politicians

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Executive Summary

Papua New Guinean voters will elect the members of the 11th National Parliament in the June election. Since the last national elections in 2017, PNG has seen significant shifts in literacy of and access to technology and digital connectivity.³ These shifts have been carefully followed, with particular concern for the potential risks associated with the dissemination of [misinformation surrounding](#) the COVID-19 pandemic. Certainly, the newness of the digital information landscape in PNG has contributed to the success of anti-vaccine campaigns that have seen PNG's vaccination levels remain at less than [5%](#)— a number that threatens to turn this year's campaign rallies and polling sites into super-spreader hotspots.⁴

In a joint research effort in the run-up to the 2022 elections in Papua New Guinea, DT Institute⁵ and DT Global completed an exploratory research project to describe how Papua New Guinean political candidates and their connected constituents used Facebook between 1 January and 30 March 2022, and how this might impact the conduct or results of 2022 elections.

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³ For further information on PNG digital literacy and training, see: PNG Department of Information and Communications Technology, Facebook: <https://ne-np.facebook.com/pngdict/photos/free-online-technology-training-for-all-public-servantsthe-png-department-of-inf/736139097790681/>; Peter Williams, "Connecting Papua New Guinea: The Dawn of the Digital Era," *Centre for the Edge*, Deloitte, June 2019; "A new normal for education in Papua New Guinea," UNICEF, September 7, 2021. As of April 27, 2022: <https://www.unicef.org/png/stories/new-normal-education-papua-new-guinea>

⁴ Christopher Hoy, Terence Wood, and Ellen Moscoe, "The Drivers of COVID-19 Vaccine Hesitancy and How to Address Them: Evidence from Papua New Guinea," World Bank, November 18, 2021; Anslem Manoka, "Why Many Papua New Guineans Reject COVID-19 Vaccine, and Why I Changed My Mind," *Devpolicy Blog*, February 8, 2022.

⁵ *Current strategic priorities for DT Institute include anti-human trafficking, rule of law, human rights, conflict prevention, social cohesion, and countering disinformation in conflict and post conflict environments. PNG is a key country for expansion of these technical areas given that PNG is a priority country in the implementation of the 2020 Global Fragility Act, the 2021 Trafficking in Persons Report of the US Department of State, and the documented spikes of disinformation as covid-19 continues globally.*



We collected and analysed a small dataset from Facebook accounts, pages and groups associated with a focused subset of incumbent Papua New Guinean Members of Parliament (MPs).⁶

We expected to see candidates and electors engaging on Facebook with increasing frequency in the lead up to the campaign period. We also expected to see, as is often seen in other democratic election processes, candidates make some statements on social media which were blatantly partisan and difficult to verify or fact check. We also expected to see some amount of misinformation or claims of questionable quality, similar to what might be present in other democratic election campaigns around the world.

We found that the incumbent candidates whose Facebook use we analysed demonstrated a marked divide in level and style of use of social media. Incumbents generally used dry, carefully worded press releases to announce infrastructure projects intended at least in part to demonstrate their ability to deliver capacity to their constituencies. Opponents like former Prime Minister Peter O’Neill took a more casual, personalized approach in order to connect with voters in the runup to the elections.

Contrary to our going-in expectations, we did not find substantive evidence of misinformation either by the politicians or by most of the commenters who responded to their posts. Nor did we find any substantive evidence that any of our nine selected politicians abused restrictions on paid advertising on their Facebook pages. We did, however, find troubling signs that fake and misleading pages created using these politicians’ names have proliferated on Facebook in the runup to the elections.

What’s changed since the 2017 General Election? What’s different about 2022?

The information ecosystem in PNG is changing rapidly. National infrastructure and training programs—many supported by the international community—are accelerating digital access and digital literacy beyond key urban centres. Datareportal’s detailed 2021 survey of PNG digital access showed an 8.3% year-on-year increase in mobile phone use, a 24.5% growth in internet use, and a 22.4% growth in active social media use by those with access to mobile phones or landline internet.⁷ This same data showed a 137.2% increase in the average speed of Internet connections in PNG. Approximately one-third of all Facebook messenger users were female.

In 2022, Facebook dominates the social media landscape in PNG. According to a 2021 [survey](#) by Datareportal, a remarkable 97% of the approximately 930,000 mobile phone users in PNG—approximately 1/7th of the total population—are active on Facebook. By comparison, LinkedIn

⁶ For more on the PNG Parliament, see: National Parliament of Papua New Guinea, official website. As of April 27, 2022: <http://www.parliament.gov.pg/about/parliament>

⁷ Datareportal, Digital 2021 Papua New Guinea. As of April 27, 2022: <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-papua-new-guinea>

had 23% penetration and Instagram and Twitter were used by a negligible 7% and 1% (respectively) of all social media users.

Analysis by the International Cyber Policy Centre of [Twitter's Information Operations Archive](#), which was released for public analysis in October 2018, estimates that cyber and information operations (Cyber OPS and INFO OPS) became “mainstream” by 2019 – use of cyber and INFO OPS to target elections and other major events increased significantly in both in frequency and scale between 2015 and 2021.⁸ This global trend makes digitally developing nations more vulnerable to electoral interference and manipulation than at any time in history.

Papua New Guinea has ambitious goals to improve living standards, equity of opportunity, peace and good governance.⁹ Understanding how digital connectivity and social media uptake and behaviours might impact democratic processes supports better understanding of PNG's journey to a culture of strengthened democratic governance. The health of the information ecosystem – an independent, accessible and professional media sector, robust evidence based political debate and broad-based community engagement – forms an essential part of this picture.

The general presence of misinformation about candidates and government policies may play a role in these elections. If left unreported and unchallenged, misinformation may undermine currently fragile perceptions of electoral legitimacy and make the transition between the 10th and 11th parliaments difficult, disrupting relationships with international partners and sub-national service providers.

We know that historically, election campaigns in PNG have been in part fought using an uptick in disbursement and publicity around local district investments in attempts to shore up local support for incumbents,¹⁰ prompting the country's Ombudsman [to freeze those funds](#) ahead of this ballot. Candidates challenging incumbents (there are also seven new districts in the 2022 election without incumbent candidates) are now working to build constituencies in what has traditionally been a volatile, [high-turnover](#) ballot.

⁸ Niblock, Wallis and Zhang (2022) *Understanding Global Disinformation and Information Operations*, International Cyber Policy Centre (Australian Strategic Policy Institute)

[https://www.aspi.org.au/report/understanding_global_disinformation_information_operations]

⁹ Various plans and accords spell out both national and international plans for development in PNG. See, for example: Papua New Guinea Vision 2050, National Strategic Plan Taskforce, The Independent State of Papua New Guinea. As of April 27, 2022: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org>; Alotau Accord II, August 1, 2017. As of April 27, 2022: <https://www.cdda.gov.pg/sites/default/files/documents/Alotau%20Accord%20II.pdf>; Stephanie Copus Campbell, “The PNG-Australia Development Partnership,” *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, June 2019. As of April 27, 2022: https://ad-aspi.s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/2019-05/SI%20137%20PNG%20Aus%20development%20partnership.pdf?VersionId=2FNv4ZoNZ5Gv8Wwd9ZsZv6_8N6BqMbgA

¹⁰ See Laveil, M. and Wood, T. on SSRN https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4059724

Pilot Study: Methodology

Given the significant structural shifts in the information landscape since the last time elections took place in Papua New Guinea, we wanted to better understand how the online information landscape might be changing wider information flow patterns in PNG. To get an initial picture of these changes, our exploratory research sought to characterize the social media use of key politicians seeking office in the 2022 elections. We initially set out to identify and characterize misinformation, identify prospective misuse of paid advertising as part of official campaigns, and look for indications of how Facebook publishing might be influencing voters.

Our research questions were: (1) To what extent are prominent politicians generating or participating in disseminating misinformation on Facebook?; and (2) To what extent are prominent politicians abusing paid advertising to deliver pre-election messages?

Given Facebook's de facto domination of the social media landscape in PNG, and the heavy reliance on mobile phones for election information, we centred our research on the Facebook accounts and pages associated with our selected politicians. Throughout this paper, 'Accounts' refers to 'people' as the term is used on Facebook who have a [profile](#), and pages refers to the Page function on Facebook, where people can like or follow a Page to get updates from businesses, organisations and public figures.



People



Pages



Groups

Selecting Politicians

Our resourcing for this research allowed capacity to analyse nine selected politicians: James Marape, Peter O'Neill, Belden Namah, Bryan Kramer, Joseph Lelang, Powes Parkop, John Rosso, Ginson Saonu, and Joe Sungi.

Candidate	Province	Electorate	Position – reason for inclusion
KRAMER Bryan	Madang	Madang Open	Urban and rural province
LELANG Joseph	West New Britain	Kandrian-Gloucester Open	Remote island province
MARAPE James	Hela	Tari-Pori Open	Prime Minister
NAMAH Belden	Sandaun	Vanimu-Green	Leader of the Opposition
O'NEILL Peter	Southern Highland Province	lalibu-Pangia Open	Alternative Prime Minister
ROSSO John	Morobe	Lae Open	Remote province
SAONU Ginson	Morobe	Morobe Provincial	Governor of the province with the second largest city, Lae.
SUNGI Joe	Sandaun (West Sepik)	Nuku Open	Rural and remote highland province

PARKOP Powes	National Capital District	National Capital District Provincial	Governor of the district with the largest city (and capital), Port Moresby
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We chose to include only incumbent MPs, given that the nomination period for the 2022 election had not yet opened and we wanted to focus resources on actors who were likely to have established online followings, a factor less likely with challenging candidates. We sought a mix of urban and rural electorates, as well as of party leaders more nationally focussed and politicians with a local emphasis. The 2017 General Election yielded no women Members of Parliament,¹¹ meaning that our focus on incumbent MPs precluded any women from our sample. The likely impacts of this lack of diversity will be discussed throughout the results analysis.

While not a scientifically random sample from the expansive 2022 candidate list, this selection does allow us to provide a window into social media use by some of the most prominent candidates.

Finding and Authenticating Facebook Pages and Accounts

In order to find and authenticate Accounts and Pages, we conducted searches for candidates' names and the names of their electorates. We then collected the resulting URLs and assessed them for indications of authenticity, like the presence and quality of a profile picture, posting activity which reflected the expected agenda and activities of the individual, and absence of suspicious content like offers of money or products. We have used the term *authentic* to mean controlled by the person represented or their agent. We then made an indication of how likely the page or account was to be authentic, and authentic channels were added to the database.

Channel	Page 1	Page 2	Account
Followers/Friends	22979		4022 not visible
Authenticity confidence	high	Medium	high
Date created	4/09/2020		23/07/2022 not visible

Six of these nine nationally prominent figures appeared to be active on Facebook in the selected dates of our study, January 1, 2022, through April 15, 2022. One of the nine, Belden Namah, was associated with pages that we could not effectively authenticate or discount.

Joseph Lelang and Joe Sungi were both absent from the platform. Bryan Kramer had four channels, two of which were active during our sample period but which posted identical content. One of the inactive channels was active through 2021, prior to our sample period, on

¹¹ This makes Papua New Guinea one of only 4 handful of countries in the world to have no women legislators. Other countries are the Federated States of Micronesia, Vanuatu and Yemen. See World Bank, "Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments (%)" World Bank Open Data (https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SG.GEN.PARL.ZS?most_recent_value_desc=false).



page called *The Kramer Report*. He then appeared to have shifted to a more formal and less controversial site in 2022, *Madang Open MP*, with a matching Account by the same name with identical posts - eight relatively anodyne press release posts. *The Kramer Report* was removed from Facebook during our study period and is no longer visible.

Prime Minister Marape has four pages, two of which were active: two personal, one verified page for the Department of Prime Minister & NEC and one page with the URL “PNGPRIMEMINISTER” (unverified). The Departmental page was the only verified channel within our sample.

We found 3 accounts and 2 pages for Belden Namah which offered varying levels of confidence in their authenticity. Several pages claiming to represent Belden Namah existed but provided no active content in 2022. His PNG party site (PNGPARTYBELDEN) had prolific content and over 14,000 followers, but its last post was in October 2019. A newer page (pngparty) was active but presents itself as a whole-of-party outlet and so was not included in our sample of candidate channels. Of the five included channels, only three were active, with between 1 and 6 posts in our study period. One of these channels changed its display name from “Belden Nama” to Kings Marn during the study period, which appeared to be an attempt to make the account less visible.

Powes Parkop and John Rosso were each active on a centralised page, and with one personal account each. Rosso posted extensively on his Lae Open account focused on his local constituency. Ginson Saonu had five visible channels, one of which had visible recent activity.

Absence of these two prominent politicians—Lelang and Sungi—from Facebook constitutes one of the findings from our research, and it generates a series of follow-on questions for further analysis. Were these professional politicians simply failing to take advantage of a direct conduit to their constituents, or were they absent for other reasons? If they are not using Facebook to communicate with voters, what other means are they using to transmit political messaging? Or were Lelang and Sungi uninterested in Facebook because they did not believe it generated results in their constituencies?

Together, Marape, O’Neill, Kramer, Parkop, and Rosso had 12 active accounts that we could reasonably attribute to them or to their staffs.

Data collection

With our search narrowed to six politicians and 12 Facebook pages, we recorded and coded all posts between January 1, 2022, and April 25, 2022. This process netted a total of 148 posts. We copied the text and engagement numbers of each post into an Excel spreadsheet to preserve the content of these pre-electoral messages for future analysis. We characterized each post by identifying its originating site, and the number of reactions, comments, and shares it garnered to help us understand relative impact and influence. We also read through all the comments for



each post to get a sense of the reactions and discourse generated by politicians' activities on Facebook. This was a substantial undertaking given the sheer number of comments for O'Neill and Kramer; both often generated several hundred comments per post.

Once each post was recorded, we coded posts for four characteristics. First, we coded for content. This categorization helped us understand candidates' focus, and to compare approaches between politicians who were in environments competing for clientelist attention and support. We built the categories inductively as they appeared, leading us to code for infrastructure, jobs, finance and corruption, sport, legal, cultural, political, and health, with an "other" catchall for remaining, infrequent, or idiosyncratic topics. Next, we applied three binary codes: Was the post focused on local or national issues? Was it delivered in the form of a press release or something less formal? And did the post contain anything that could be construed as purposeful misinformation?

Finally, we analysed the results of the coding process. While we focused on the content of the posts, looking for misinformation related to COVID-19 or the elections, we also paid close attention to the various styles applied by different politicians, and to changes in the types of posts and reactions received over time.

Analysis: Authentic Data

Facebook's stake in the information environment has been contentious in PNG. The Papua New Guinean government banned Facebook for a month in [2018](#) while it hoped to address issues with misinformation, and the government considered a [second](#), albeit more controversial ban in 2019 while then Prime Minister Peter O'Neill faced a no-confidence vote. In both cases, politicians and other critics argued that Facebook was inadequately policing fake accounts and misleading posts. Former Prime Minister Peter O'Neill—one of the subjects of our research—called Facebook "[fake news](#)," though he continues to use the service prolifically through 2022.

Pre-Election Facebook Post Characterization

Our data collection resulted in the characterization of 148 Facebook posts by six PNG politicians made on 12 pages between January 1 and April 15, 2022. What we did not see in these posts was perhaps most remarkable. Our effort to code for the binary presence or absence of misinformation generated an overarching binary result: Not one appeared to contain obvious misinformation or efforts to deceive the public. In fact, even the most politically focused messages were generally level, bland, and unlikely to mislead.

Our analysis revealed a contrast to between the 2021 and early 2022 information environments in PNG. In our 2022 sample period, we found no evidence of COVID-19 misinformation in the politicians' posts, nor did we find substantive misinformation about the virus or vaccines in the thousands of comments accompanying the posts.



Increased moderation or a crackdown on dissent?

It also appeared that as the election approached, discourse on candidates' pages was more heavily moderated, with less dissent in the discourse surrounding posts after the New Year. Our less formal review of pre-2022 Facebook activity by the same politicians revealed a somewhat more raucous and disingenuous discourse in the comments. Comments in the early 2022 posts were either laudatory or, at most, mildly acerbic.

From January through late March, 2022, the generally positive comments in response to O'Neill's posts were interlaced with critical comments. After late March, critical commentary effectively disappeared while even more obsequious comments proliferated.

For example, in response to a March 11, 2022, post by Peter O'Neill, two of the 106 commenters wrote "The best prime minister ever," and "King of infrastructure. The brilliant strategist and leader of the people..." A typical negative comment to O'Neill's February 9th post on rising unemployment and cost of living stated "Please tell us the solution to the mess you created when you were PM." Many negative comments were substantive, thoughtful, and would be read as genuine political discourse rather than inflammatory or aggressive. It is also likely that the bland nature of the politicians' posts generated equally mundane or, in some cases, polite and thoughtful questioning.

Who is staying on message?

Of the 127 posts we could confidently code as *press release yes/no?*, 70% were either labelled as press releases or appeared to be press releases written by staffers and posted to Facebook. Very few posts were shorter, social media-style content or in any kind of personable voice. In global press release format, most posts reported without embellishment on infrastructure developments, jobs programs, and forthcoming political events. Most of the freestyle, informal posts contained brief and generally insubstantial mentions of constituent visits, cultural engagements, or sporting events.

There was a clear difference in style between current PM Marape and former PM O'Neill. Prime Minister Marape's Facebook posts consisted almost entirely of formal press releases (~98%), while O'Neill's posts were entirely informal (100%). This is unsurprising given Marape's position and resources, and it is consistent with a general incumbent-challenger dynamic. At least on Facebook, O'Neill's informal, man-of-the-people style generated more interest and positive feedback (as counted in followers, likes, and comments) than Marape's colder, more formal style.

Marape and O'Neill also differed in their focus on subject matter. Consistent with most of our sample, Marape emphasized infrastructure projects and clientelist benevolence, leveraging the power of his office to ensure citizens were aware of the many pre-election investments being made across the country. O'Neill, a stand-out, focused on cultural issues, trumpeting engagements with constituents and local leaders in public events.

Infrastructure project announcements and cultural engagements predominated across all coded posts for all six politicians. Out of a total of 148 posts, 40 centred on infrastructure and 36 centred on cultural events (e.g., local traditional dance performances or celebrations), with the remaining posts spread across political, financial, legal, sports, health, and jobs announcements or commentary (see **Error! Reference source not found.**). Posts coded as *other* were typically statements of condolence in the wake of a prominent death.

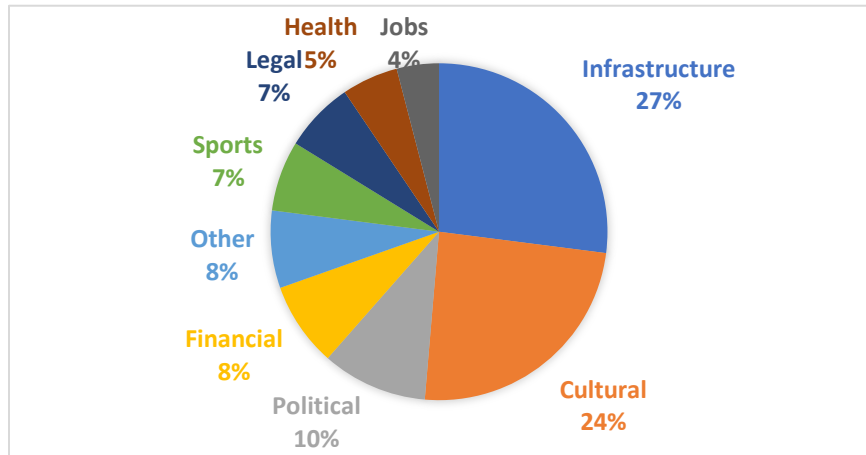


Figure 1 Posts coded by theme

Staying local

Lastly, we coded each post for national or local focus. Were the politicians addressing a broad audience across PNG, or were they targeting constituents in a specific area? Of the 127 posts we were able to code for *local or national?*, there was an effectively even split with 55% of posts focused on local issues and 45% focused on national issues. Prime Minister Marape was unsurprisingly focused on national issues (82%) while former PM O’Neill focused more (71%) on various local constituent issues. John Rosso, our most active provincial MP, spent 81% of posts focussing on local issues, largely infrastructure.

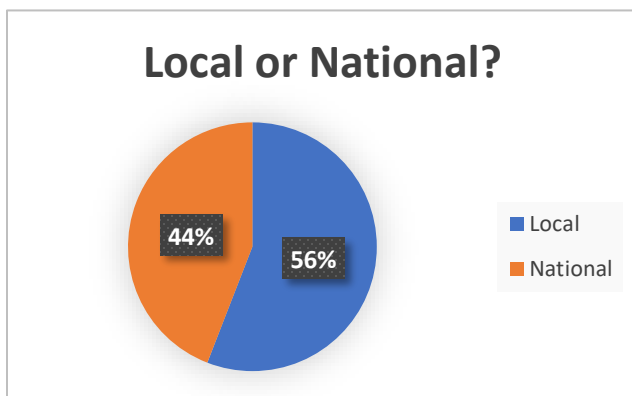


Figure 2 Posts by local or national focus

Papua New Guinea’s elections are famously fought on highly localised issues, so this predominance of local issues in candidates’ online engagement is unsurprising. However, the presence of national issues in every candidate's posts since the start of 2022, and the evenness of the local-national split could point to a shift towards a national agenda for voters and for future MPs.

Trends in the authentic data

Given Facebook’s clouded history in PNG and the nation’s substantive challenges with vaccine hesitancy, we undertook this project looking for and expecting to find misinformation about COVID-19 and a variety of election-related smear campaigns. What we found in this relatively

limited was plain fact-driven reporting, press-release quotes, and generic social media activity met by mostly cordial discourse.

A few of the thousands of comments embedded in these 12 Facebook pages hinted at the more concerning phenomenon we observed during our initial page screening. Wedged between plaudits and barbs we found what appeared to be organised attempts to create fake profiles for candidate, and links to financial scams targeting local communities in Papua New Guinea. Probable scammers and others seeking to build off PNG politicians' names have created a number of accounts that appear to violate Facebook's terms of service.

Suspicious accounts and Fake Pages

In addition to the attributable accounts described above, we identified a number of accounts we determined to be suspicious and likely inauthentic. We did not set out to investigate the prevalence of potentially malign foreign interference in the Papua New Guinean election. However, in the process of trying to identify candidates' Facebook channels, the number of inauthentic channels present was overwhelming, making our core objective of analysing candidates (real) online activities difficult.

We know that the rapid shifts in recent decades in the information ecosystem in Papua New Guinea are redefining opportunities for foreign actors to interfere in Papua New Guinean affairs including by undermining stability and democratic processes. It is on the public record that the Australian Intelligence community and its international partners have turned attention towards foreign interference in neighbouring Pacific Island Countries (PICs). The Australian Government has publicly stated that the level of foreign interference [“into Fiji or Samoa or PNG is at a record level”](#).¹² However, unlike other key focal points of global strategic competition, the extent of foreign interference in the information landscape in the Pacific remains largely unknown due to limited number of local digital forensics and OSINT (open-source intelligence) practitioners.

Given these trends, the proliferation of inauthentic or suspicious channels we found during our search was concerning. As the scale of the problem became apparent, we adjusted our methodology to start recording suspicious channels as they were identified in searches. Accounts deemed suspicious had a positive claim to belong to the candidate. A channel with only the same name as a candidate was not per se deemed to be suspicious. A channel with a photograph clearly showing the name and an image of the candidate, though with no visible activity, was deemed to be suspicious. Other indications included things like profile fields locating the account in PNG or West Papua, a number of friends or followers who would reasonably be expected to have an interest in PNG politics (Papua New Guinean Nationals), or references to PNG in posted content.

¹² Dutton, Peter. China's unprecedented interference in Pacific Islands sees Five Eyes strengthened Ray Hadley. Brisbane: Nine Radio, 3 June 2021. Radio.



Prime Minister Marape's name and likeness were used to generate more than 30 channels claiming to represent the PM, many of them obviously fake and most of them created in the last 2 months. In one 24 hour period in early May, 2022, at least four suspicious accounts in PM Marape's name appear to have been created overnight. Throughout April, non-systematic observations led us to estimate that there may have been three to four suspicious accounts generated under PM Marape's name each week in early 2022. Many of these accounts remained inactive after their initial setup, and some were removed quickly, possibly by Facebook. Among these were a selection of financial scams apparently based in the Philippines or francophone countries, as well as collections of accounts with recurring configuration patterns which actively pursued PNG nationals as connections. One account had recently had its screen name and photo changed from a representation of the Prime Minister of Kuwait to Prime Minister Marape. It has now been removed. Another account appeared to have previously belonged to a Facebook user whose account had been hacked and changed to a representation of Marape (also now removed). These are two of the instances which point towards foreign interference targeting PNG.

There are other indications that these accounts were backed by at least a modestly well resourced operation intended to use Marape's name for potentially illicit benefit. Some of the fake profiles have hundreds—and in some cases more than 1000—Facebook friends and followers who appear to comment and interact with one another. One account asked these friends to send private messages with financial information (see Figure 3) , while others were part of networks connected to a common page advertising pyramid or other get-rich-quick schemes (see Figure 5).

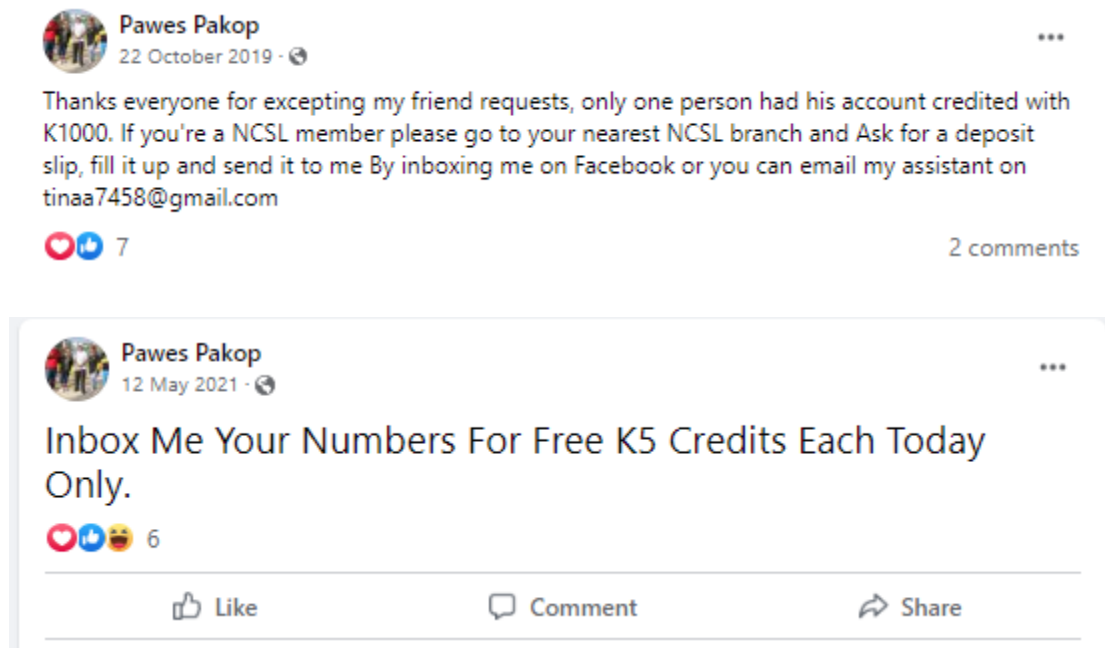


Figure 3 Posts from [an account we found suspicious](#). Note the slight misspelling of the candidate's name - a common phishing technique.

One category of accounts and pages linked to financial scams with suspicious links to “get a grant” (translated from the French) or start a WhatsApp chat for financial services or weight loss solutions. Some of these used phishing tactics like slight misspellings of MPs names (“[Pawes Parkop](#)” and “[Peter Oneil](#)”), others were [connected to larger networks](#) of fake accounts, largely francophone, tagging each other in posts like “Who wants to be my next millionaire ❤️💰”.

The most frequent kinds of channels, though, with the names and likenesses of PNG MPs included newly set up profiles which still carried Facebook’s “New Facebook User” warning when first seen. These were similarly configured, with open source images of MPs added as profile and cover images. Some of these accounts appeared to have actively friend requested Papua New Guinean nationals, while others remained friendless and inactive.

Their common thread was the repeated use of the same set of open source images, often in distorted proportions, and their creation dates in sets of four or so per day in identical fashion. These accounts seemed to be testing a scattergun approach to different combinations of images and friend requests to find a foothold in the information landscape – and some of them were successful, with one now-removed account purporting to represent Powes Parkop amazing 3600 friends. Another, claiming to represent the Prime Minister and using images of Marape with former Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop, built a substantial network of more than 200 friends in less than two weeks in April, before being taken down by Facebook.

While we could also observe these accounts being taken down at a similar speed they were going up, we managed to record more than 45 suspicious accounts in total over the study. At last check, about 20 of these were still visible.

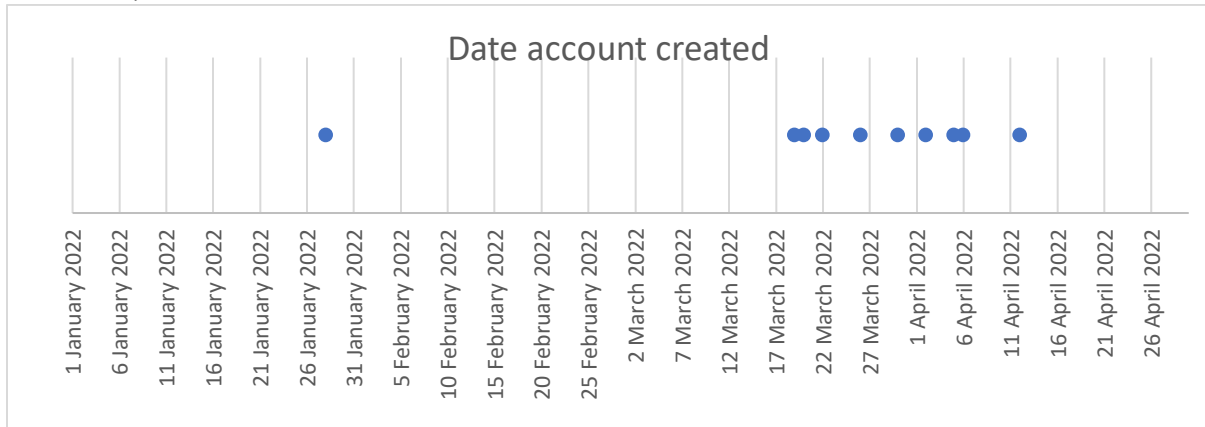


Figure 4 Frequency of accounts we observed being created in the lead up to the election

There were some tactics used in these account creation sprees which were particularly malign, and raised the most concern: one account we found had previously belonged to an individual and on 12 April had its screen name and profile picture changed to represent PM Marape. We later found a new account made by the original individual the following week, confirming a suspicion that their account had been hacked and taken over. The hacked account has now been taken down.

Another concerning instance was an account which was originally established with the name and likeness of the PM of Kuwait, and changed to Marape on 2 April, suggesting control by an actor with particular interest in global political affairs. This account has now also been taken down.

Each of these groups of inauthentic activity on Facebook is of course concerning, given Facebook’s domination of the social media landscape in PNG,¹³ and the significant global increase in online foreign interference globally since 2017 when Papua New Guinea held its last election.

¹³ According to a 2021 [survey](#) by Datareportal, a remarkable 97% of the approximately 930,000 mobile phone users in PNG—approximately 1/7th of the total population—are active on Facebook.

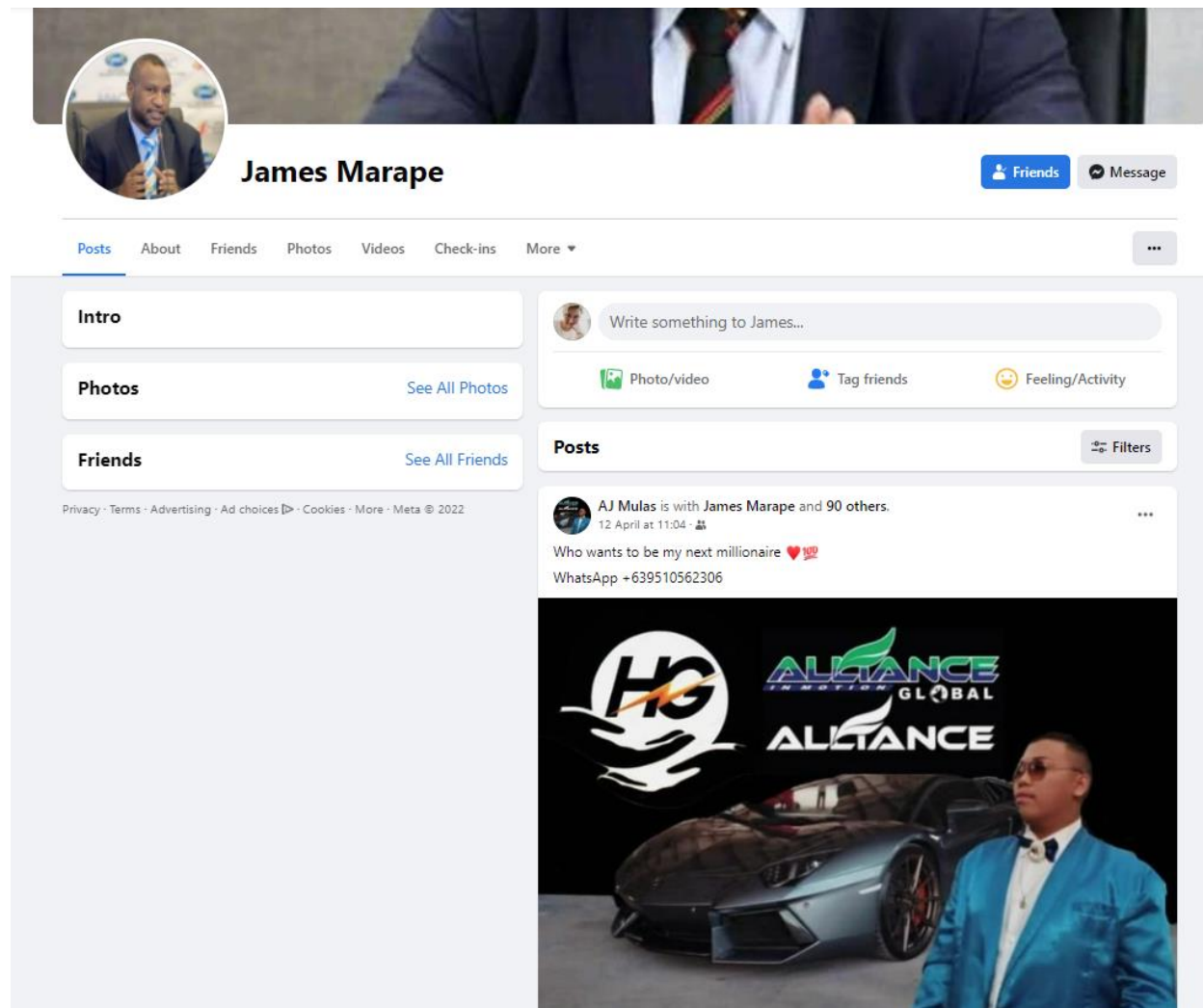


Figure 5 Screenshot of one of the suspicious channels purporting to be PM Marape

There were not a significant number of suspicious pages under former PM Peter O'Neill's name. However, there appeared to be a trend on O'Neill's verified page that merits further examination.

Conclusion

Our exploratory research questions were: (1) To what extent are prominent politicians generating or re-channelling misinformation on Facebook?; and (2) To what extent are prominent politicians abusing paid advertising to deliver pre-election messages?

We found no clear, irrefutable evidence that these nine politicians are generating or re-channelling misinformation on Facebook or are abusing paid advertising to deliver pre-election messaging. This leaves open the possibility that these politicians are behaving differently



through other channels like WhatsApp. Further research would be needed to paint a more holistic picture of pre-election messaging in PNG.

We also found that our cohort were actually conducting very little genuine engagement on Facebook, with a vast majority of channels being used largely to distribute formal press releases rather than social media style content. This suggests that incumbent MPs are not investing heavily in online engagement, and that use of social media is not currently designed to engage followers or create dialogue. We note that using Facebook for the broadcasting of press releases appears to be an effective means for transmitting government messaging on an accessible platform where web development and maintenance skills are limited in institutions which in other countries might host official websites. However, this creates issues of ownership and verification.

We also found some suggestion that candidates were spending a larger share of their attention on national issues than expected (44% of posts), in contrast to the historically hyper-local nature of PNG elections. Unsurprisingly, we saw a focus on infrastructure as a key issue, followed by cultural and political issues. Health and employment saw the smallest proportion of attention in posted content.

Coding Facebook posts also allowed us to characterize an important portion of PNG political discourse: At least through this narrow window, Papua New Guineans engage in civil and thoughtful online dialogue. Facebook's effective monopoly on social media communication in PNG is concerning, but it does appear to provide a legitimate channel for pre-election communication between politicians and constituents.

However, while we expected to find some misinformation and possibly inappropriate activity, we were not fully prepared for the sheer volume of suspicious and inauthentic content we found in the process of trying to verify MPs' online presences. We found evidence of organised attempts to impersonate MPs and indications that some actors were politically motivated, and that inauthentic accounts were often not removed from the platform even when reported by our team.

Suggested Follow-On Research

Exploratory research is designed to provide a jumping off point for more intensive efforts.

On-the-ground engagement with Papua New Guineans is needed to better understand the ways in which they obtain, process, and share political information. According to Datareportal, only 15% of Papua New Guineans have access to the Internet. Millions of citizens receive their [news](#) from one-way transmission television and radio sources, or through word of mouth. Investment in face to face or phone surveys on political information access in PNG remains valuable information of which we currently have very little.



According to The Lowy Institute article, an unknown but possibly significant number of these [people may be “disconnected”](#),¹⁴ with little or no access to even basic radio services. Satellite television and radio [penetration](#) is increasing but remains limited due to difficult geography and lack of supporting infrastructure on the outer islands.¹⁵ At least under these circumstances, no characterization of PNG social media activity can be extrapolated to broadly represent the ways in which citizens receive information or engage with their representatives. Wider studies are needed.

Further substantive research on the online behaviour of candidates in the runup to the 2022 elections may be valuable in analysing election outcomes.

Lessons from this study and other analyses of the election can and should inform research to help PNG and supporting international partners prepare for both interim local elections and the 2027 national elections.

In the near term, the apparently false pages we identified in this exploratory effort require further analysis. We have reported every suspicious account we identified to Facebook. In the coming weeks we will make our data and coding available in spreadsheet format to the research community and to others interested in tracking and analysing Facebook’s role in national elections.

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¹⁴ McLeod, Shane. “Bridging Papua New Guinea’s Information Divide.” Policy Brief. 2021.

<<https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/bridging-papua-new-guinea-information-divide>>.

¹⁵ National ICT Authority of Papua New Guinea. “International Satellite Symposium 2017.” *Country Presentation – Papua New Guinea*. Bangkok: International Telecommunication Union, 2017. Powerpoint Presentation. 2022.

<https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Regional-Presence/AsiaPacific/Documents/Events/2017/Aug-ISS2017/PPT_S4_PNG.pdf>.

Annex on Ethics

Facebook's rules regarding content searching are explicit. We followed those rules by eschewing data [scraping](#), instead conducting manual site-by-site, post-by-post searches and analysis using a [genuine](#) named account. This approach allowed us to operate within Facebook's terms of service while ensuring that both members of the research team gained deep familiarity with the public and private data.

As we uncovered what we believed to be fake accounts, we reported these accounts to Facebook in accordance with its reporting [guidelines](#). While challenging potentially fake pages was not an explicit purpose of this research, we believed it to be an ethical responsibility to report these pages for further investigation.

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