

AI AND THE POLITICS OF KNOWING: TRANSNATIONAL INFORMATION LANDSCAPE OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN THE MEKONG REGION

STATEMENT OF RESEARCH PROJECT

The rapidly expanding scam economy across Southeast Asia, particularly in the Mekong region, has drawn hundreds of thousands of people into an illicit transnational industry generating billions of dollars in criminal proceeds, with many scam centres linked to human trafficking, forced criminality, and other forms of exploitation. Yet as the scale and human costs of scam centres have become increasingly visible, understanding what is actually happening within and around them has become remarkably difficult. Information is not scarce. Investigative reports, government statements, NGO documentation, survivor testimonies, social media posts, and content produced by online creators circulate across countries and platforms every day. But more information does not necessarily produce better knowledge. Accounts are fragmented across languages and jurisdictions, produced by actors with unequal access and different interests, and vary widely in their visibility, credibility, and verifiability. Scam centres therefore present not only a transnational challenge of crime, migration, human trafficking, and exploitation, but also a critical challenge of information: how does a fragmented and rapidly evolving crisis become known, represented, contested, and acted upon transnationally?

Artificial intelligence is making this already complex information landscape more difficult to navigate. The same technologies that can enable increasingly scalable and sophisticated forms of deception may also expand the capacities of journalists, civil society organisations, affected communities, and other actors to investigate scam networks, translate across languages, verify claims, document trafficking and exploitation, and communicate across borders. AI, in other words, does not simply introduce a new technological problem into the scam economy; it may alter who can produce information, what can be trusted, how information travels, and whose knowledge becomes visible and actionable. Understanding these changes requires moving beyond a simple question of whether AI is a boon or a threat. Instead, this project asks how AI is reconfiguring an already fragmented transnational information landscape, for whom it expands or constrains informational capacities, and with what consequences for inequality, representation, and responses to human trafficking and exploitation.

Our proposed project therefore seeks to map and explain the changing information landscape surrounding transnational human trafficking and exploitation in Southeast Asia, bringing into view the technological, communicative, social, and institutional processes through which this landscape takes shape. Particular attention will be paid to the relationships among AI, media and non-media information actors, and communities affected by transnational exploitation. Rather than privileging any single category of actors or disciplinary perspective, the project will examine how information is produced, verified, circulated, contested, and translated into public or institutional action across borders, while remaining open to the sites, actors, and relationships that emerge as consequential through the research.

The overarching research question is:

How is artificial intelligence reshaping the transnational information landscape surrounding Southeast Asia's scam economy and human-trafficking issues, and how do different actors navigate, shape, and contest this changing landscape?

Three interconnected questions guide the broader research agenda:

1. Information ecology: Who produces, verifies, circulates, and contests knowledge about transnational scam centres, and how do media and non-media actors interact within this information landscape?
2. Technological transformation: How does the growing use of AI redistribute informational and communicative capacities among criminal networks, journalists, civil society organisations, affected communities, and other actors?
3. Social consequences and responsibility: How do these transformations affect visibility, credibility, inequality, representation, and the capacity of different actors to respond to transnational exploitation?

Within this broader framework, the doctoral researcher will develop an independent area of inquiry reflecting their disciplinary background, regional expertise, and research interests.

SCOPE OF WORK FOR SELECTED PHD STUDENT

Independent Research Focus

The PhD student will undertake an independent study of the changing information landscape surrounding scam centres and transnational human-trafficking issues in Southeast Asia and beyond. The broader project provides a shared intellectual and empirical context, while the student will develop a distinct research focus according to their disciplinary training, regional knowledge, language capabilities, and research interests.

Mapping the Information Landscape

A central part of the student's work will be to map the actors, practices, and relationships through which knowledge about scam centres is produced, verified, circulated, and contested across borders. This will involve identifying relevant media and non-media actors and examining how information moves between them, where informational gaps or tensions emerge, and how different forms of expertise and authority are established. Particular attention will be paid to the changing role of AI and other digital technologies where they become consequential to these processes. Rather than assuming in advance which actors or technologies matter most, the student will refine the empirical focus through initial research and engagement with the field.

Empirical Research

The student will undertake sustained empirical research in their selected sites and relevant transnational networks. The project is expected to be primarily qualitative, potentially combining interviews, field observation, and analysis of digital and documentary materials, while allowing other methods where appropriate to the student's research questions. The student will be responsible for developing the final research design, establishing relevant field and organisational contacts, collecting and analysing original data, and addressing the ethical and practical challenges associated with research on vulnerable populations and sensitive transnational issues.

Dissertation and Scholarly Contribution

The dissertation should move beyond mapping the information landscape descriptively to develop an original argument about the relationships among technological change, knowledge production, and the social dynamics surrounding transnational scam centres. Through interdisciplinary

supervision, the student will be expected to engage seriously with perspectives beyond a single disciplinary tradition and to produce research that contributes both empirically to understanding this rapidly evolving regional phenomenon and conceptually to the fields with which the dissertation ultimately engages.