



## Sigur Center for Asian Studies

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

### **Countering China's Sharp Power: Disinformation and Social Media in Taiwan**

As the United States wavers in the Indo-Pacific, Taiwan has become a prize whetstone for China to hone its sharp power strategies. The Sigur Center for Asian Studies and the Organization for Asian Studies hosted Jessica Drun, a fellow at the [Center for Advanced China Research's Party Watch Initiative](#), and Maggie Farley, former Los Angeles Times foreign correspondent and adjunct instructor of journalism at American University, to discuss the role of social media and disinformation in recent cross-strait relations in a panel entitled "[Media Literacy and Fake News: Countering China's Sharp Power Impact.](#)"

#### **Taiwan's Social Media Landscape**

Jessica Drun began the panel with an explanation of Taiwan's social media landscape. Since the election of Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) President Tsai Ing-Wen in 2016, China has been increasing pressure on Taiwan by "poaching diplomatic allies, squeezing its international space, and sending fighter jets near Taiwan." Despite Tsai's commitment to maintaining the status quo, China demands that she directly affirm the 1992 Consensus, an unofficial agreement between Chinese officials and Taiwan's Kuomintang (KMT) party which acknowledges the existence of "one China" and served as the baseline for cross-strait relations under the previous KMT administrations. In the wake of the DPP's presidential

victory, China has increased its efforts to foster direct ties to local KMT-held districts with economic investment packages.

As part of its efforts to further undermine Tsai and the DPP, China has begun to exploit Taiwan's massive social media use. Amidst an incredibly high rate of internet access, approximately 80 percent of internet users use social media. Facebook is the most popular site (77 percent of Taiwanese internet users), and is closely followed by messaging app Line (71 percent). Twitter is only used by 21 percent of Taiwanese users, but serves as an important platform for politicians to engage with audiences outside of the island. For politics, however, the online bulletin board PTT is the most popular venue. The 2014 election for the mayor of Taipei was the first in which candidates used social media platforms as part of their campaign strategy, and its use was cited as a major factor in the DPP's win over the KMT in the 2016 elections.

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## **Enter China**

Drun explained that the increasing role of social media in Taiwan's elections caught China's attention. Chinese universities began heavily researching Taiwan's social media usage and the government began to develop a strategy on how to utilize the technology to its advantage. During the 2016 election cycle in Taiwan, Chinese internet users were suddenly granted access to Facebook, which had been previously banned. Mainland users—easily identified by their use of simplified characters, parroting of Chinese government slogans, and an “unwarranted degree of animosity”—spammed the Facebook pages of Tsai and Taiwan's major media outlets in January 2016. A localization “battleplan” for the spam campaign began with a post on Chinese social media site Weibo that same month that encouraged users to use traditional characters,

avoid use of profanity, “keep emotions in check,” and promote anti-independence documents. The post further advocated for users to “friend” Taiwanese residents to appear local themselves.

The effectiveness of such tactics is perhaps most apparent in the tragic suicide of Su Chii-Cherng, head of Taiwan’s representative office in Osaka, Japan in September 2018. Following the devastation of Typhoon Jebi, travelers were stranded in the Kansai International Airport. A story quickly spread through the Taiwanese social media community that the Chinese consulate in Osaka had

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sent buses to the airport to assist stranded passengers, but would only aid Taiwanese travelers if they swore their alliance to China. A wave of outrage at the Taiwanese office’s lack of response to their citizens’ plight drove Su to suicide. Later inquiries to Kansai International Airport officials revealed, however, that the Chinese consulate—and indeed no diplomatic mission—had the

authority or access to provide buses to the airport at the time. The original post condemning the Taiwan office’s alleged lack of action was later traced to a Mainland user.

Such interference, and its scope and effect on election, remains difficult to source due to IP spoofing. However, Drun suggested that the KMT’s sweep of local elections this past year was indicative of how penetrative China’s sharp power is: while relations between top officials remain frozen, local engagement is increasing. Drun attributed part of China’s success to the existing societal and political cleavages in Taiwan that are ripe for exploitation, as well as the unwillingness of the Taiwanese media to tie election outcomes to Chinese meddling. She suggested that Taiwanese officials need to reach a bipartisan consensus to establish a working group to tackle the problem and encouraged the media to disavow Chinese “influence” as “interference.”

## **Tools of Disinformation**

Maggie Farley followed with a discussion of how misinformation and disinformation are effective tools

for foreign interference in elections and developments in Taiwan's efforts to curtail China's sharp power. "Fake news," Farley explained is hardly a new phenomenon: it is simply propaganda by another name. She further distinguished between misinformation, the unintentional spreading of inaccurate information, and disinformation, the deliberate distortion or misrepresentation of actual facts with ulterior motives.

Creators of disinformation are skilled marketers: they want users to do the work for them by spreading their wares organically. They tailor their message to encourage "sharing" behavior by unwitting users. The primary strategy is utilizing users' existing confirmation biases and social biases: users are more likely to believe disinformation that affirms their pre-existing beliefs, and they are also prone to sympathizing with disinformation that reinforces in-group/out-group dynamics. Social media's own technological bias only makes this effort all the easier: algorithms are designed to elevate content that is popular, even if it is not necessarily correct.

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Furthermore, social media platforms carry the additional weakness of privileging content from users' "friends," and disinformation peddlers can acquire "friendships" with users with only a few clicks. A final, but key, advantage of disinformation campaigns is the asymmetry between the interferers and those who must defend against it: disinformation is successful even if it only spreads confusion and muddles public debate, but clearing such confusion is a much more difficult task.

Taiwan's social media community is fertile ground for China's disinformation campaigns for a number of reasons. First, internet use and social media access are incredibly high, and second, cross-strait relations are a contentious and polarizing issue of identity and because the Taiwanese government's options in responding to the problem are limited by its laws that protect free speech. Third, the Taiwanese media are often characterized as "churn-alism" rather than "journalism": reporters are incentivized by their story's spread on social media, but

not accuracy. The mainstream media can thus become an unwitting conduit of disinformation efforts. Finally, China has the advantage in terms of sheer scale: the size of China's so-called "50 Cent Army," or "cyber troops," remains unknown, however, the Taiwanese government claims it fends off at least 2500 attacks per day. Farley noted, however, that these attacks are only the ones that Taiwan can identify.

## **Fighting Back**

While the situation seems bleak, Farley offered an optimistic report of the Taiwanese government's efforts to defend itself from China's interference. A number of citizen-led fact-checking programs have been launched. [Cofacts](#) and [MyGoPen](#) are fact-checking accounts on the Line messaging platform that allows users to verify suspect stories before they spread them. The "civic tech community" behind Cofacts, gov ("gov-zero") also launched the browser extension [NewsHelper](#) that verifies content as users visit websites and website [Taiwan FactCheck Center](#). The government has also prioritized timely response to disinformation stories with its [Real-time News Clarification Page](#).

Digital Minister Audrey Tang, meanwhile, is promoting a different strategy: rather than focusing on response, she advocates for treating disinformation like an epidemic. Disinformation cannot succeed if users are inoculated from its effects and educated on how to suppress its spread. To that end government is currently limiting its legal strategy to reinforcing existing laws and instead prioritizing improvements in media literacy and critical thinking skills in schools so that users will be able to identify and ignore disinformation on their own. Whether or not Taiwan can contain the disinformation virus, however, remains to be seen.

*By Kathleen K. McAuliffe, Ph.D. Student, The George Washington University, and Graduate Research Assistant, Rising Powers Initiative*

*The views expressed are the speakers' own.*

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## ***About the Rising Powers Initiative and Sigur Center for Asian Studies***

The Sigur Center's Rising Powers Initiative examines how domestic political debates and identity issues affect international relations in Asia. RPI acknowledges support from the MacArthur Foundation and Carnegie Corporation of New York for its activities.

The Sigur Center for Asian Studies is an international research center of The Elliott School of International Affairs at The George Washington University. Its mission is to increase the quality and broaden the scope of scholarly research and publications on Asian affairs, promote U.S.-Asian scholarly interaction and serve as the nexus for educating a new generation of students, scholars, analysts and policymakers. The Sigur Center houses the Rising Powers Initiative, a multi-year, multi-project research effort that studies the role of domestic identities and foreign policy debates of aspiring powers.

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