

Press Release

The 2018 Global Cooperation Training Framework on “Defending Democracy Through Media Literacy” Opening Ceremony

The 2018 Global Cooperation and Training Framework (GCTF) International Workshop on “Defending Democracy Through Media Literacy,” co-hosted by the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy (TFD) along with the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), opened today (10/18). The two-day event’s opening ceremony was graced by the presence of TFD Chairman Jia-chyuan Su, Foreign Minister Jaushieh Joseph Wu, Digital Minister Audrey Tang, AIT Director William Brent Christensen, and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Scott Busby.

In his opening remarks, TFD Chairman Su Jia-chyuan said in an era in which information is spread fast and widely, there is some disinformation being disseminated with malicious intent, and these acts should be rejected and condemned by everyone. “But restricting media through strict laws and regulations, or reviewing messages being sent, violates the spirit of freedom that democracies pride themselves on… as defenders of democracy, each and every one of us needs to cultivate the ability to discern truth from lies. Developing this skill and overcoming other related obstacles are the challenge democracies now face,” Chairman Su said.

Minister of Foreign Affairs Jauhsieh Joseph Wu similarly emphasized on how the balance between fighting disinformation and maintaining freedom of speech should be kept. “Criticism of the government can take many shapes and forms. And it is our job - as an administration rooted in our fight for democracy - to ensure that this freedom is not only respected, but also enshrined as part of our society. But when this criticism is based on fake information and falsehoods, when it is based on unsourced and anonymous material, and when it comes coordinated from foreign actors that hold a vested interest in degrading our political system, that is when it becomes our responsibility to counter it,” he said.

Citing the United States’ National Security Strategy published in late 2017, AIT Director William Brent Christensen said the NSS describes “a geopolitical competition between free and repressive visions of governance that is playing out in

this region and beyond,” and nowhere is this description “truer than on the information battlefield.”

“The United States is grappling with the spread of disinformation, particularly as foreign actors seek to use social media to interfere in our elections, divide the American public, and undermine confidence in our democratic institutions,” he said, adding that Taiwan is “also on the frontlines” as those perpetrate disinformation campaigns see democratic societies like the United States and Taiwan as soft targets.

“They are wrong. These freedoms and institutions provide our societies with the resilience, creativity, and confidence needed to respond to these insidious attacks,” Director Christensen stressed.

US Deputy Assistant Secretary Scott Busby, who came to Taiwan for this GCTF workshop, said in his welcoming remarks that at a time of democratic backsliding and human rights abuses elsewhere in the Indo-Pacific region, “Taiwan serves as an invaluable model to others.” “And given the challenges we all face,” he continued, “it is especially important that democracies like Taiwan and United States stand together in promoting a brighter future, free of repression, censorship, and exploitation.”

Deputy Assistant Secretary Busby cautioned that in the Indo-Pacific region, there are already cases where disinformation was “used to instigate devastating human rights violations and abuses and erode democratic governance.”

Saying Taiwan “knows all too well how a determined external actor with hostile intentions can place enormous strain on democratic institutions through various influence tactics, including disinformation,” Deputy Assistant Secretary Busby quoted US Vice President’s words in his recent speech, where Vice President Pence said that the Chinese Communist Party has been shaping the information environment by “rewarding or coercing American businesses, movie studios, universities, think tanks, scholars, journalists, and local, state, and federal officials.”

But Deputy Assistant Secretary Busby also stressed that the most effective solutions to the challenges posed by disinformation “are those consistent with the rule of law and democratic principles.” “We must take care that our approaches to countering disinformation do not inadvertently undermine the bedrock principles that

undergird democracies – particularly freedom of expression, both online and offline,” he said.

Digital Minister Audrey Tang, in her keynote speech, said Taiwanese have only gained true elections and freedom of information and assembly for one generation. “We still remember what it is like to be without these freedoms. We are committed to keep these freedoms alive,” she said, adding Taiwanese are therefore also committed to be innovative when facing misinformation campaigns and disinformation threats, “with ways that do not destroy freedom of information and freedom of speech, which is exactly what [those spreading disinformation] want from us.”

She said her team and the government have been including people in the decision making process as a way to respond to rumors or misinformation. Raising the country’s new tax filing system as an example, Minister Tang said they included people that complained about the tax filing system last year in co-creation workshops to make improvement on the system.

“This is a perfect example because those who participated now understand how it is like to be in the kitchen of policy making and rule making. And people are armed with extra contextual information... So when they hear something that is just partially true or manifestly untrue about the tax filing system in the future, they are able to spread the truth,” she said, adding that this in turn enhances the accountability and transparency of our institutions.

For disinformation that is intentionally spread to sow discord, Minister Tang said besides partnering with the independent fact checking mechanisms, both abroad and also domestic, she has also been working on the education. “We are one of the first, if not the first, places, in Asia to introduce in our K-12 basic curriculum, the ability to critically think and the capability for the teachers to learn, along with the students, how to navigate various information online. Media literacy is one of the nine core characters in our new curriculum.”

During her speech, Minister Tang used an online audience interaction tool to collect questions from the audience. In answering the question, “How does Taiwan know that fake news that is traced to China is linked to the Chinese government,” she acknowledged that “not all IP addresses traced back to a [Chinese] region is

necessarily linked to the [Chinese] government; it can also be linked to the [Chinese Communist] party or to the military.”

But we can make what we know public and rely on international collaboration framework and independent and investigative journalists to piece together the puzzle, she said.

She was also asked about the channels by which China uses to spread disinformation in the Taiwan society. “Many,” she replied. “If there is any channel that you can think of, that’s probably used for that purpose,” as any channel that can spread information is the channel via which disinformation can also be spread.

But if the government can treat “well intentioned questions and speculations” “seriously and authentically,” she stressed, “then in that particular channel, people can become vaccinated against future disinformation campaigns. So far that is the most effective way that we have discovered.”

Minister Tang also gave her definition of “misinformation,” which is different from “disinformation,” responding to a question. Misinformation is “unintentional, certainly not organized, speculation or a piece of information that may contain controversy or disputes that are just partial truth.” People can hold different slice of truth from their perspective, and “to everybody else it looks like misinformation,” but the important thing is that you see misinformation “as an invitation for people to complete the picture together” and to engage in “real and true public conversation.”

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