

Press Release

The 2019 6th East Asia Democracy Forum

The annual East Asia Democracy Forum was held in Taipei, Taiwan today (6/26). Each year, the forum takes on on issues or problems that are most salient or urgent that need to be addressed and tackled. Disinformation, a concern around the globe in the recent years, was again the focus this year's forum, following the discussion last year on how democracies should work together to combat disinformation and develop counter-narratives to the authoritarian models. Deputy Foreign Minister Szu-chien Hsu and President Liao of the TFD gave welcoming and opening remarks stressing that Taiwan, on the frontline of an authoritarian regime's influence tactics, requires efforts from the government, the civil society, and the private sector to face up to the mounting pressure from China. Their speeches echoed the presentations of the following four speakers at the forum, who also called for awareness and vigilance against authoritarian influence and disinformation that can disturb a democratic society and weaken its democratic composition.

TFD President Ford Fu-te Liao cautioned us against authoritarian maneuvers that, with the help of technology, aim to “polarize the [democratic] society and stir up conflicts via online operations” such as spreading plain disinformation, generating fake accounts, and purchasing fan pages.

Taiwan is, as President Liao said, resolute in safeguarding democracy and freedom while authoritarian regimes are attempting to “expand their influence in democracies through financial investments, political donations, and producing media narratives in line with their political interests.”

“The authoritarian powers now not only impose censorship within their own countries but are able to silence those with different views around the world, including governments and international organizations,” he said.

Deputy Foreign Minister Szu-chien Hsu emphasized that as a democracy, placing curbs and walls on the Internet, as many non-democratic regimes use without qualms, is out of the question. But “guaranteeing freedom of speech does not mean tolerating hate speech or intentional falsehood that could in the end compromise our democratic and free environment,” he added.

There are “proactive roles for the government to play,” he said, listing several measures adopted by the Taiwanese government to curb disinformation and authoritarian operations, which include issuing rebuttals and clarifications via social media outlets by using easy-to-forward infographics, passing amendments to impose stiffer penalties on those who spread fake disaster and disease information, and being more attentive to social media accounts that appear to be fake or spread unfounded messages in social media groups.

“To probe the origin of all these disinformation campaigns, authoritarian influence is the elephant in the room,” Deputy Minister Hsu said, pointing out that both the civil society and the government in Taiwan are “already more vigilant than ever of the authoritarian influence prevalent in the Taiwanese society, from the local political scene and business through education and entertainment to media outlets,” and raising the huge protest against “red media” taken place on the Ketagalan Boulevard on Sunday (6/23) as an example.

In the research of Tai-li Wang, professor of journalism at National Taiwan University, the result of which she presented at the forum, Wang found that disinformation did make impact on how Taiwanese voters voted in the local elections last November.

“Politically neutral voters were least able to discern fake news,” but at the same time they tended to vote for candidates from one particular political party, she said. What she also found was that voters who were “more tuned in to pro-unification TV news channels tended to believe more in fake news than other voters.”

Chang Yu-huang, editor of the Open Culture Foundation, Academia Sinica Research Fellow Lin Thong-hung, and democracy activist Wuer Kaixi, on the other hand, discussed the authoritarian influence in a broader, global context.

Chang proposed a “disinformation map” that helps analyze and compare the disinformation situation on the regional level and facilitates possible cooperation. Lin shared the research results that found the more authoritarian a country’s neighboring countries are, the less democratic that particular country would be. Same logic is also true for the censorship spillover effect, which according to the study Lin referred to found that the stronger your neighboring countries are exercising Internet censorship, the more likely you are going to be troubled by disinformation disseminated by those countries.

But Lin also has good news for us. “The more robust a civil society is within a country, the better the country can tackle with disinformation,” he said.

Wu'er Kaixi, who has been in exile since the Tiananmen Incident in 1989 and has lived in Taiwan for 23 years, was critical of the “appeasement policy” of the foreign governments have been adopting toward the Chinese Communist Party regime, and reiterated that there is no way we can avoid addressing “the elephant in the room.”

He called Taiwan “a beacon of democracy to the world, and probably “the most influential and important defender of democracy, simply because it is in the blast zone of the threat of the Chinese communist regime.”

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