Taiwan Journal of Democracy, Volume 17, No. 1: 21-43

Hacking, Debating, and Renewing Democracy in Taiwan in the Age of "Post-Truth" Communication

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Abstract

Across the world, cyber actors are destabilizing democracies by flooding public spheres with disinformation. While a preponderance of studies has focused on how the Russians interfered in the U.S. 2016 presidential election, this essay addresses two cyber-disinformation campaigns against Taiwan. The first case study is the 2016 "sticker war," wherein Chinese netizens bombarded Tsai Ing-wen's Facebook page following her election as Taiwan's president. Addressing the "sticker war" opens questions about the nuances of user-led cyber activism in and between China and Taiwan. The essay then tackles the more expansive 2018–2020 cyber-disinformation campaign launched by the Communist Party of China (CPC) against democracy in Taiwan, focusing on the case of Su Chii-cherng, wherein the CPC sought to sow confusion and chaos into the democratic process. Both cases confirm the fears of scholars tracking the evolution of a new "post-truth" communication paradigm. Citizens have risen to the defense of democracy, however, so the essay closes on a hopeful note, arguing the hacking of democracy via cyber-disinformation operations has led to healthy debates about communication norms, and hence a renewal of democratic practices in Taiwan.

Keywords: Democracy, social media, sticker war, Su Chii-cherng, Tsai Ing-wen.

In India, Hindus attacked Muslims after reading misleading Facebook and WhatsApp posts alleging Muslims had committed blasphemy against Hindu icons.[1] In Hong Kong, while the streets surged with prodemocracy marchers, "more than 200,000 Twitter accounts" controlled by the Communist Party

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[1] Annie Gowen and Elizabeth Drew, "Indians Are Wild about WhatsApp, But Some Worry It's Hurting Democracy," *Washington Post*, May 14, 2019.

of China (hereafter CPC, or the party) spewed confusion in a "Russian-style disinformation offensive."[2] In Myanmar and Sri Lanka, Buddhists set fire to the makeshift camps of Rohingya refugees after seeing Facebook posts asserting the Muslims were seeking to displace local farmers.[3] And in Michigan, where Donald Trump surprised the world by winning the historically Democratic stronghold, 48 percent of the "news" shared on Twitter during the final months of the 2016 presidential election was disinformation posted by Russian trolls and then circulated by bots.[4] In these cases, online disinformation fueled sectarian violence, sowed chaos and fear into public demonstrations, and impacted elections, illustrating what Peter Singer and Emerson Brooking call "the weaponization of social media."[5] Similar instances of social media driving conflict have hit Europe, Africa, Latin America, and Australia,[6] indicating that disinformation campaigns targeting democracies are a global phenomenon.[7] Given the success of the disinformation operations noted here, scholars are asking: What cyber tactics are used to attack democracies around the world? What are their shared patterns and distinctive practices? And how can democracies withstand the weaponization of social media?

In response to these questions, most efforts focus on Russia's cyber disinformation campaign against the U.S. election in 2016. This essay turns to a less discussed international arena where democracy is threatened by disinformation: Taiwan. As Nicolas Monaco writes, "Taiwan is unique insofar as it exists on the periphery of one of the most prolific propaganda-filled regimes on earth—mainland China."[8] Taiwan's shared language and cultural proximity make the island nation an ideal "satellite target for China's propaganda efforts."[9] In fact, the *Taiwan Democracy Bulletin* reports the

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[2] Raymond Zhong, Steven Lee Myeres, and Jiu Wu, "How China Unleashed Twitter Trolls to Discredit Hong Kong Protesters," *New York Times*, September 18, 2019.

[3] Max Fisher and Amanda Taub, "Tracing Facebook's Harms in Sri Lanka," *New York Times*, April 23, 2018.

[4] Philip N. Howard, et al. "Junk News and Bots during the U.S. Election: What Were Michigan Voters Sharing over Twitter?" a *COMPROP* memo, March 26, 2017.

[5] Peter W. Singer and Emerson T. Brooking, *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2018).

[6] Viktor Orban captured the Hungarian presidency with the help of a disinformation campaign (see Patrick Kingsley, "Safe in Hungary, Orban Pushes His Message across Europe," *New York Times*, June 4, 2019); concerning Australia's travails, see "Australia Concluded China Behind Hack on Parliament," Reuters (September 15, 2019), https://www.reuters.com/article/us-australia-china-cyber-exclusive/exclusive-australia-concluded-china-was-behind-hack-on-parliament-political-parties-sources-idUSKBN1W00VF (accessed June 22, 2021).

[7] Davey Alba and Adam Satariano, "At Least 70 Countries Have Had Disinformation Campaigns," *New York Times*, September 26, 2019.

[8] Nicholas J. Monaco, *Computational Propaganda in Taiwan: Where Digital Democracy Meets Automated Autocracy* (Oxford: University of Oxford Computational Propaganda Research Project, 2017), 15.

[9] Ibid.

independent nation is hammered by "constant and ferocious espionage attacks and hacks from China."[10] These "attacks" have been so relentless that the *Washington Post* characterized them as "a full-scale disinformation campaign to undermine the government of President Tsai Ing-wen."[11]

Although first a victim of disinformation campaigns, this young democracy has shown its ability to recover. In 2018, China and China-proxies interfered with the midterm elections, resulting in a sweeping defeat of the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (hereafter DPP). Using similar tactics, these foreign and domestic forces looked to interfere once more, this time in Taiwan's 2020 presidential election. However, having learned from 2018 and standing witness to the unfolding turmoil in Hong Kong, Taiwan demonstrated its resilience by withstanding a populist, Beijing-friendly candidate in the 2020 presidential election—despite a highly visible Chinese disinformation campaign in support of said candidate.[12]

Tracing the evolution of China's cyber intrusions into Taiwan's domestic politics reveals a complex system of disinformation practices, requiring the collusion of foreign and domestic, institutional, and civic forces in both transmission and reception. This is a matter of great significance, for the health of Taiwan's democracy—and the PRC's interference therein—points to questions of regional peace. Most observers believe that China's cyberattacks against Taiwan foreshadow the eventual use of military forces, which, if deployed in the name of "unifying" Taiwan with the mainland, would draw the United States into a war to defend Taiwan.[13] As Kenneth Lieberthal notes, "One of the greatest dangers to international security today is the possibility of a military confrontation between China and Taiwan that leads to a war between China and the United States."[14] This potential catastrophe is now even more complicated, for just as the Russians interfered in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, so China is targeting citizens in Taiwan with waves of disinformation, hence destabilizing the quality of public deliberation while perhaps foreshadowing crises to come.

Before turning to our two Taiwan-based case studies, we open with a survey of the critical literature, hence demonstrating the range and complexity of such cyber disinformation activities. We argue these disinformation

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[10] Alison Hsiao, "Taiwan, U.S. Join Forces in Countering Disinformation," *Taiwan Democracy Bulletin*, November 2, 2018.

[11] Ellen Bork, "Here's What the Chinese Communist Party Wants You to Forget about Taiwan," *Washington Post*, November 24, 2018.

[12] Charlie Campbell, "What's at Stake in Taiwan's Presidential Election," *TIME Magazine*, January 6, 2020.

[13] See Chen Ming-tong, et al., *The China Threat Crosses the Strait*, trans. Kiel Downey (Taipei: Taiwan Security Research Group, 2006), and Lara Seligman, "U.S. Increasingly Concerned about a Chinese Attack on Taiwan," *Foreign Policy*, January 16, 2019.

[14] Kenneth Lieberthal, "Preventing a War over Taiwan," *Foreign Affairs* 84 (2005): 53-63, quotations at 53, 60.

campaigns accelerate a social phenomenon that scholars are calling "post-truth" communication. With that theoretical context in place, we show how the CPC is manufacturing "post-truth" communication via its so-called "50-cent Army," and how nationalistic netizens have responded with their own grassroots efforts via the phenomenon scholars are calling "Little Pink." Then, to address how this network of "post-truth" communication is weaponized against Taiwan, we turn to two case studies. We start with the January 2016 "sticker war," wherein Chinese netizens launched what started as vicious attacks against Taiwan's newly elected president, Tsai Ing-wen, but which soon evolved into a playful exercise in youthful nationalism. The "sticker war" raises questions about the intermingling of power and pleasure on the Internet in China. We then move to the larger, and more dangerous, question of how the CPC, building upon the lessons learned from the "sticker war," flooded Taiwan with disinformation, thus seeking to destabilize Asia's most vibrant democracy. We focus here on the case of Su Chii-cherng, who committed suicide following a barrage on online attacks. Whereas the cyber efforts of the "sticker war" were visible and playful, the cyber maneuvers behind Su's case were invisible and malicious, as the allegations against him were launched across a shadowy network of foreign and domestic actors who sowed confusion and chaos into Taiwanese civic life. We close by turning to the governmental and civic initiatives launched in Taiwanese society to counter such attacks, thus showing how, in response to Chinese hacking, Taiwan is now debating and renewing its commitment to democratic practices.

Establishing the Contours of "Post-Truth" Communication

The bulk of critical literature addressing cyber-disinformation campaigns is rooted in analyses of the Russians' attacks on the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The U.S. government produced three such studies.[15] While these reports are largely quantitative and forensic, a fourth key document, *The Tactics & Tropes of the Internet Research Agency*, began the move toward a more qualitative form of analysis by categorizing the flood of disinformation into thematic strands.[16] These early reports were supported by a raft of scholarly studies, including Kathleen Hall Jamieson's *Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers*

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[15] See Intelligence Community Assessment (ICA), *Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections* (Washington, DC: Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017); Robert S. Mueller, *Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election* (Washington, DC: Department of Justice, 2019); and Select Committee on Intelligence, *Report on Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election, Volume 2: Russia's Use of Social Media* (Washington, DC: U.S. Senate, 116th Congress, 1st Session, 2020).

[16] Renee DiResta, et al., *The Tactics & Tropes of the Internet Research Agency* (New York: Columbia University/New Knowledge, 2019).

and Trolls Helped Elect a President,[17] and journal articles by scholars working in the fields of cyber policy,[18] communication,[19] American studies,[20] computer science,[21] journalism,[22] information management,[23] security studies,[24] and more. Across this interdisciplinary range of work, one of the conclusions is that the Russians' efforts were successful in part because they dovetailed with the emergence of what Jayson Harsin calls a "post-truth" media ecosystem.[25]

The transformation toward "post-truth" began in response to the controversial and disinformation-plagued invasion of Iraq by the United States,[26] and has since then accelerated to the point where a majority of people surveyed in the United States and abroad view U.S. political institutions with suspicion.[27] Perhaps most dauntingly, President Trump fueled this distrust of U.S. institutions by seeking, as argued by Neville-Shepard, "to rid the public sphere of its referees" and by "undermining the system of experts and institutions that determine what kind of reason and evidence is acceptable."[28] From the Russians' interference in 2016 up to and through the Trump presidency, then, "post-truth" communication evolved into a dizzying state of confusion "where chaos and disagreement is the new norm."[29]

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[17] Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[18] Susan Morgan, "Fake News, Disinformation, Manipulation, and Online Tactics to Undermine Democracy," *Journal of Cyber Policy* 3 (2018): 39-43.

[19] Ryan Neville-Shepard, "Post-Presumption Argumentation and the Post-Truth World: On the Conspiracy Rhetoric of Donald Trump," *Argumentation and Advocacy* 55 (2019): 1-19

[20] Ian Reilly, "F for Fake: Propaganda! Hoaxing! Hacking! Partisanship! and Activism! in the Fake News Ecology," *Journal of American Culture* 41 (2018): 139-152.

[21] Arash Barfar, "Cognitive and Affective Responses to Political Disinformation in Facebook," *Computers in Human Behavior* 101 (2019): 173-179.

[22] Deen Freelon and Tetyana Lokot, "Russian Disinformation Campaigns on Twitter Target Political Communities across the Spectrum," *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review* (January 14, 2020), http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:42401973 (accessed June 22, 2021).

[23] Edda Humprecht, "Where 'Fake News' Flourishes: A Comparison across Four Western Democracies," *Information, Communication & Society* 22 (2018): 1973-1988.

[24] Stephen Mccombie, Allon Uhlmann, and Sarah Morrison, "The US 2016 Presidential Election & Russia's Troll Farms," *Intelligence and National Security* 35 (2019): 95-114.

[25] Jayson Harsin, "Post-Truth and Critical Communication," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Communication* (2018), DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.013.757, and Susan Morgan, "Fake News, Disinformation, Manipulation, and Online Tactics to Undermine Democracy," *Journal of Cyber Policy* 3 (2018): 39-43.

[26] See Stephen J. Hartnett and Laura Stengrim, *Globalization and Empire: The U.S. Invasion of Iraq, Free Markets, and the Twilight of Democracy* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006).

[27] See Richard Wike, et al., *America's International Image Continues to Suffer* (New York: Pew Research Center, October 1, 2018).

[28] Neville-Shepard, "Post-Presumption Argumentation and the Post-Truth World," quotation at 7.

[29] Ibid., 11, 15.

Within this framework, most scholars agree that whereas the old Cold War model of persuasion sought to convince readers and viewers to accept some over-arching narrative (that communism is better than capitalism, say, or that democracy trumps authoritarianism),[30] the new form of "post-truth" disinformation strives not to create a logical and coherent series of targeted messages but "to hack the attention economy."[31] Critics argue the goal of such "post-truth" hacking is not consistency but chaos, not persuasion but noise.[32] The "post-truth" media ecosystem therefore hinges not on a few dominant narratives but on a swirling mish-mash of instantaneous memes, rumor bombs, likes, shares, infotainment, and traditional news repurposed across social media. Within this delirious "attention economy,"[33] consumer interest is not driven by evidence, careful reasoning, or systemic persuasion, but by a sense of drama, the thrill of the extreme, and the crass laughter of mockery. Thus, as one study concludes, the "post-truth" media ecosystem poses a threat to the health of democratic deliberation, for it shatters our hopes for informed and civil debate by fueling the rise of tribal affiliations, spreading lurid conspiracy theories, and encouraging the loathing of others, therefore driving a process of polarization.[34]

This review of the critical literature suggests that within the world of "post-truth" communication, online actors are less concerned with fostering coherent counter-narratives than in gumming up the processes of informed deliberation, hence paralyzing democracies in webs of consternation and anger. As Jamieson argues, such "discourse saboteurs" strive to create chaos and confusion.[35] The bulk of this theoretical framework hinges on U.S.-based analyses of the Russians' interference in the 2016 presidential election, however, and so, to expand this thinking to a more global frame, we turn to the question of how "post-truth" communication is being produced in China and Taiwan.

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[30] See Shawn J. Parry-Giles, "Rhetorical Experimentation and the Cold War, 1947—1953: The Development of an Internationalist Approach to Propaganda," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 80 (1994): 448-467, and Martin J. Medhurst, Robert L. Ivie, Philip Wander, and Robert L. Scott, *Cold War Rhetoric: Strategy, Metaphor, and Ideology* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1990).

[31] Reilly, "F for Fake," 143.

[32] See Gabriella Coleman, *Hacker, Hoaxer, Whistleblower, Spy: The Many Faces of Anonymous* (London: Verso, 2014).

[33] Singer and Brooking, *LikeWar*.

[34] Philip N. Howard, Bharath Ganesh, Dimitri Liotsiou, John Kelly, and Camille Francois, *The IRA, Social Media, and Political Polarization in the United States, 2016—2018* (Oxford: University of Oxford, 2018).

[35] Jamieson, *Cyberwar*, 6. Also see Adrian Chen, "The Real Paranoia-Inducing Purpose of Russian Hacks," *The New Yorker*, July 27, 2016.

"Post-Truth" Communication in China and Taiwan

Much as Trump worked with Fox News and other allied media outlets to push the "post-truth" paradigm in America, so the communication ecosystem in China is marked by the party's top-down management, which strives to saturate both legacy and social media with tightly scripted messages supporting Xi Jinping's "China Dream." As Xi said in an infamous speech delivered in 2016, the role of China's state-run media is to "align their ideology, political thinking, and deeds to those of the CPC Central Committee," hence driving "conscious action by the general public."[36] More than just a call for concerted efforts to produce state-supporting news—what the party euphemistically calls "constructive journalism"[37]—Xi's command has led to a new age of disinformation, wherein party-run outlets claim that Hong Kongers and Taiwanese long for reunion with the motherland, Tibetans thank their Han saviors, and Uighurs applaud the party's efforts to stomp out terrorism in Xinjiang.[38] The resulting "conscious action" on the part of the masses has taken two distinct forms on Chinese social media: inwardly focused nationalism pushing positive, pro-party messages, and outwardly focused nationalism attacking enemies of the state.

Much of the existing scholarship has focused on the *wumao dang*, or "50-cent Party," sometimes called the "50-cent Army," which consists of the CPC's trolls filling up the Internet with pro-party and anti-Taiwan sentiments while, according to some sources, earning a small payment for each post.[39] While this phenomenon has received much coverage in the popular media[40]—including evidence of domestic pushback by Chinese social media users[41]—the most detailed analysis of the "50-cent Party" (hereafter 50c) is offered by Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, who coded 43,000 known 50c posts and interviewed some of their authors. Their study concludes that the 50c is not a grassroots eruption of citizenship, but rather "a massive government operation that writes approximately 448 million 50c posts a year." This avalanche of

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[36] "Xi Underscores CPC's Leadership in News Reporting," *Xinhua*, February 19, 2016; see Patrick Shaou-Whea Dodge, "Communication Convergence and 'the Core' for a New Era," in *Communication Convergence in Contemporary China: Politics, Platform, and Participation,* ed. Patrick Shaou-Whea Dodge (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2020), ix-xxxii, Xi quoted at xi.

[37] See Zhao Alexandre Huang and Rui Wang, " 'Panda Engagement' in China's Digital Public Diplomacy," *Asian Journal of Communication* 30 (2020): 118-140.

[38] For analysis, see *"The Happiest Muslims in the World": Disinformation, Propaganda, and the Uyghur Crisis* (Washington, DC: Uyghur Human Rights Project, 2020).

[39] Payments are reported in Rongbin Han, "Manufacturing Consent in Cyberspace: China's 'Fifty-Cent Army'," *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 44 (2015): 105-134.

[40] See Nikhil Sonnad, "Hacked Emails Reveal China's Elaborate and Absurd Internet Propaganda Machine," *Quartz*, December 18, 2014.

[41] Samuel Wade, "Challenging the 50 Cent Party," *China Digital Times*, March 7, 2012.

party-sponsored propaganda is overwhelmingly geared toward "cheerleading and positive discussions" of key issues, apparently with "the strategic objective" of "distract[ing] and redirect[ing] public attention from discussions or events with collective action potential."[42] The 50c is therefore an engine of "post-truth" communication, albeit inwardly focused, targeting Chinese netizens. As confirmed by Rongbin Han as well, even while the "Army" produces what appears to be an avalanche of citizen-led sentiment, the operation amounts to a massive online exercise in CPC-produced disinformation.[43]

Part of what makes "post-truth" communication so confusing is the interfacing of supposedly organic, user-generated content with tightly scripted, top-down messaging. For example, in studies of social media disinformation spread throughout Hong Kong during the Umbrella Revolution, paid ads, troll-produced content, bot-reproduced posts, and legacy media were systematically interfaced, creating the appearance of consensus among users.[44] This apparent consensus was driven, of course, by party-run media. Likewise, during the so-called "Trade War" between the United States and China, most of China's social media influencers were not generating their own content, or offering their own analyses of the conflict, but liking, sharing, and otherwise reproducing information already published in the party-run legacy media.[45] In this way, party propaganda gets recycled through social media, where it appears to represent the authentic views of individual citizens—and this, too, is a new form of disinformation, for it saturates our public deliberation with claims, positions, and narratives immune to debate and contestation. Because the origin of such arguments is never certain, and because such messages accumulate into a self-repeating echo-chamber of nationalistic bombast, such white-washing of propaganda short-circuits critical thinking.

The debate about the authenticity of social media communication in China—and hence about the means of disinformation production and dissemination—condensed in much public commentary around questions about China's "Little Pink." The name derives from the pink background of the home page of the website of Jingiang Literature City, a popular Chinese discussion forum rooted

[42] Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, "How the Chinese Government Fabricates Social Media Posts for Strategic Distraction, Not Engaged Argument," *American Political Science Review* 111 (2017): 484-501, quotations at 485; for links to the key documents, see Anne Henochowicz, "Thousands of Local Internet Propaganda Emails Leaked," *China Digital Times*, December 3, 2014.

[43] Rongbin Han, "Defending the Authoritarian Regime Online: China's 'Voluntary Fifty-Cent Army'," *China Quarterly* 224 (2015): 1006-1025.

[44] See Xin Xin, "Popularizing Party Journalism in China in the Age of Social Media," *Global Media and China* 3 (2018): 3-17, and Karoline Nerdalen Darbo and Terje Skjerdal, "Blurred Boundaries: Citizen Journalists versus Conventional Journalists in Hong Kong," *Global Media and China* 4 (2019): 111-124.

[45] See the chapters by Peiqin Chen, Ke Guo, Louisa Ha, Nan Lyu, and Yang Yang, in *The U.S.-China Trade War: Global News Framing and Public Opinion in the Digital Age*, ed. Louisa Ha and Lars Willnat (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, forthcoming 2022).

in a love of teen fiction. Because the site was traditionally frequented by apolitical youth, the phrase "Little Pink" was used to indicate the miraculous arrival of international political consciousness to a new set of cadre—think of a gendered and online version of the Red Guard.[46] For example, the *South China Morning Post* reported that "83 percent of these keyboard warriors identify as female" and fall "between 18 and 24."[47] The Communist Youth League of China responded to this characterization in celebratory yet patronizing ways, commending the good "meme war" work of "our daughters, our sisters, the girls next door we secretly love."[48] This narrative of "Little Pink" suggests that its pro-party "meme war" communication is driven by young women finding their voices as patriots, thus depicting the site as a form of self-generating political education and community-building for Chinese youth.

In contrast to the above narrative, Kecheng Fang and Maria Repnikova argue that "Little Pink is a manufactured and mythologized label" that was used by the CPC to stoke patriotic blather, even while it also was used by liberal reformers in China to undercut this same narrative.[49] On this reading, "Little Pink" was not so much an organic cultural entity as a subject of debate rotating around questions about gender and authenticity in contemporary China. Among their findings, Fang and Repnikova report that counter to the narrative of "Little Pink" as a form of political engagement on the part of formerly apolitical young women, their survey of the posters showed that "64% of them were actually male" and "about half were located in countries other than China."[50] Much as in the "post-truth" media ecosystems in the United States and Taiwan, so in China users found it difficult to discern who was an authentic user versus who was a bot or part of the 50c, what was an actual individual's post versus what was paid disinformation, and what was an organic cultural movement versus what was an astroturfing exercise in flimflam.

Just as the rise of "post-truth" communication rendered America vulnerable to the Russians' disinformation operation in 2016, and as the "50-cent Army" and "Little Pink" fueled the spread of "post-truth" communication in China, so the contested norms of public deliberation in Taiwan have enabled disinformation, particularly from Beijing, to thrive. In 2018, President Tsai Ing-wen used her National Day Address to call attention to nontraditional national security challenges, including "social infiltration." She declared that "preventing foreign powers from infiltrating and subverting our society, ensuring that our democratic institutions and social economy function

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[46] Anthony Tao, "China's Little Pink Are Not Who You Think," *SupChina*, November 15, 2017.

[47] Zhuang Pinghui, "The Rise of Little Pink," *South China Morning Post*, May 26, 2017.

[48] Lotus Ruan, "The New Face of Chinese Nationalism," *Foreign Policy*, August 25, 2016.

[49] Kecheng Fang and Maria Repnikova, "Demystifying 'Little Pink': The Creation and Evolution of a Gendered Label for Nationalistic Activists in China," *New Media & Society* 20 (2018): 2162-2185, quotation at 2164.

[50] Ibid., 2170.

normally," are a top priority for the Taiwanese people.[51] Although built on implication, as neither disinformation nor China are specifically named, Tsai's public pronouncement encompasses these concerns.

As a technologically integrated country, Taiwan has one of the highest Internet penetration rates in Asia (92.78 percent)[52] as well as a substantial number of mobile phone users (78.8 percent).[53] Furthermore, across platforms, 90 percent of Taiwanese citizens have a social media presence.[54] These high penetration rates, combined with a high level of press freedom, provide ample opportunity for China to disseminate and amplify disinformation. Focusing on the 2018 midterm election, Wang finds that the "onslaught of misinformation" greatly affected Taiwanese citizens' voting behavior. The youth and lower-income voters were most vulnerable to false information, because of their high social media exposure and low media literacy, respectively.[55] Furthermore, Chen and Wen report that the "fear of missing out" drove Taiwanese voters to share "dramatic disinformation" on social media in search of peer recognition. They approach sharing suspicious news from a social utility approach, without looking more deeply into the political consequences of such action.[56] These issues are of particular concern with the three most popular online platforms in Taiwan, including Facebook, PTT [批踢踢], and LINE.

Given its capacity to extend offline networks into online mobilization, Facebook has become a vital campaign tool for Taiwanese politicians and political parties.[57] The site's political energy explains why Chinese netizens gravitate toward the platform, creating fake accounts to shape public opinion. Paul Huang's analysis shows that during the 2018 midterm election, the most active Facebook community page advocating for the pro-Beijing candidate, Han Kuo-yu, was created and maintained by a "professional cybergroup from China."[58] Another report indicates that China-based users sought to acquire several Taiwanese Facebook groups to promote cross-Strait reunification

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[51] Tsai Ing-wen, "President Tsai Delivers 2018 National Day Address," Office of the President, Republic of China (Taiwan), October 10, 2018.

[52] Lauren Dickey, "Confronting the Challenge of Online Disinformation in Taiwan," in *Disinformation, Cybersecurity, & Energy Challenges*, ed. Yuki Tatsumi, Pamela Kennedy, and Jason Li (Washington, DC: Stimson Center, 2019), 51.

[53] Ho-Chun Herbert Chang, Samar Haider, and Emilio Ferrara, "Digital Civic Participation and Misinformation during the 2020 Taiwanese Presidential Election," *Media and Communication* 9 (2021): 144-157.

[54] Dickey, "Confronting the Challenge of Online Disinformation in Taiwan."

[55] Tai-Li Wang, "Does Fake News Matter to Election Outcomes? The Case Study of Taiwan's 2018 Local Elections," *Asian Journal for Public Opinion Research* 8 (2020): 67-104.

[56] Yi-Ning Katherine Chen and Chia-Ho Ryan Wen, "Facebook's Algorithms, Fake News, and Taiwan's 2018 Local Elections," delivered at the 30th European Conference of the International Telecommunications Society (ITS), Helsinki, Finland, June 16-19, 2019.

[57] Michael Chan, Hsuan-Ting Chen, and Francis L. F. Lee, "Examining the Roles of Mobile and Social Media in Political Participation," *New Media & Society* 19 (2017): 2003-2021.

[58] Paul Huang, "Chinese Cyber-Operatives Boosted Taiwan's Insurgent Candidate," *Foreign Policy*, June 26, 2019.

messages through micro-targeting.[59] Responding to these cyber maneuvers, on December 13, 2019, Facebook removed 118 Taiwanese fan pages, 99 groups, and 51 accounts for "violating the platform's rules by artificially inflating their posts' reach" or having traces of suspicious content and foreign interference.[60] In this way, the social media giant took a small step to protect Taiwan's vulnerable democracy.

Founded in 1995 by students from National Taiwan University, PTT is a Reddit-like message board widely used among youth. An early study about this site discussed how a local "cyber army" used "manual propaganda" to support domestic political campaigns.[61] Recently, PTT has come under scrutiny for its potential to allow foreign forces to spread political rumors. For example, after Burkina Faso broke ties with Taiwan in May 2018, a message began to circulate on this site warning that Honduras would soon swap recognition and establish official ties with Beijing. Taiwan's National Security Council traced the IP address of this post to Shanghai, China.[62] The post indicates Chinese netizens' attempts to imitate an authentic local voice by using Taiwanese dialects and turns of phrase (i.e., the adoption of traditional characters).

LINE has been equally susceptible to efforts to shape public opinions. LINE, the most popular messaging app in Taiwan, disseminates information through closed individual or group conversations. Based on five thousand stories circulated via LINE during the 2018 midterm election, Horng-En Wang found a surge of disinformation.[63] Liu Zhi-Xi, Ke Hao-Xiang, and Hsu Chia-Yu further identified a Malaysia-based content farm named the Qiqi News Network as the primary source of such disinformation.[64] Beijing's influence, here, is evident in

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[59] 李秉芳 [Li Bing-Fang], "「買台灣比打台灣便宜」中國疑買粉絲頁、招募「支持統一」小編？陸委會：屬實將開罰" [(It would cost less to bribe than attack Taiwan), China is suspected of buying fan groups and recruiting local cyber army for reunification? Mainland Affairs Council: If true, they will be fined], *關鍵評論網* [The News Lens] (April 6, 2019), https://www.thenewslens.com/article/116816 (accessed June 22, 2021).

[60] Alice Su, "Can Fact-Checkers Save Taiwan from a Flood of Chinese Fake News?" *Los Angeles Times*, December 16, 2019.

[61] Man-Chun Ko and Hsin-Hsi Chen, "Analysis of Cyber Army's Behaviours on Web Forum for Elect Campaign," *Information Retrieval Technology* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2016), 394-399.

[62] Next Magazine, "〈獨家〉PTT放宏國外長赴北京假新聞 IP竟來自中國" [Exclusive: PTT rumors regarding Honduras's foreign minister in Beijing: The IP is from China], *Next Magazine TW* (June 1, 2018), https://tw.nextmgz.com/realtimenews/news/410484 (accessed June 22, 2021).

[63] 王宏恩 [Horng-En Wang], "選舉前的假新聞比較多嗎？以LINE為例" [Was there more fake news before the election? Using LINE as an example], *思想坦克* [Voicetank] (September 5, 2019), https://voicettank.org/2019-09-05-090501/ (accessed June 22, 2021).

[64] 劉致昕, 柯皓翔, and 許家瑜 [Liu Zhi-Xi, Ke Hao-Xiang, and Hsu Chia-Yu], "LINE群組的假訊息從哪來？跨國調查，追出內容農場「直銷」產業鏈" [Where did the disinformation on LINE groups come from? A discovery of the content farm supply chain through transnational investigation], *報導者* [The Reporter] (December 25, 2019), https://www.twreporter.org/a/information-warfare-business-disinformation-fake-news-behind-line-groups (accessed June 22, 2021).

the use of simplified Chinese characters and nonlocal phrasing as well as in the site's frequent promotion of China's state-media-made material. While content farming is mostly financially driven, "Qiqi News Network's content leading up to the Taiwanese election exposes the porous border between financially and politically motivated information operations."[65]

We have surveyed the existing literature on disinformation and "post-truth" communication, focusing first on theoretical findings rooted in the Russians' 2016 information warfare against the United States; second, on the patterns of disinformation being produced in China; and third, on the disinformation flow from China to Taiwan. Now, with that context established, we turn to the question of how this "post-truth" communication has been weaponized against Taiwan.

Two Case Studies of Chinese Cyber-Assaults against Taiwan

To pursue this complicated entanglement of post-truth communication, the CPC's disinformation operations, and the consequences of "hyper-adversarial" communication in Taiwan,[66] we offer two related case studies. Used by diverse disciplines, case study research presents "a typical or particularly instructive example of a more general problem,"[67] thereby providing the exemplars essential to building larger explanatory models.[68] The case study is especially popular among qualitative scholars. Indeed, the case study has become "an expansive field within the qualitative paradigm" because it "provides the researcher with a holistic understanding of a problem, issue, or phenomenon."[69] Not a method in and of itself, the case study embraces, even necessitates, a combination of methods. Our analysis relies on textual analysis but applies it to various news and online discourses. The case study, as offered here, facilitates understanding of a larger phenomenon rather than being driven by an intrinsic interest specific only to the case.[70] The two cases addressed below were selected for their news coverage, association with major

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[65] Nick Monaco, Melanie Smith, and Amy Studdart, "Detecting Digital Fingerprints: Tracing Chinese Disinformation in Taiwan," Institute for the Future's Digital Intelligence Lab, Graphika, and the International Republican Institute (2020), https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/detecting_digital_fingerprints_-_tracing_chinese_disinformation_in_taiwan_0.pdf (accessed June 22, 2021).

[66] Gary Rawnsley and Qian Gong, "Political Communications in Democratic Taiwan: The Relationship between Politicians and Journalists," *Political Communication* 28 (2011): 323-340, quotation at 330.

[67] UweFlick, "Designing Qualitative Research," in *An Introduction to Qualitative Research* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2014), 111-132.

[68] Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Patricia Leavy, *The Practice of Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2011).

[69] Ibid., 256.

[70] Robert E. Stake, "Case Studies," in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2000), 435-454.

elections, and social impact. The first discusses the 2016 "sticker war," hence addressing how Chinese netizens performed nationalism by attacking Tsai Ing-wen.[71] The second tackles the 2018 suicide of Su Chii-cherng, Taiwan's representative in Osaka, who was prodded into his desperate act by a barrage of online criticism—which most observers now believe was launched by both agents of CPC disinformation and unwitting Taiwanese accomplices. In both cases, we analyze how Taiwan's fledgling democracy was roiled by deceptive online communication.

The 2016 Sticker War and the Nuances of Chinese Cyber-Nationalism

A proponent of postcolonial nationalism, LGBTQ equality, indigenous rights, transitional justice, and a host of other progressive values, Tsai Ing-wen has long been appraised by Beijing as a threat to its "reunification" hopes.[72] And so, throughout the summer and autumn of 2015, as Tsai campaigned for the presidency, the CPC launched a media campaign attacking her. The CPC even took the dramatic step of threatening Taiwanese voters, warning that if Tsai won the presidency, her supporters "should be made to pay the price for their choice."[73] The CPC argued again and again, both before and after Tsai's election, that she and the DPP were "independence leaning" radicals committed to "separatism" and "splittism."[74] Tsai won the election nonetheless, yet the CPC continued its assault upon her character by deploying rhetoric so demeaning the *New York Times* characterized it as "hateful commentary."[75] Still, as these attacks against Tsai were rendered in public outlets, and hence were open to public scrutiny in China, Taiwan, and abroad, they all fell within the normal parameters of political persuasion.[76]

Given the failure of this public persuasion campaign, however, and taking a page from the Russians' playbook, the CPC then decided to smear Tsai by launching a cyberattack against her. Thus, upon the day of her election, the CPC orchestrated what China's *Global Times* celebrated as an "Internet

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71 For context, see the essays in *The Internet, Social Media, and a Changing China*, ed. Jacques deLisle, Avery Goldstein, and Guobin Yang (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

72 See Stephen J. Hartnett, Patrick Shaou-Whea Dodge, and Lisa Keranen, "Postcolonial Remembering in Taiwan: 228 and Transitional Justice as the 'End of Fear'," *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 13 (2020): 238-256.

73 China Review News, "Who Is Responsible for Taiwan's Blank Cheque?" from a party-run website, report by the BBC Worldwide Monitoring service as "Monitoring Quotes from China, Taiwan Press," June 8, 2015.

74 Zhu Songling, "Cross Straits Discord May Continue," *China Daily*, December 21, 2017.

75 Chris Horton, "Taiwan President Stops in U.S. as Relations Warm, Angering China," *New York Times*, August 19, 2018.

76 See Shen Dingli, "Tsai Banging Her Head against a Brick Wall," *China Daily*, October 12, 2018; "Maintaining Cross-Straits Peace Top Responsibility for Taiwan Leader," *Beijing Review*, January 28, 2016; and "Tsai May Jeopardize US Policy," *China Daily*, May 19, 2016.

war" against her Facebook page. Hosted by the Di Ba discussion group on China's Baidu platform—a Facebook-like platform boasting more than 20 million readers—organizers tasked users with bombarding Tsai's Facebook account, amounting to "an online rally" supporting hard versions of Chinese nationalism.[77] Many of the posts used prepackaged sets of emojis, emoticons, and other visual "stickers," so the trolling campaign became known as a "sticker war," or, riffing on the name of the platform, as the "Di Ba Expedition." Within twenty-four hours of Tsai's electoral victory, more than 70,000 such messages flooded her Facebook page,[78] while the hashtag "Di Ba goes to Battle on Facebook" miraculously garnered 800,000 followers on Weibo (a Twitter-like micro-blogging platform).[79] The original Baidu and Facebook posts were then shared via WeChat (a WhatsApp-like messaging app), Weibo, and other Chinese social apps, turning into an online social phenomenon Nikhil Sonnad has characterized as "troll madness."[80]

Gabriele De Seta has studied the "Di Ba Expedition" and found that many of the posts relay personal hatred toward Tsai, anger toward anyone who supports Taiwanese independence, and threats of sexual violence. For example, De Seta quotes posts saying: "Every one of you is an Idiot!" "You are all *Shabi* [stupid cunts]!" "What the fuck, you dare support Taiwan independence?"[81] The vulgar and threatening tone of the "sticker war" was captured in Rebel Pepper's political cartoon in the Japanese *Newsweek* on January 22, 2016, in which smirking and shouting men flash Tsai while waving flags, hence merging the righteous fury of Chinese nationalism with the male prerogative to inflict sexual violence.[82] The "sticker war" thus stands as a prime example of what Min Jiang and Ashley Esarey have described as "uncivil society in digital China."[83]

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[77] Zhang Yiqian, "China's Youth Demonstrate Patriotism through Launching Emoji and Sticker War," *Global Times*, January 25, 2016.

[78] Sidney Leng, "Taiwan President-elect Tsai Ing-wen's Facebook Page Bombarded," *South China Morning Post*, January 21, 2016.

[79] Marco Huang, "Chinese Netizens Flood Tsai Ing-wen's Facebook Page," *Wall Street Journal/China Real Time Report*, January 21, 2016. The manufacturing of "followers" indicates automated CPC interference, as analyzed in Heather Timmons and Josh Horwitz, "China's Propaganda News Outlets Are Absolutely Crushing It on Facebook," *Quartz*, May 6, 2016.

[80] Nikhil Sonnad, "Troll Madness: An Army of Chinese Trolls Has Jumped the Great Firewall to Attack Taiwanese Independence," *Quartz*, January 20, 2016.

[81] Gabriele De Seta, "*Wenming Bu Wenming*: The Socialization of Incivility in Postdigital China," *International Journal of Communication* 12 (2018): 2010-2030, quotations at 2018.

[82] "Rebel Pepper" is the *nom de guerre* of Wang Liming, a Chinese artist who has fled China; readers can see his work on his Twitter feed, @RebelPepperWang.

[83] Min Jiang and Ashley Esarey, "Uncivil Society in Digital China: Incivility, Fragmentation, and Political Stability," *International Journal of Communication* 12 (2018): 1928-1944, and Anne Henochowicz, "Minitrue: Trolling Tsai Ing-wen beyond the Great Firewall," *China Digital Times*, June 10, 2018.

An alternative interpretation focuses not so much on the geopolitical ramifications of the "sticker war" as on the personal and interpersonal motivations of Chinese netizens. For example, Guobin Yang suggests the "sticker war" indicates "the distinct features of a public performance, but of the self more than for its alleged audience in Taiwan." From this perspective, participants sought not so much to destabilize Tsai in Taiwan as "to stage a drama of self-pride, self-glorification, and self-performance."[84] Yang speculates that joining the "sticker war" offered participants a chance to become "re-enchanted in a world of disenchantment," even to explore some "collective yearning for grandeur and heroism."[85] The *Global Times* echoes this reading, noting that many of the participants "weren't looking to communicate with the other side" and, rather than acting politically, "joined in for fun, to feel a sense of participation." The young netizens "even started posting their own photos and turned the Facebook 'battlegrounds' into dating sites."[86] This interpretation jells with Jonathan Auerbach and Russ Castronovo's reminder that "to be effective, propaganda must harness a rich affective range beyond negative emotions such as hatred, fear, and envy to include more positive feelings such as pleasure, joy, belonging, and pride."[87] In this sense, the "sticker war" offered the perfect combination of emotions: both a loathed Taiwanese Other to attack and a joyful sense of Chinese patriotic belonging while doing so.

The "sticker war" thus raises fascinating questions about mediated patriotism in China. Does the eruption of online nationalism indicate authentic hardline sentiment against Tsai and Taiwan? And, if so, does the "sticker war" indicate grassroots support for Xi Jinping's "China Dream"? If one answers "yes," that would suggest the arrival of widespread, genuinely felt nationalism rooted in support of a vision of China as a regional power with legitimate claims over Taiwan and the South China Sea. Like the Trump phenomenon in America, this would suggest a new populism in China, a trend toward an aggrieved sense of nationalism willing to call for military action.[88] On this reading, the "sticker war" points toward a cyber-version of "traumatized nationalism," with online

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[84] Guobin Yang, "Performing Cyber-Nationalism in Twenty-First Century China," in *From Cyber-Nationalism to Fandom Nationalism: The Case of the Diba Expedition in China*, ed. Liu Hailong (London: Routledge, 2019), 1-12, quotations at 2, 3.

[85] Yang, "Performing Cyber-Nationalism in Twenty-First Century China," 4.

[86] Zhang, "China's Youth Demonstrate Patriotism through Launching Emoji and Sticker War," 4, 7.

[87] Jonathan Auerbach and Russ Castronovo, "Thirteen Propositions about Propaganda," *The Oxford Handbook of Propaganda Studies*, ed. Jonathan Auerbach and Russ Castronovo (London: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1-16, quotation at 10.

[88] Regarding Trump's nationalism, see Jennifer Mercieca, *Demagogue for President: The Rhetorical Genius of Donald Trump* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 2020). See also, Xu Wu, *Chinese Cyber Nationalism* (Boulder, CO: Lexington, 2007), and Ying Jiang, *Cyber-Nationalism in China* (Adelaide: University of Adelaide Press, 2012).

platforms generating and then echoing "a new chest-thumping bravado."[89] If correct, this conclusion would point to a transformation in the roles the Internet plays in China, for as recently as 2013, Yanqi Tong and Shaohua Lei argued that interactive social media in China were dominated by netizens who were "overwhelmingly liberal" and who were driving movements leading toward the CPC "losing ideological hegemony."[90] Protest and dissidence are still found on the Internet in China,[91] but the "sticker war" suggests that, at least in some parts of the Internet, the CPC is no longer losing the war of ideas.

On the other hand, maybe the netizens leaping on the bandwagon were seeking a sense of collective identity, a public forum for performing patriotic citizenship. If this is the case, the moment points not so much to a new nationalism sweeping China's youth as to the more mundane fact of their loneliness, their need to connect via online platforms, in this case complete with CPC-approved emotions targeting CPC-approved enemies. This reading would suggest that China's netizens are experimenting with new forms of *constrained agency*, wherein participation in civil society is acceptable, albeit only within the CPC's tightly controlled spaces.[92] This version of constrained agency would confirm Guobin Yang's argument that the CPC is supplementing its early, crude forms of Internet censorship, which sought to block forbidden communication, by practicing more subtle forms of "activism management," wherein the CPC encourages acceptable communication by "managing and co-opting" netizens "in the hopes of channeling" their energy "to its own advantage."[93] Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret Roberts conclude that this constrained agency creates the illusion that "the Chinese people are individually free" to post what they want, yet the CPC's control of the range of acceptable speech, particularly its inhibition on all forms of communication that call for collective action, means Chinese netizens are "collectively in chains."[94]

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89 Stephen J. Hartnett, "Google and the 'Twisted Cyber Spy' Affair: U.S.-China Communication in an Age of Globalization," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 97 (2011): 411-434, quotation at 413; for context, see Zheng Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

90 Yang Tong and Shaohua Lei, "War of Position and Microblogging in China," *Journal of Contemporary China* 22 (2013): 292-311, quotation at 311.

91 See Patrick Shaou-Whea Dodge, ed., *Communication Convergence in Contemporary China: Politics, Platforms and Participation* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2020).

92 See Sonja K. Foss and Karen A. Foss, "Constricted and Constructed Potentiality: An Inquiry into Paradigms of Change," *Western Journal of Communication* 75 (2011): 205-238.

93 Guobin Yang, "Internet Activism & the Party-State in China," *Daedalus* 143 (2014): 110-123, quotations at 116, 120, and Guobin Yang, "Demobilizing the Emotions of Online Activism in China," *International Journal of Communication* 11 (2017): 1945-1965.

94 Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret E. Roberts, "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression," *American Political Science Review* 107 (2013): 326-343, quotation at 339.

Or perhaps the whole affair was driven by the "50-cent Army," meaning it was less of an organic eruption of Chinese nationalism, or an example of constrained agency in action, than another instance of the state using the Internet to manipulate public discourse—in essence, faking the appearance of CPC support. On this reading, the "sticker war" illustrates how the Internet in China has been turned into an echo-chamber of CPC ideology, amounting to what Rebecca MacKinnon calls "networked authoritarianism."[95] Readers trained in the ways of free speech will find this conclusion hard to fathom, but MacKinnon and Min Jiang argue that even when experienced under a regime of CPC-controlled constrained agency, netizens find participating on social media both edifying personally and comforting politically.[96] For example, Xueqing Li, Francis L. F. Lee, and Ying Li have studied college-age netizens in Guangzhou, a massive and wired coastal city near to the tech-center of Shenzhen and the financial hub of Hong Kong, and concluded that for these students, even when their netizenship is highly constrained, their "public affairs communication via social media" correlates strongly to "optimism about the government."[97] This reading suggests that, at least under Xi Jinping's "China Dream" regime, astroturfing works, the 50c works.[98]

We should remember that political life in China is just as complicated and contradictory as it is in America and Taiwan, meaning it is likely that some aspect of all three readings are at play. So, what happens when these same dynamics are exported to Taiwan? How will Taiwan's raucous democratic habits respond to these waves of disinformation? To answer that question, a closer look at the disinformation campaign launched against Taiwan in 2018, right before the midterm election, sheds light on the evolution of China's attempts to interfere in Taiwan's domestic politics.

The Case of Su Chii-cherng and Political Warfare against Taiwan's Democracy

The case of Su Chii-cherng merits special attention as an example of disinformation because of its international visibility, national impact, and cross-Strait collusion. No one would have imagined that a tropical cyclone hitting western Japan would result in a political storm swamping Taiwan. In September 2018, Typhoon Jebi disrupted air traffic, stranding thousands

[95] Rebecca MacKinnon, "China's 'Networked Authoritarianism'," *Journal of Democracy* 22 (2011): 32-46.

[96] Ibid., and see Min Jiang, "Authoritarian Informationalism: China's Approach to Internet Sovereignty," *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 30 (2010): 71-89.

[97] Xueqing Li, Francis L. F. Lee, and Ying Li, "The Dual Impact of Social Media under Networked Authoritarianism," *International Journal of Communication* 10 (2016): 5143-5163, quotation at 5155.

[98] See Ki Deuk Hyun and Jinhee Kim, "The Role of New Media in Sustaining the Status Quo," *Information, Communication, & Society* 18 (2015): 766-781.

of travelers at Kansai International Airport.[99] On September 6, a user by the screenname of "GuRuGuRu" posted on PTT, accusing the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office (TECO) in Osaka of failing to offer relief; the aggrieved poster claimed he had to rely on a bus transport arranged by the Chinese consulate to return to center-city Osaka.[100] A few hours later, another post entitled, "Did our representative office in Japan do anything for us??" also appeared on PTT, emphasizing that fifteen buses were sent to the airport to evacuate six large groups of stranded Chinese citizens—among them thirty-two were Taiwanese.[101]

Although the accuracy of these posts was hard to verify, Taiwanese media picked up these narratives and repackaged them as breaking news with sensational headlines, such as "Taiwanese had to rely on Chinese transportation to get away."[102] Later that night, several political commentators focused on this social-media-accusation-turned-news to criticize TECO's service in Osaka while praising China's efficiency and humanitarianism. Many of this first wave of comments asked for the resignation of Frank Hsieh, Taiwan's chief representative to Japan, yet another PTT post made by user "idcc" later that day defended Hsieh. Posing as an insider narrative, this post claimed that TECO in Osaka has operated as its own territory for years and was far from Frank Hsieh's reach (his offices are in Tokyo).[103] On September 7, several legislators from the Kuomintang (KMT), the major oppositional party in Taiwan, held a press conference to question the qualifications of the Japan-stationed staff generally, and Hsieh specifically. Public criticism of the government's slow and inadequate relief efforts allegedly caused the suicide of Director Su Chii-cherng, the head of TECO in Osaka, on September 14.[104] As his wife stated, "he died believing he had done his job and looking to avoid further public humiliation."[105]

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[99] Justin McCurry, "Typhoon Jebi: Japan Hit by Strongest Storm for 25 Years," *The Guardian*, September 4, 2018.

[100] Apple Daily, "[獨家]台客受困關西靠中援助？ 造謠大學生抓到了！" [Exclusive: Taiwanese stranded in Kansai airport relied on China's relief effort? The college student spreading the rumor was caught!], *蘋果新聞網* [Apple Daily] (December 15, 2018), https://tw. appledaily.com/local/20181215/IBVTILKQX7FFOATFPVDKOX2EBI/ (accessed June 22, 2021).

[101] 綠燈幸福 [ggus], "[爆卦]我們的駐日代表處為了國人做了些甚麼??" [Explosive report: Did our Japanese Representative Office do anything for us?], *PTT* (September 6, 2018), https://disp.cc/b/163-aOEN (accessed June 22, 2021).

[102] Lam Oiwan, "Taiwan: What Really Happened during the Kansai Airport Evacuation?" *The News Lens International Edition* (September 28, 2018), https://international.thenewslens.com/article/105060 (accessed June 22, 2021).

[103] 笑死 [idcc], "[爆卦] 大阪空港疏散事件相關資訊" [Explosive report: Information regarding evacuation Kansai airport], *PTT* (September 6, 2018), https://disp.cc/b/163-aOG0 (accessed June 22, 2021).

[104] Stacy Hsu, "Osaka Envoy Commits Suicide," *Taipei Times*, September 15, 2018.

[105] Apple Daily, "真相大白 不甘記過羞辱 蘇啟誠自殺 遺孀首發聲明　遺書未提假新聞」" [The truth is revealed. Su Chii-cherng's death is caused by humiliating demerit. His widow broke the silence for the first time (fake news was not mentioned in the suicide notes)], *蘋果新聞網* [Apple Daily], December 21, 2018.

First regarded as a governmental failure, Japanese legacy media later labeled the incident a prime example of “fake news.” For example, *Yomiuri Shimbun* attributed the story’s impact on Taiwan’s domestic politics to Beijing’s systematic disinformation campaign and to the unwitting Taiwanese media that focused more on driving ratings than on protecting information integrity.[106] Several Taiwanese reports provided more details to support this claim. Based on their interview with the representative of Kansai International Airport, the Taiwan FactCheck Center found that all shuttles were arranged by the airport to evacuate stranded travelers to the Izumisano Station in center-city Osaka. The Chinese consulate had proposed to coordinate its own transportation for Chinese citizens, yet this proposal was declined by airport officials.[107] Both Japanese and Taiwanese investigators thus concluded the original charge regarding TECO’s malfeasance following Jebi was false. Su’s suicide was thus triggered, at least in part, by disinformation.

Puma Shen, an expert on disinformation warfare at National Taipei University, spent months tracing the information flow of this story and found a complex system of digital manipulation.[108] As Shen notes, the first social media post commenting on Typhoon Jebi appeared on Weibo, not PTT, on September 5, 2018. Published by a female social media influencer named “fierce floods and savage beasts baby” [洪水猛兽baby], the post presented itself as an eyewitness account of the Chinese consulate’s efforts to arrange relief transportation and concluded with a strong statement of national pride. The post also tagged Xinhua News Agency, *People’s Daily*, and the Communist Youth League of China. Knowing that Japanese officials never allowed China to send buses to the damaged airport area, this nationalistic and CPC-affiliated false report read like political propaganda disguised as harmless personal sentiment. A similar story posted on Weibo echoed this post by saying that several stranded Taiwanese tourists asked if they also could ride on the buses arranged by the Chinese consulate, despite not being Chinese.[109] *The Observer*, a controversial Chinese news website, adopted both stories as key sources in

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[106] Apple Daily, “亂抄假新聞害死外交官　日媒：台媒太在乎點閱率” [Fake news caused by insufficient verification killed the diplomat. Japanese media: Taiwanese media care too much about click rates], *蘋果新聞網* [Apple Daily] (October 6, 2018), https://tw.appledaily.com/international/20181006/N32ZG5Q3IWHFMS7GKT6AFSOHEE/ (accessed June 22, 2021).

[107] Taiwan FactCheck Center, “[錯誤]媒體報導：日本關西機場因燕子颱風重創而關閉後，中國優先派巴士前往關西機場營救受困之中國旅客?” [(False) media coverage: Kansai airport was closed due to deadly Typhoon Jebi. China sent buses to the airport to rescue stranded Chinese tourists?], *台灣事實查核中心* [Taiwan FactCheck Center] (September 15, 2018), https://tfc-taiwan.org.tw/articles/150 (accessed June 22, 2021).

[108] Puma Shen, “關西機場的事件很簡單” [The Kansai airport incident is pretty straightforward], Facebook (December 2, 2019), https://www.facebook.com/pumashen/posts/10162807121245654 (accessed June 22, 2021).

[109] Information Operations Research Group, “B.1 關西機場—IORG 中國對台資訊操弄案例研析” [B.1 Kansai airport—IORG an analysis of China’s disinformation infiltration targeting Taiwan], IORG, March 1, 2021. https://iorg.tw/r/b1 (accessed June 22, 2021).

a piece published on September 5, 2018; this article promoted the image of China for its swift disaster management and tried to persuade Taiwanese to abandon their national identification.[110]

It is hard to overlook the striking similarities between these posts on Weibo and on PTT a day later, as they each curate credibility by posing as eyewitness testimonies. The resulting meta-narrative serves a two-fold purpose: to discredit Taiwan's liberal democracy and to advocate for its unification with China.[111] Additionally, as Puma Shen reminds us, the posts illuminate the general trajectory of China's disinformation campaigns, in which seemingly mundane narratives featuring patriotic language on social media are turned into sources for Chinese news websites. Transformed into news, the false information is augmented by the weight of journalistic sanction and then spreads rapidly to Taiwan through websites, social media, and closed communication apps (such as LINE). Just as the U.S. media found itself engaging with Russian-made disinformation in 2016, so Taiwanese media often adopt these Chinese-produced stories to increase readership, while Beijing-leaning politicians propagate these stories to advance their political agenda—China's disinformation campaigns targeting Taiwan therefore rely in large part on Taiwanese media and social media users to reproduce sensational yet unverified stories.[112] The case of Su Chii-cherng illustrates this flow of disinformation and the societal and personal costs of such malicious campaigns.

A curious twist happened in December 2019, when the Taipei District Prosecutor's Office filed charges against Ms. Yang Huiru and Mr. Tsai Fuming for humiliating a public office (i.e., TECO in Osaka). In the prosecutor's report, Ms. Yang, identified as a past staff member and longtime supporter of Frank Hsieh, was said to have authorized Mr. Tsai to defend Ambassador Hsieh and to insinuate Director Su's culpability through a PTT post under the screen name "icdd."[113] KMT politicians seized this opportunity to reframe the case of disinformation, in which China originally stood as the accused, to a narrative that—through Ms. Yang's personal behavior—attributed blame to the DPP.[114] This later revelation stoked the already deepening political divisions in Taiwan, in which the KMT and DPP often attack the other by alleging

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110 观察者网 [The Observer], "3000游客被困日本机场 中国游客告诉观察者网：领事馆开专车来接人了！" [3,000 tourists stranded in Kansai airport. Chinese tourists told the Observer: China's evacuation buses are coming to save us], *Weibo* (September 5, 2018), https://weibo.com/1887344341/GxYl46fFE?type=comment (accessed June 22, 2021).

111 Monaco, *Computational Propaganda in Taiwan*.

112 Shen, "關西機場的事件很簡單" [The Kansai airport incident is pretty straightforward].

113 Tan Yi-Lun. "網軍逼死蘇啟誠？「卡神」楊蕙如涉案遭起訴" [Cyber Army killed Su Chii-cherng?" (Credit Card Goddess) Yang Huiru has been prosecuted], *TVBS News* (December 2, 2019), https://news.tvbs.com.tw/politics/1242849 (accessed June 22, 2021).

114 Huang Jian-Hao, "國民黨出奇招 祭100萬獎金懸賞楊蕙如 " [KMT's curve ball. One-million-dollar reward to catch Yang Huiru], *新頭殼* [Newtalk] (December 27, 2019), https://newtalk.tw/news/view/2019-12-27/346278 (accessed June 22, 2021).

treason. In this way, the (fake) TECO controversy, Su's suicide, and the political storm that followed injected anger, confusion, and fear into Taiwanese political discourse. Much like the Russian hacking of the 2016 election in the United States, in this example, the Chinese-made and Taiwanese-fueled disinformation was not meant so much to persuade voters as to stymie them, leaving public deliberation confounded.

Indeed, while the Su suicide example does not by itself amount to a threat against Taiwan's democracy, the cumulative effect of the CPC's disinformation campaign was potentially debilitating, especially when linked to on-the-ground efforts led by Beijing-backed gangs, political parties, and provocateurs, who, mimicking the Russians' efforts against the United States, used social media to organize rallies and marches.[115] The *Washington Post* thus concluded that the CPC was seeking "to sow division and political chaos" in Taiwan.[116] As in the Russians' 2016 operation against the U.S. presidential election, the key to the CPC's disinformation campaign was not the accuracy or sticking-power of any single post but the sheer abundance of messaging, creating a flood of confusion and consternation. As noted by W. Lance Bennett and Steven Livingston, such disinformation campaigns strive to achieve the "disinformation–amplification–reverberation (DAR) cycle."[117] Within this "DAR cycle," disinformation is launched on alternative outlets, is then amplified in the mainstream press, and then reverberates around the media ecosystem, providing injections of communicative sludge into the public sphere. Singer and Brooking argue that the overall effect of such campaigns is the "5 Ds": "*dismiss* the critic, *distort* the facts, *distract* from the main issue, *dismay* the audience," and "*divide*" society into bickering factions rooted in patterns of anger, animosity, and anomie.[118] Considered as a whole, and diagnosing the situations in both the United States and Taiwan, we might conclude that such disinformation campaigns point to three more "Ds": *destroying* the healthy *deliberation* that makes *democracy* possible.

Conclusion: Renewing Democracy in Taiwan

The evidence offered herein is damning, daunting, and disturbing; there is no doubt that the CPC, reproducing the Russian's efforts against the United States, is doing everything in its power to destabilize Taiwan's democracy (and that of

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[115] On "China's thuggish proxies" in Taiwan, see J. Michael Cole, "Nice Democracy You've Got There. Be a Shame if Something Happened to It," *Foreign Policy*, June 18, 2018.

[116] Anna Fifield, "Taiwan Heads to Vote amid Fears of Disinformation," *Washington Post*, January 10, 2020.

[117] W. Lance Bennett and Steven Livingston, "The Disinformation Order: Disruptive Communication and the Decline of Democratic Institutions," *European Journal of Communication* 33 (2018): 122-139, quotation at 126.

[118] Singer and Brooking, *LikeWar*, 107, 206.

many other countries[119]). At the same time, however, evidence points toward the fact that once such disinformation campaigns are exposed, they discredit their perpetrators and rally the targeted population to a sense of aggrieved nationalism. Thus, in the summer of 2019, once news began to spread in Taiwan about the CPC's disinformation campaign, residents rallied to defend their nation. On June 23, tens of thousands marched in protest against "red media," those traditional and new media outlets suspected of serving China's, rather than Taiwan's, national interest.[120] As we have noted above, one of the hallmarks of the CPC's disinformation machine is the interweaving of party-produced propaganda, alleged "news," and user-generated social media—this explains why the marches against "red media" were understood not just as criticizing traditional, legacy forms of news, but also as raising the larger question of China's influence within Taiwan's media ecosystem. The PRC's disinformation campaign became so widely reviled in the final days before the presidential election, that public discourse had shifted toward a loose understanding that a vote for the KMT was as good as a vote for the CPC, and hence a loss of independence. This thinking was captured in one of TACO's political cartoons in the *Taipei Times* showing the KMT and CPC sealing their partnership with a blood-soaked handshake.[121]

The most powerful evidence of the backlash against the CPC's disinformation campaign, however, is the election results from January 2020, when President Tsai won re-election in a "landslide."[122] Although the results can be interpreted through multiple lenses, from KMT candidate Han Kuo-yu's inept campaign to Hong Kong's anti-extradition bill protests,[123] they amount to a renunciation of China's disinformation campaign, in particular, and, more broadly, as the *New York Times* announced, to "a stinging rebuke of China's rising authoritarianism."[124] As President Tsai celebrated in her acceptance speech the night of the election, "when our sovereignty and democracy are threatened, the Taiwanese people will shout our determination even more loudly back."[125]

In fact, Taiwan has responded to Chinese disinformation attacks through several governmental and civic initiatives. Since 2018, the Tsai administration has established several cross-unit task forces to trace and collect false

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[119] In *China's Cyber Warfare* (Boulder, CO: Lexington, 2017), 151-153, Jason R. Fritz documents over seventy nations that have been hit with Chinese cyber operations.

[120] See Shelley Shan, "Protesters Urge Action Over 'Red Media'," *Taipei Times*, August 16, 2019.

[121] *Taipei Times,* January 11, 2020.

[122] "A Big Win for Tsai Ing-wen and Taiwanese Identity," *SupChina*, January 13, 2020.

[123] See Anna Fifield, "Taiwan's President Wins Second Term with Landslide Victory," *Washington Post*, January 11, 2020.

[124] Steven Lee Myers and Chris Horton, "In Blow to Beijing, Taiwan Re-elects Tsai Ing-wen as President," *New York Times*, January 11, 2020.

[125] "Full Text of Tsai Ing-wen's Acceptance Speech," *Focus Taiwan/China News Agency*, January 11, 2020.

information disseminated by China.[126] The Executive Yuan also launched a web page called "Real-Time News Clarification" to correct online rumors pertaining to any government agency.[127] In January 2020, the legislature passed the Anti-Infiltration Act to allow five-year sentences or fines for "lobbying, election influence, fake news dissemination and political contributions originating outside Taiwan."[128] An official curriculum on media literacy will also be introduced into Taiwan's twelve-year mandatory education scheme to cultivate a sense of media sophistication among the youth.[129] Meanwhile, several citizen groups have adopted both journalistic procedures and technology-enhanced methods (e.g., LINE chatbot) to fact-check online fake stories.[130] Although more time is needed to realize the true impact of Taiwan's public-private partnerships on reducing the spread of disinformation, they are critical steps to safeguarding the nation's sovereignty and renewing its democracy.

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[126] Central News Agency, "傳加強蒐報訊息　國安局：掌握輿情供政府參考" [Strengthen information collection. National Security Council: Master public opinion for government reference], *中央社* [CNA] (September 14, 2018), https://www.cna.com.tw/news/aipl/201809140128.aspx (accessed June 22, 2021).

[127] Dickey, "Confronting the Challenge of Online Disinformation in Taiwan."

[128] Ralph Jennings, "Taiwan's Anti-Infiltration Bill Sends Relations with China to New Low," *Voice of America*, January 1, 2020.

[129] Nicola Smith, "Schoolkids in Taiwan Will Now Be Taught How to Identify Fake News," *Time*, April 7, 2017.

[130] Su, "Can Fact-Checkers Save Taiwan?"