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Amid escalating tensions in the Taiwan Strait, China has intensified its disinformation activities (“fake news”) targeting Taiwan as part of a multifaceted attempt to coerce, confuse, and corrode Taiwanese society. Picture source: Gerd Altmann, *Pixabay*,

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## *The Impact of China’s Disinformation Operations Against Taiwan*

Dr. J. Michael Cole

Amid escalating tensions in the Taiwan Strait, China has intensified its disinformation activities (“fake news”) targeting Taiwan as part of a multifaceted attempt to coerce, confuse, and corrode Taiwanese society. This all-out strategy targets the Taiwanese government, Taiwanese society, and the democratic institutions and practices that underpin the nation today.

Through disinformation, China has sought to achieve three principal objectives: (1) as part of psychological warfare operations, *to shape the narrative* by tarnishing the image of the Tsai Ing-wen administration (e.g., over the government’s response to recent flooding in Japan, which led to the suicide of a Taiwanese





diplomat), undermining belief in and support for democracy, increasing social tensions (e.g., fuel protests over pension reform), exacerbating negative perceptions of Taiwan's future ("ghost island" 鬼島 as a recurring theme), boosting the appeal of Beijing's policy initiatives (e.g., the "31 incentives") and burnishing the image of the Chinese Communist Party; (2) *to create a world in which the objective truth itself is under assault*, where all the information that is beamed at consumers is suspect or serves to reinforce preconceived ideas among certain segments of the population. In such a chaotic information environment, the public is confused, its trust in government and institutions uncertain, and it is therefore unable to make enlightened decisions based on the facts; and (3) *to wear down the Taiwanese government* by forcing it to respond to and debunk every piece of disinformation aimed at it.

To initiate disinformation, Beijing has relied primarily on its own state-run media (e.g., *Global Times*, *China Review News*); government-linked Weibo accounts; Internet platforms known as "content farms" or "content mills" (e.g., COCO01.net); media controlled by or associated with the PLA-linked 311 Base (Psychological Operations, and Legal Warfare Base, or 61716 Unit) in Fuzhou, Fujian Province; Facebook groups; as well as popular online forums like PTT Gossiping (批踢踢八卦板), which is believed to have been penetrated by pro-CCP elements. According to an ongoing investigation, every day, as many as 2,400 distinct pieces of disinformation targeting Taiwan originate on Facebook (Taiwan has the highest Facebook

market penetration rate in the world).

Content is overall generated by humans, with involvement of bots/computers for replication. Recently, Beijing appears to have addressed linguistic issues which undermined the effectiveness of its disinformation efforts by reportedly paying Taiwanese to generate disinformation content rather than rely on Chinese, whose idiosyncratic use of the Chinese language often served as a telltale sign that Taiwanese were consuming information that originated in China.

Disinformation is then spread throughout Taiwan's media bloodstream via three principal mechanisms, namely: (1) sharing on social media (Facebook, Line, Twitter, PTT board and so on); (2) recycling by traditional media outlets; and (3) politicians. In other words, *for China's disinformation campaign to be successful, it needs legitimization that can only be conferred by the Taiwanese side*. In several cases (e.g., flooding in Japan), disinformation efforts suggested a high level of coordination between the Chinese side and facilitators in Taiwan.

The disinformation campaign has also exploited deficiencies in how the Taiwanese public tends to consume its news. Market behavior analysis demonstrates that Taiwanese consumers of news online (cellphone and computer) spend on average between 40 seconds and 1 minute per article, meaning that agents of disinformation need only concern themselves with headlines, subheads, the main graphic content and first paragraph to spread disinformation. The passive manner in which



consumers access their news — whatever shows up on their Facebook or is sent to them on Line — also exposes them to manipulation: algorithms can now decide what reaches consumers as opposed to consumers proactively seeking out news from trusted sources, while the “flocking” phenomenon created by friend networks can reinforce “groupthink.”

Poor media practices in Taiwan have also greatly facilitated the spread of disinformation, with traditional media serving as “repeater stations.” Besides pro-Beijing media that consciously broadcast “fake news,” other media have been inadvertently complicit due to poor fact-checking, non-attribution, and market/editorial pressures. As a result of deficient corroboration practices, disinformation is recycled and legitimized by traditional media; non-attribution practices (i.e., not identifying the original source of information) reduces the premium on reliable sourcing; while market/editorial pressures ensure that, once one outlet has released a piece of news, every other media will follow suit. The information then becomes the subject of TV talk shows, which, depending on their political slant, will use the content to reinforce the preconceptions of their target audience (e.g., CtiTV 中天 to criticize the Tsai government, FTV 民視 or SET-TV 三立 to debunk the claims).

Defending against systematic efforts by an authoritarian regime to erode Taiwan’s news environment is a formidable challenge. Unless Beijing ceases all disinformation activities, Taiwan’s response can only be palliative at best.

Online applications, such as g0v’s cofacts (真的假的專案) collaborative fact-checking system, have been created which can help combat disinformation. However, the effectiveness of such systems is contingent on their being used by the public; moreover, the sheer volume of disinformation could overwhelm the resources of fact-checkers. Government-sponsored human and computerized forensic link-analysis to identify, track and tag/block sources and spreaders of disinformation can also alleviate the problem.

Public education, media literacy campaigns, collaboration with foreign governments/private sector, reducing media polarization and emphasizing responsible editorial/fact-checking practices in professional media, can mitigate the appeal, spread and impact of disinformation.

Finally, legislation could also be considered to punish individuals and organizations that consciously generate or disseminate disinformation that is harmful to the state. However, the legal route opens the possibility of a “slippery slope” which, if mishandled, could undermine freedom of expression. Moreover, deciding who (e.g., the NCC 國家通訊傳播委員會) has the authority to decide what constitutes true and false information is also problematic and subject to abuse by the state.

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