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Information Disorder in Asia

Overview of misinformation ecosystem in
**India, Indonesia, Japan, the Philippines,
Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan**

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Editors:

Masato Kajimoto & Samantha Stanley

Authors:

Kanchan Kaur & Shyam Subhash Nair (India)

Yenni Kwok (Indonesia)

Masato Kajimoto (Japan)

Yvonne T. Chua & Ma. Diosa Labiste (The Philippines)

Carol Soon (Singapore)

Hailey Jo (South Korea)

Lihyun Lin (Taiwan)

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Introduction

By Masato Kajimoto

This research paper is the first of a series of short articles that provide an overview of what is known about the scale and impact of disinformation in different Asian countries.

In this part of the world, there is nothing new about fraudulent news stories, bogus claims, fabricated facts, malicious disinformation, political propaganda, attacks on journalists, and other efforts to manipulate the information space to influence public conversations, beliefs, and opinions.

However, while concerns over “fake news” have prompted rigorous investigations in the United States and Europe over the past eighteen months, little is known about the way misinformation and disinformation is spread in many Asian countries where economic and digital development, especially smartphones, have transformed people’s lifestyles including their patterns of news consumption and distribution.

On which platforms do falsehoods spread? Who are the actors? What motivates them? Why do specific topics, issues, and individuals become targets for information disorder? What is the scale and impact of false or misleading news reports? Of course, Asia is comprised of many countries; we speak different languages, have different cultures and religious beliefs, and live under various political systems. Naturally, the matters at the heart of the misinformation ecosystem in each country vary considerably.

In this research project, we aim to map the landscape of each country’s own “fake news” problems. Many intertwined factors affect the situation, including culture, history, politics, economy, education, digital adoption, technology trends, media law, and press systems.

Our goal is not to encompass all such aspects, but rather to highlight salient characteristics that will inform academics, media professionals, tech companies, non-government organizations, and government organizations of critical issues and their impact on the community.

We believe these case studies would also inform the broader global discussion and research on misinformation already in progress; in some areas, Asian countries lead the rest of the world in technology use. Mobile-only internet usage, heavy reliance on chat apps, the popularity of emojis and messaging app stickers—these are some of the phenomena we observed in the Asia-Pacific region a few years before they caught on internationally.

We don’t know how long the overall investigation will take in the end, but as a start, we are releasing an overview research article on information disorder in different Asian countries in this document.

India

By Kanchan Kaur & Shyam Subhash Nair

Overview

India has the second-largest number of residents on the Internet after China — more than 390 million¹ — but the penetration level, according to figures available, is only about 30 percent.² However, rapid development in the technology sector is expanding access to the Internet at a staggering pace. The number of internet users in the country grew by 40 percent in 2015 to 277 million, making India the only country where the growth rate of internet users in that year was higher than the previous year's 33 percent.³

The entry of Reliance Jio, a telecom firm owned by one of the richest Indians,⁴ in the Internet service provider (ISP) market, has had a significant impact on access to mobile internet in the country. The Mary Meeker Report⁵ points out that Jio's plans disrupted the ISP market by decreasing prices and making data plans more affordable. In 2017 they were acknowledged as "a driving factor in India's rapidly expanding Internet usage."⁶

The 2017 Meeker report focuses on the growing Indian market, highlighting the 10 percent decline in data costs per gigabyte on a quarterly basis.⁷ Declining smartphone prices have also contributed to the surge in internet usage in the country. A report by the Internet and Mobile Association of India and market research firm IMRB International⁸ has indicated that though 60 percent of India's urban population and 17 percent of rural residents use the internet, mobile phones are the primary access device for 77 percent of the former and 92 percent of the latter.

In parallel, the country has seen a change in its political, economic, social, and cultural character in the past few years.⁹ The ruling right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), in power since 2014 under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has changed the nature of political discourse

¹ Total number of Internet subscribers has increased from 367.48 million at the end of Sep-16 to 391.50 million at the end of Dec-16, registering a quarterly growth rate of 6.54%. (TRAI,2017)

² <http://www.livemint.com/Industry/QWzIOYEsfQJknXhC3HiuVI/Number-of-Internet-users-in-India-could-cross-450-million-by.html>

³ <http://www.livemint.com/Politics/yuDlyPkr72sQ8jTQqbrG0J/India-lone-bright-spot-in-Mary-Meekers-Internet-Trends-2016.html>

⁴ <https://www.forbes.com/india-billionaires/#716d4588643b>

⁵ <http://www.kpcb.com/internet-trends>

⁶ http://www.huffingtonpost.in/2017/06/01/reliance-jio-is-driving-indian-internet-growth-says-the-mary-me_a_22120777/

⁷ By March 2017, the average cost of 1GB of data was down by 20 per cent among incumbents, and if one were to include Jio, the average cost per GB stood at \$0.33 or Rs 21 by March 2017 (<http://indianexpress.com/article/technology/tech-news-technology/mary-meeker-internet-trends-2017-report-india-top-highlights-points-to-note-mobile-growth-4683709/>).

⁸ <http://www.livemint.com/Industry/QWzIOYEsfQJknXhC3HiuVI/Number-of-Internet-users-in-India-could-cross-450-million-by.html>

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/may/16/what-next-india-pankaj-mishra>

in the country.¹⁰ The party, more than any other political parties, has used the power of the internet to spread its ideology — something it had been working on even before it came to rule the country. Reports indicate that the party had created a battalion of ‘cyber-Hindus’ that flooded online fora and social media even as far back as 1999.¹¹

Definition and terms

India is a country with over 22 official languages and over 2500 dialects.¹² Yet, the phrase “fake news” has made its way to daily lexicon, including in the regional languages, to describe information disorder. Like in many other countries, distinctions among different types and motivations of “fake news” production and distribution are not clearly defined in everyday conversations.

Prevalent modes of misinformation ecosystem

Since its use by BJP in the 2014 election, social media has become a popular way to promote ideas, policies, and propaganda. Though Indians use a variety of social media such as Facebook and Twitter, the most favored means of communication seems to be the WhatsApp mobile messaging platform. The number of monthly active users for this platform in the country has risen ten-fold in the past four years — from 20 million in 2013 to 200 million active users in 2017,¹³ making India the largest market for WhatsApp as of February 2017.¹⁴

For its part, the government has tried to enter the digital communications realm through efforts such as “Digital India” and a citizen engagement community platform, mygov.in. However, critics say these efforts have not really turned into effective governance¹⁵ as the platforms are mainly used by citizens to lodge civic complaints, and sometimes to pay taxes, fines and the like. Reasons range from there being not enough ministers active on social media to the failure of the government to address crucial incidents like riots and accidents on social media.¹⁶ Several times, the government and its ministers have kept quiet¹⁷ when they were expected to say something about an event or topic.¹⁸ This information void creates an opportunity for misinformation to spread elsewhere on the Internet, particularly on social media.

¹⁰ <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2014/11/hindu-right-ideology-indian-textbooks-gujarat-20141147028501733.html>

¹¹ <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/elections/story/20131111-social-media-internet-cyber-hindu-twitter-narendra-modi-768368-1999-11-30>

¹² <https://www.daytranslations.com/blog/2016/09/closer-look-indias-languages-7831/>

¹³ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/280914/monthly-active-whatsapp-users-in-india/>

¹⁴ <https://www.thequint.com/news/world/whatsapp-messenger-monthly-user-base-over-1-billion>

¹⁵ <http://theconversation.com/narendra-modi-indias-social-media-star-struggles-to-get-government-online-73656>

¹⁶ <https://thewire.in/43460/the-difficult-task-of-translating-modi-govts-social-media-prowess-into-effective-governance/>

¹⁷ <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/maneka-gandhis-silence-on-jallikattu-row-continues/1/864075.html>

¹⁸ <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/pm-tweets-on-everything-but-silent-on-indians-attacked-in-us-congress/story-PZ9MedhRyfh98kKE3PrsPJ.html>

India has its fair share of websites that spread misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda online. Postcard News, a conservative website known for posting “fake news,” for instance, carried a story falsely accusing Booker Prize winner and outspoken writer Arundhati Roy of making statements against Indian Army¹⁹ to a Pakistani newspaper about Kashmir.²⁰ In response, a ruling party lawmaker tweeted that she ought to be tied to an army jeep as a human shield.²¹ It later turned out that she had given no such interview.²² Even though she denied making any such statement, however, Arundhati Roy was trolled and harassed on social media.²³

Several other conservative websites in the country propagate unverified reports and rumours, including Satya Vijay,²⁴ The Resurgent India²⁵ and News Dog.²⁶ With thousands of followers on their Facebook pages, who share their content without verifying, these websites penetrate every strata of the Indian society. Several right-wing activists are known to follow these sites and redistribute information including unsubstantiated claims, creating echo chambers of certain views.²⁷

As mobile devices have become the main gateway to the internet for most Indians, WhatsApp seems to have turned into India’s main channel of misinformation. From laughable, rather harmless forwards²⁸ to deadly hoaxes,²⁹ this messenger service spreads it all.³⁰ For example, false “news” stories circulated on WhatsApp includes rumors about tracking GPS chips in new currency notes (the Indian government in 2017 demonetized some currency and issued new notes), UNESCO awards to the Indian prime minister and the national anthem,³¹ Guinness World Records,³² religious ownership of media companies, fruit contaminated with HIV,³³ and allegations of Islamic roots to famous opposition families, such as the Gandhis.

Sometimes such rumors have grave consequences. Seven men were lynched in a north-eastern state in the country in May 2017 under false allegations on WhatsApp that they were kidnapping children.³⁴ Vigilantes have been using social media to attack people they think

¹⁹ The falsified claim read, “India cannot achieve its objective in the occupied valley even if its army deployment is increased from 7 lakh to 70 lakh.”

²⁰<http://postcard.news/70-lakh-indian-army-cannot-defeat-azadi-gang-kashmir-arundhati-roy-gives-statement-pakistani-newspaper/>

²¹ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/hindi/bollywood/news/tie-arundhati-roy-to-jeep-says-paresh-rawal-faces-twitter-flak/articleshow/58793214.cms>

²² <https://thewire.in/139162/paresh-rawal-arundhati-roy-fake-news-kashmir/>

²³http://www.huffingtonpost.in/2017/09/11/bjp-may-have-created-a-monster-with-its-troll-army-but-amit-shah-understands-it-may-turn-on-them-one-day_a_23204198

²⁴<https://satyavijayi.com/>

²⁵<http://www.theresurgentindia.com/indian-army-cannot-defeat-azadi-gang-in-kashmir/>

²⁶<http://newsdog.today/a/article/582aa32712907171d12e2ae8/>

²⁷<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/12/growing-tide-fake-news-india-171210122732217.html>

²⁸ <http://viral.laughingcolours.com/news/10-VIRAL-Whatsapp-Forwards-In-India-That-Were-LIES/>

²⁹ <http://www.mid-day.com/articles/mumbai-is-safe-do-not-believe-whatsapp-rumours-rakesh-maria/16024176>

³⁰<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/25/world/asia/india-vigilante-mob-violence.html>

³¹ <https://check4spam.com/internet-rumours/narendra-modi-declared-best-pm-unesco/>

³² <https://check4spam.com/internet-rumours/kannada-oldest-living-language-spam/>

³³ <https://check4spam.com/internet-rumours/fruits-blood-aids-virus-spam/>

³⁴<https://thewire.in/138667/whatsapp-message-turns-tribals-violent-leaves-seven-dead/>

guilty of offences or crimes, especially crimes related to alleged offences against cows and Indian culture.

The Indian army has been the target of social media hoaxes, both negative³⁵ and positive (praises),³⁶ the latter created primarily by right-wing hoaxers who appear to believe in powerful armies. Fake news photographs have also affected the country's relations with its neighbour, Pakistan. In September 2017, Pakistan's permanent representative to the UN displayed a photograph that she claimed was the face of a victim of army pellets in the disputed state of Kashmir. Later, it turned out that the photograph was of a Palestine resident who had been injured in an Israeli airstrike.

Actors, classifications, and motivations

Even reputable media organizations fall prey to misinformation. Whether it was the falsified Arundhati Roy story that several media outlets published and debated,³⁷ or videos of a tornado in Sri Lanka that were passed off as those of the recent cyclone that landed on Indian shores,³⁸ the Indian media has been quite irresponsible in disseminating videos and text that are not carefully verified.

It's not just the mainstream media. In their 2014 election campaigns, all political parties used the Internet, especially social media, to target first-time voters in particular (the BJP was said to be exceptionally successful).^{39,40} Political parties employ social media 'armies' that work on putting out information that suits and advances their ideologies. A recent book, *I am a Troll* by Swati Chaturvedi,⁴¹ claimed that the ruling political party supported Internet trolls and created campaigns that were abusive to not just other political parties, but also journalists and other prominent people.⁴²

In December 2015, India's state-run Press Information Bureau tweeted a doctored image of PM Narendra Modi surveying the Chennai floods. The bureau initially tweeted a picture of the PM looking at submerged fields and buildings through a plane window. Hours later, they tweeted the same image again, but with a much clearer scene (crudely) digitally transferred onto the window. The second tweet was deleted but not in time to prevent social media ridicule.⁴³ Some state governments, mainly run those by the BJP, have issued spurious health

³⁵ <http://www.financialexpress.com/india-news/kashmiri-youth-are-being-instigated-by-misinformation-campaign-on-social-media-army-chief-general-bipin-rawat/711029/>

³⁶ <http://www.vifindia.org/article/2017/august/10/doklam-chinese-lies-and-misinformation>

³⁷ <https://www.newslaundry.com/2017/07/17/india-and-its-fake-news-epidemic>

³⁸ <https://www.thequint.com/news/india/old-cyclone-video-makes-rounds-as-ockhi-cyclone>

³⁹ <https://www.voanews.com/a/social-media-emerges-as-a-key-tool-in-indias-election/1931238.html>

⁴⁰ <https://gadgets.ndtv.com/social-networking/features/did-social-media-really-impact-the-indian-elections-527425>

⁴¹ The author's claim is backed by the account of Sadhavi Khosla, an entrepreneur and erstwhile Modi supporter, who says she was a BJP cyber-volunteer for two years until late 2015. However, Chaturvedi's slim volume offers no clinching proof that the BJP orchestrates online harassment or cyberbullying; see <https://www.ft.com/content/6dd90462-e3bd-11e6-8405-9e5580d6e5fb>

⁴² https://www.buzzfeed.com/pranavdixit/bjp-trolled-indians?utm_term=.hhj2r1xRO#.apzxDrjQ3

⁴³ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-34991822>

warnings to women,⁴⁴ such as recommending sexual abstinence during pregnancy. In these cases, the resulting backlash usually leads to the department concerned simply deleting the offending post.

Spreading misinformation can be a profitable business in the country, too.⁴⁵ Websites such as Postcard News, an Indian version of Breitbart, have cropped up and made a successful business model out of distribution of provocative, often false, news stories with catchy clickbait headlines. Social media also plays a crucial role in the dissemination of hate speech built on the foundations of misinformation,⁴⁶ with the intention of provoking violence. Religion is often at the crux of such content.

Scale and Impact

While there are few estimates of how much of the content online is misleading, it can be easily said that the impact has been dangerous.⁴⁷ People have been killed⁴⁸ and fuel has been added to communal discord.⁴⁹ India has been ranked fourth (index value: 8.7/10) on the Social Hostilities Index⁵⁰ in a research conducted by Pew Research Center to study social hostilities involving religion.

The aforementioned case of lynching as a result of a WhatsApp hoax was not an isolated incident. Similarly, Mohammad Akhlaq was dragged out of his home and killed by a Hindu mob in September 2017 for allegedly slaughtering a cow.⁵¹ In this instance, a Whatsapp message led to a meeting outside a local temple where the priest allegedly pronounced the man to be guilty of eating beef. These instances exhibit how commonly fake stories are believed even though they are circulated with clearly doctored images and unverified text. Information disorder could have deadly consequences in India as misinformation sometimes leads to mob formation and lynching.

Current state of legislation/policy

In response to the spread of information disorder online, the Indian government has sometimes shut down access to the Internet all together.⁵² This is especially true in restive

⁴⁴ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/court-battle-continues-between-rss-linked-arogyabharati-and-mamata-banerjee-government-over-garbh-sanskar-programme/articleshow/58569027.cms>

⁴⁵ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/12/growing-tide-fake-news-india-171210122732217.html>

⁴⁶ <http://www.livemint.com/Opinion/ZAHBp4YDLp1BcCnlluwFON/Hate-speech-and-the-role-of-social-media.html>

⁴⁷ <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/12/growing-tide-fake-news-india-171210122732217.html>

⁴⁸ <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/a-whatsapp-message-claimed-nine-lives-in-jharkhand-in-a-week/story-xZsllwFawf82o5WTs8nhVL.html>

⁴⁹ <http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-bjp-haryana-leader-vijeta-malik-shares-bhopuri-movie-still-to-show-plight-of-hindus-in-west-bengal-2495403>

⁵⁰ <http://www.pewforum.org/2014/01/14/appendix-3-social-hostilities-index/>

⁵¹ https://www.huffingtonpost.in/2015/09/30/beef-killing-up_n_8219828.html

⁵² <https://www.indiatimes.com/technology/news/the-internet-was-shut-down-29-times-in-2017-and-it-s-only-july-so-much-for-free-internet-326082.html>

areas such as Kashmir,⁵³ where Internet access has been blocked more than 20 times in the first six months of 2017.⁵⁴ As well as curbing freedom of speech and access to information,⁵⁵ the shutdowns have exacted an economic cost. The Brookings Institution says that the country lost US\$968 million due to these disruptions.⁵⁶

Indian law is not clear on misinformation. Law enforcers in the city of Varanasi, the prime minister's constituency, issued orders that essentially say that any misleading information spread on a social media platform could result in jail time for the group administrators.⁵⁷ However, this has not resulted in any arrests or fear of arrests in the country thus far.⁵⁸

In March 2018, Bangalore police arrested the co-founder of Postcard News Mahesh Vikram Hegde⁵⁹ for allegedly spreading fake information that a Jain Monk was attacked by a Muslim man. The tweet was a dig at the present Chief Minister of Karnataka ahead of the upcoming elections. The BJP has used the opportunity to politically shame the Congress government with the hashtag “#ReleaseMaheshHegde.” Mahesh Hegde was charged with sections of existing laws dealing with promoting enmity among different groups, criminal conspiracy, and computer related offences.

The phrase ‘fake news’ is not defined by the judiciary; therefore, there are no direct provisions against the spreading of fake news. Though tangential legal provisions against defamation or electronic forgery could theoretically be used against fake news, the inability to pinpoint the source of origin complicates the process in most cases.

Current solutions and efforts to combat misinformation

While the government bungles through orders and laws to halt the spread of misinformation, other efforts are also being made to counter these onslaughts of fake news. However, these are mostly individuals and small organisations. Altnews,⁶⁰ a fact-checking website describes itself as a site for the “post-truth world,” is one such initiative.⁶¹ Factchecker.in⁶² has been checking the veracity of statements made in the public domain, by individuals in public life.⁶³

⁵³ http://www.huffingtonpost.in/2017/07/06/complete-internet-shut-down-in-jandk-ahead-of-burhan-wanis-first_a_23020192/

⁵⁴ <https://tech.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/internet/india-shut-down-internet-29-times-in-2017/59627417>

⁵⁵ <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/govt-issues-first-ever-rules-to-carry-out-internet-shutdowns-in-india/story-Drn0MnxJAp58RoZoFI7u4L.html>

⁵⁶ <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/internet-shutdowns-v-3.pdf>

⁵⁷ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/offensive-whatsapp-posts-can-now-land-group-administrator-in-jail/articleshow/58281149.cms>

⁵⁸ <https://www.businesstoday.in/buzztop/buzztop-feature/whatsapp-posts-can-land-group-admin-in-jail/story/250481.html>

⁵⁹ <https://scroll.in/article/873872/arrest-of-postcard-news-co-founder-shines-a-light-on-indias-fake-news-problem>

⁶⁰ <https://www.altnews.in/>

⁶¹ <http://www.firstpost.com/india/how-alt-news-is-trying-to-take-on-the-fake-news-ecosystem-in-india-3513879.html>

⁶² <http://factchecker.in/>

⁶³ <http://factchecker.in/about-us/>

Others include Check4spam⁶⁴ and SM Hoax Slayer.⁶⁵ Though these fact checkers look at misinformation in various sections, the largest chunk of information they verify is political.

Some educators say there is an urgent need for news literacy education in the country. The Center for News Literacy at Stony Brook University in New York⁶⁶ is influencing some of the efforts and methods being followed at the Indian Institute of Journalism & New Media (IIJNM) in Bangalore. Every year, IIJNM conducts a series of lectures in cities across the country with the aim of improving news literacy. The lectures address young adults on issues related to misinformation and help them understand the importance of verification in journalism, and the importance of being informed in a democratic setting. Inspired by the BBC's efforts to target secondary schools across the UK,⁶⁷ the IIJNM is also setting up a programme to take news literacy to high schools.

About the authors

Kanchan Kaur is the Dean, Indian Institute of Journalism & New Media, Bangalore. She has over 20 years of journalistic experience and for the last couple of decades has been teaching trainee journalists news gathering and writing. Lately, she has been speaking at colleges across the country on news literacy and fact-checking. She is an external assessor for the International Fact-Checking Network run by the Poynter Institute.⁶⁸

Shyam Subhash Nair, is English Professor and Academic Coordinator, Indian Institute of Journalism & New Media, Bangalore. He holds an M.A. in English Literature, and an M.Ed. TESOL from the University of Exeter. He has been coordinating with universities across the country to organize lectures and workshops on news literacy and fact-checking.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ <https://check4spam.com/>

⁶⁵ <http://smhoaxslayer.com/>

⁶⁶ <http://www.centerfornewsliteracy.org/>

⁶⁷ <http://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-42242630>

⁶⁸ <http://www.iijnm.org/profile/kanchan-kaur/>

⁶⁹ <http://www.iijnm.org/profile/shyam-nair/>

Indonesia

By Yenni Kwok

Overview

Misinformation and disinformation are not new problems in Indonesia. Unfounded political propaganda was an integral part of the 32-year authoritarian rule of President Suharto, which ended in 1998. But false claims and fraudulent information have become an even bigger problem in the post-Suharto era of democracy, as hotly contested political competition drives the spread of, and the demand for, what is now called “fake news.”

“Fake news” has been frequently present during important elections, exploiting the religious and ethnic fault lines that seem to consume the country. Despite its image as a country with a tolerant and moderate Muslim population, Indonesia’s voters are still influenced by religious and ethnic sentiments, concepts known collectively by an Indonesian acronym, SARA.

In recent years the spread of fake news has grown exponentially, largely due to the rapid growth of Internet and social media in Indonesia. The number of internet users has risen 600%, from 8.1 million in 2005 to 50.6 million in 2015.¹ Indonesian citizens are ferocious consumers of social media: Indonesians are the fifth-largest nationality on Twitter, with over 4 billion tweets originating from the country in 2016.²

As of July 2017, it has 126 million Facebook users, the fourth largest user population in the world.³ Nearly 40% of Indonesians are active WhatsApp users, the second highest user population in Asia-Pacific, behind Malaysia.⁴ This digital landscape provides a fertile breeding ground for fake news.

Definitions and terms

In Indonesia, intentional misinformation and disinformation are singly referred to as the Indonesian word for “hoax.” This paper does not distinguish between the two, rather it refers to both types of information disorder as the commonly used term “fake news” to reflect how the issues are being perceived and discussed in the country.

Prevalent modes of misinformation ecosystem

Indonesians are avid social media and smartphones users, so it is not surprising that fake news is spread among the three most popular platforms in Indonesia: Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp. In addition to social and messaging platforms, dubious non-mainstream news websites, known in Indonesian as *media abal-abal*, have traditionally been the purveyors of

¹ <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1vk4PDmVSQHb0AdfJE3QOZgUyZZGI6EhQ>

² <http://jakartaglobe.id/news/indonesia-fifth-largest-country-in-terms-of-twitter-users/>

³ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/268136/top-15-countries-based-on-number-of-facebook-users/>

⁴ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/291540/mobile-internet-user-whatsapp/>

fake news; examples include VOA-Islam.com, Arramah.com, PKS Piyungan, all of which push hard-line and militant Islamist propaganda.

During the 2012 presidential election, the Islamist websites backed candidate Prabowo Subianto and published hoaxes to attack his rival, Joko “Jokowi” Widodo. During the hotly contested Jakarta elections in 2017, the websites backed Prabowo’s party candidate, Anies Baswedan, and spread religion and ethnic-based disinformation about the rival candidate Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, who is known by his Chinese name, “Ahok.”

In response, non-mainstream websites supporting Jokowi and his political allies like Ahok have also proliferated, such as Seward.com and Gerilya Politik. “Some sites deliberately published fabricated content and disinformation,” wrote researcher Merlyna Lim.⁵ “For example, some pro-Ahok websites were spoofs of Islamist websites, trying to make readers believe they were visiting the original websites. Examples include arramahnews.com, which was a spoof of arramah.com, voa-islamnews.com instead of voa-islam.com, and pkspuyengan.com instead of pkspiyungan.com.”

The problem of these sophisticated fake-news tactics is unlikely to abate soon, especially with the upcoming regional elections next year and the presidential election in 2019, where Jokowi is expected to seek re-election.

Actors, classifications, and motivation

According to Inaya Rakhmani, a communications lecturer at the University of Indonesia, misinformation and disinformation is spread “to manipulate public anxiety, fear and aspiration to reach a certain goal, which can be political or can be to sell something.”

The main actors that play a major role in spreading and producing fake news are political “buzzers” and fake-news syndicates. Rudi Sukandar, senior associate fellow at the Habibie Centre, a Jakarta-based think-tank, believes that these actors are motivated “to create distrust toward their rivals, for example the government, to [achieve] social and political instability. The actors will escalate and use such instability to gain political benefits, especially in efforts to seize power in strategic executive and legislative positions” in both national and provincial elections.

Many politicians turn to so-called political buzzers to help defend their campaigns and/or spread misinformation or disinformation about their opponents on social media. There are buzzers who support Jokowi and his political allies, such as the anonymous @kurawa on Twitter, and there are those who support Prabowo, his Gerindra Party, and politicians belonging to the Islamist Prosperous Justice Party. The most well-known buzzer, who supports Prabowo, is Jonriah Ukur Ginting, better known as Jonru.

Before his arrest in September 2017 for hate speech, Jonru was one of Indonesia’s most prominent social-media personalities, amassing 1.5 million followers on Facebook; 100,000

⁵ <https://theconversation.com/beyond-fake-news-social-media-and-market-driven-political-campaigns-78346>

on Twitter; and 60,000 on Instagram.⁶ A blogger who once wrote motivational strategies and even won a Healthy Internet Blog Award in 2009, Jonru supported Prabowo in the 2014 presidential election and his tone changed; his posts were rife with ridicule and fake news about the opposing candidate, Jokowi, and his supporters. His false claims included that Jokowi would disband the Religious Affairs Ministry and that moderate Muslim cleric Quraish Shihab was a Shiite (most Indonesian Muslims are Sunni). In early March, a Jakarta court found Jonru guilty of spreading hate speech and sentenced him to 1.5 years in jail.⁷

One of the largest and most notable fake news and hate speech producers in Indonesia was Saracen, a syndicate of online content creators for hire that has recently been targeted by Indonesian authorities. Prior to their arrests in August 2017, its administrators spread made-to-order divisive and sectarian content using as many 800,000 fake or hacked social-media accounts.⁸ The group's named Facebook account alone had 800,000 followers, making Saracen's social reach extremely valuable. Its administrators reportedly could earn as much as 100 million rupiah (US\$7,500) from a single post.⁹

Political disinformation using SARA ideals was a frequent political communication tactic even before the spread of social media. In the 2004 presidential election, candidate Megawati Sukarnoputri was rumored to be a Hindu, while in the 2009 election, Kristiani Herrawati, wife of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, was falsely accused of being a secret Christian—both were efforts to discredit them, although such smear campaigns did not seem to take hold to influence public opinion.

Observers and experts generally agree that the problem of political “fake news” in the electoral season began during the 2012 gubernatorial election in Jakarta. The then-mayor of Solo, Jokowi, ran against the incumbent Jakarta Governor Fauzi Bowo. Jokowi, whose running mate was Ahok, stirred much public enthusiasm—as well as criticism. Rumors, spread through SMS, BlackBerry Messenger and social media like Twitter and Facebook, questioned Jokowi's Muslim credentials, for example, accusing him of not performing pre-prayer ablutions correctly.¹⁰

Politically driven misinformation gained significant attention when it reached a new fever pitch in the 2014 presidential election.¹¹ The election pitted the governor of Jakarta, Jokowi—the first presidential candidate with no ties to political and military elites—against Prabowo, an ex-military general once married to Suharto's daughter. The election was fraught by smear

⁶ <http://indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/buzzer-jonru-muzzled-at-last/>

⁷ <https://en.tempo.co/read/news/2018/03/02/055916247/Jonru-Ginting-Sentenced-to-15-Years-in-Jail>

⁸ <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics-Economy/Policy-Politics/Indonesia-strikes-at-alleged-internet-fake-news-syndicate>

⁹ <https://www.thesplicenewsroom.com/saracen-indonesia-fake-news/>

<http://bali.tribunnews.com/2017/08/24/ternyata-saracen-dibayar-mahal-sebar-sara-punya-800000-akun-penyebar-kebencian-di-medsos>

<https://www.merdeka.com/peristiwa/ketuanya-ditangkap-jumlah-anggota-grup-fb-saracen-turun-puluhan-ribu.html>

¹⁰ <http://www.voa-islam.com/lintasberita/suaraislam/2012/09/21/20751/dki-jakarta-akhirnya-dipimpin-orang-yang-tak-bisa-wudhu/#sthash.hTeAEmhN.dpbs>

¹¹ <http://time.com/4620419/indonesia-fake-news-ahok-chinese-christian-islam/>

campaigns, with Jokowi being accused of being of Chinese descent and non-Muslim (at one point he issued his marriage certificate to dispel rumors)¹² as well as a communist.

The Jakarta gubernatorial election in early 2017 again highlighted how fake political news and hate speech proliferate during highly contested elections. At that time, political content comprised 22% of the overall fake news, ranked second behind health hoaxes such as anti-vaccination stories.¹³

Scale and impact

Indonesia's Ministry of Communication and Informatics tracks content containing hateful language. Its reports show that online hate speech reached a new high in January 2017, leading up to the Jakarta gubernatorial election.¹⁴

Current state of legislation/policy

Indonesia's government seems to be taking the problem of fake news seriously. The most commonly used method to tackle the issue is blocking or removing content that contains what it deems harmful. In January 2017, the Ministry of Informatics blocked 11 problematic websites, nine of them due to hate speech content.¹⁵

The primary piece of legislation that governs digital content and hate speech is the Electronic Information and Transaction Law. The National Police's Cyber Crime Division has made a number of arrests under this law. Apart from Jonru, who was arrested in September 2017 and sentenced to jail in March 2018, the police also nabbed four administrators of the "hate speech provider syndicate" Saracen, along with one of its clients, in late August and September.¹⁶ In August 2017, Muslim cleric Alfian Tanjung was again arrested for accusing Jokowi of being Chinese descent and having links to the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) while in June, brothers Rizal and Jam ran were jailed for half a year for racist hate speech against Ahok and accusing Jokowi for being a PKI member.

Singer Ahmad Dhani, a supporter of Prabowo, became a suspect in a hate speech case in November 2017.¹⁷ Also in November, Buni Yani, whose disinformation campaign brought down Ahok and fanned anti-Chinese sentiment, was sentenced to 1.5 years in jail for

¹² <http://time.com/105650/indonesias-obama-is-actually-nothing-of-the-sort/>

¹³ <https://news.okezone.com/read/2017/05/02/338/1680791/selama-pilgub-dki-jakarta-berita-hoax-terbesar-kedua>
https://www.vice.com/en_id/article/3kk7v5/saracen-has-been-shut-down-but-can-we-ever-really-beat-fake-news

¹⁴ <http://via.news/asia/indonesia-fake-news-hate-speech-group-saracen/>

¹⁵ <http://nasional.kompas.com/read/2017/01/03/19201421/pemerintah.blokir.11.situs.yang.dianggap.tebarkan.fitnah.dan.kebencian>

¹⁶ Three Saracen administrators, two men – Jasriadi and Muhammad Faizal Tanong – and a woman, Sri Rahayu Ningsih, were arrested on 23 August (<https://nasional.tempo.co/read/902601/sindikat-konten-kebencian-saracen-ditangkap-polisi-siapa-mereka>); another member Muhammad Abdul Harsono was arrested on 30 August (<http://news.liputan6.com/read/3078512/ketua-saracen-ditangkap-harsono-masih-aktif-tebar-kebencian>); a female client, Asma Dewi, was arrested (<https://news.detik.com/berita/3637399/polisi-asma-dewi-pernah-transfer-rp-75-juta-ke-pengurus-saracen>).

¹⁷ <https://news.detik.com/berita/3747801/jadi-tersangka-ahmad-dhani-sara-mana-yang-dihina>

disseminating hate speech and for editing Ahok's speech transcript.¹⁸ On 1 March 2018, the police arrested six men suspected to be members of the Muslim Cyber Army, a group allegedly responsible for spreading fake news in Indonesia.¹⁹

Suggestions for further government involvement in curtailing fake news have come in the form of rules prohibiting people from creating fake accounts (for example, people would be required to use a real photo of themselves in profile pictures) and a requirement that social media accounts be registered and linked with citizens' government-issued ID cards.²⁰

Current solutions and efforts to combat misinformation

There are several civil initiatives that are using social media to fight fake news. One of them is Masyarakat Anti Fitnah Indonesia, or Mafindo, a non-government organization that fights misinformation and disinformation and whose slogan is "Turn Back Hoax." Its website²¹, which launched in November 2016, enables the public to report online hoaxes. Their fake-news-debunking Facebook page, Indonesia Hoaxes, has more than 170,000 followers. They also have Twitter and Instagram accounts, though their followers are far fewer.

Mafindo also undertakes advocacy and stakeholder engagement with the government and technology companies, as well as giving Internet literacy training to schools, homemakers and office workers. But it is an uphill struggle, admits Astari Yanuarti, the Jakarta chapter's head of Mafindo. "There are not only many hoaxes, but once it's spread, it can reach 100,000 people," said Astari, "But when we make a clarification, only around 1,000 people read it."

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the biggest Islamic mass organization in Indonesia, has an Instagram account, klarifikasihoax, to give counter-narratives to slander and extremist religious content spread online. The account has more than 28,000 followers.

The Press Council has a number of initiatives to combat fake news, says its chairman Yosep Stanley Adi Prasetyo. They encourage journalists to take part in competency tests, give media literacy training throughout the country and, in partnership with the counter-terrorism agency, set up anti-hoax communities in 32 provinces. Since the National Press Day on 9 February 2017, they have been providing barcode verifications to trusted media companies. "Hoax has clearly drastically decreased in the past six months," Stanley says.

Tech companies are working with the government to limit the impact of fake news in the run up to the 2019 election. In August 2017, the government announced Facebook has established a special team to tackle the spread of fake news in Indonesia. It will automatically block "negative content" such as pornography and hoaxes based on a special algorithm as well as users' reports.²² Around the same time, the government and Google agreed to implement the

¹⁸ <http://regional.kompas.com/read/2017/11/14/14585291/buni-yani-divonis-15-tahun-penjara>

¹⁹ <http://jakartaglobe.id/news/police-arrest-core-members-of-muslim-cyber-army/>

²⁰ <http://via.news/asia/indonesia-fake-news-hate-speech-group-saracen/>

²¹ www.turnbackhoax.id

²² <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2017/08/02/facebook-forms-team-to-tackle-hoaxes-in-indonesia.html>

Trusted Flagger program, similar to the one Google has in the US and Europe, which reviews reported content and removes “inappropriate” content.²³

Indonesia is stepping up measures to combat fake news ahead of regional elections this year, and parliamentary and presidential elections next year. On 3 January 2018, President Jokowi swore in Djoko Setiadi, a two-star general, as chairman of the newly established National Cyber and Encryption Agency, which will focus on combating fake news on social media, in cooperation with the state intelligence agency, the police and the Informatics Ministry.²⁴ The new ‘cyber czar,’ however, has already stirred controversy by seemingly legitimizing misinformation in the form of a “constructive hoax”.²⁵

On 31 January, the Informatics Minister Rudiantara announced that the government would use artificial-intelligence-equipped web crawler machine to crack down on websites spreading fake news. It seemed to use the same US\$14.5 million technology that was launched earlier this year to find and block porn websites.²⁶

Case study

The spread of misinformation and disinformation in the lead-up to the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election provides a telling case study of political information disorder and its impact on democracy.

The incident began when the ethnically Chinese and Christian candidate, Ahok gave a campaign speech to a residential community in North Jakarta on 30 September 2016, during which he referenced a verse of the Koran. Video of the 1-hour, 48-minute speech was uploaded to YouTube without any problem.

Shortly after, however, Buni Yani allegedly edited and re-posted the video, removing a critical word in the transcript, which significantly changed the meaning and tone of the sentence to be very offensive.²⁷ As word spread online about the speech—particularly the edited 30-second version with Buni Yani’s transcript, citizens of Indonesia (88% of the population is Muslim²⁸) began to protest.²⁹

Ahok, who had been favored to win³⁰, had to face trial, lost public support for his election bid—and was sentenced two years in prison for blasphemy in May 2017. The conviction and

²³ <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2017/08/04/indonesia-google-to-use-trusted-flagger-program-to-filter-out-internet-content.html>

²⁴ <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2018/01/03/jokowi-swears-in-new-chief-of-national-cyber-agency.html>

²⁵ <http://www.thejakartapost.com/academia/2018/01/05/editorial-more-power-to-big-brother.html>

²⁶ <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2018/01/31/govt-deploys-artificial-intelligence-to-combat-internet-hoaxes.html>

²⁷ Buni Yani denied he edited the video but admitted he “made a mistake” in the transcript:

<https://www.merdeka.com/peristiwa/buni-yani-mengaku-salah-transkrip-video-ahok-soal-al-maidah-51.html>

²⁸ <http://www.pewforum.org/2010/11/04/muslim-population-of-indonesia/>

²⁹ <http://time.com/4620419/indonesia-fake-news-ahok-chinese-christian-islam/>

³⁰ <https://en.tempo.co/read/news/2015/10/14/057709447/Ahok-Favorit-as-Jakarta-Governor-Candidate-for-2017-2022>

sentencing of Ahok is very controversial, as many Indonesians believe the trial was politically motivated.

Asked why Buni Yani uploaded the video, his lawyer said that he wanted to show to netizens that Ahok as a public official said something beyond his authority during his official time. “He [Buni Yani] wanted to convince himself that there was indeed blasphemy in the video,” his lawyer Aldwin Rahardian said, according to a media report.³¹

In November 2017, Buni Yani himself was sentenced to one and a half years in jail for violating Article 32 and Article 48 of the 2008 Information and Electronic Transactions Law, which dictates how electronic information can be used and shared. The judge who issued the verdict said that Buni Yani not only manipulated the footage and transcript but did so with harmful intentions.³²

As anti-Chinese and anti-Ahok sentiment heightened during the gubernatorial election campaign in late 2016, the Jakarta governor also became a fodder of anti-China conspiracies theories, such as false accusations that his free HPV vaccine policy would allow China to diminish the Indonesian population.³³

In a bizarre move, former Justice Minister Yusril Ihza Mahendra not only shared news saying four Chinese nationals were arrested for planting chili seeds contaminated with some bacteria, but also falsely accused China’s government of wanting to destroy Indonesia’s economy.³⁴ Yusril tweeted: “This is subversive. Where was it imported from? Of course, from the country who perpetrated infiltration and subversion in order to weaken our country’s economy.”³⁵ In response to the conspiracy theories, the Chinese embassy in Jakarta issued a statement that the accusations China used “biological weapons to destroy Indonesia’s economy” were baseless and “very worrying.”

The heightened social rift caused by the Jakarta election controversy has yet to be repaired.

About the author

Yenni Kwok is a Hong Kong-based journalist who was born and raised in Jakarta. She has written for various publications such as TIME, The New York Times, The Guardian and many more on a variety of topics, including Indonesian politics.

³¹ <https://www.rappler.com/indonesia/151996-motif-buni-yani-unggah-video-ahok-pulau-seribu>

³² <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/man-who-uploaded-controversial-ahok-video-sentenced-to-jail>

³³ <http://time.com/4620419/indonesia-fake-news-ahok-chinese-christian-islam/>

³⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-indonesia-china-chili/china-alarmed-as-chili-conspiracy-heats-up-indonesians-idUSKBN1451G4>

³⁵ <https://chirpstory.com/li/340913>

Japan

By Masato Kajimoto

Overview

For the most part, media researchers and observers agree that Japan has not been affected by malicious or fraudulent news stories to the extent that they have roiled some other neighboring countries in Asia, such as South Korea, the Philippines, and Indonesia. Despite the growing concern over the government's handling of the media,¹ the credibility of established news organizations remains relatively high in the nation.² The 2017 Digital News Report by Reuters Institute at Oxford University indicated that most Japanese people still rely on traditional news sources, and do not consume news via social media. Among the 36 countries sampled in the study, Japan had the lowest percentage of people who share news online.³

However, this does not mean Japan is free from misinformation. The country's internet is still rife with hyper-partisan content, racism, sensationalism, hoaxes and false claims. From news and comment aggregator Hoshu Sokuho [Conservative Bulletin],⁴ which The Hollywood Reporter calls Japan's Breitbart,⁵ to demonstrably anti-conservative, liberal web magazine Litera,⁶ Japan's online publications parallel the country's tabloid papers and lurid magazine culture with hyperbolic, clickbait headlines, one-sided (if not misleading) political news, and emotive commentaries that are mixed with entertainment gossip and salacious or shocking words and images.

Observational research presented in this paper, which is composed of a qualitative analysis and an examination of engagement data, suggests there has been no evidence of a concerted online effort to influence public opinion through a manipulation campaign backed by digital advertising, social media bots, or foreign governments.

The reach and influence of so-called "fake news" has been very limited in Japan where people are not constantly exposed to falsified news or other types of misinformation on social media or through chat apps. Some news aggregators and message boards on the web, on the other hand, are full of groundless accusations, fear mongering and hate speech but such content stays mostly within certain communities and does not get shared widely by internet users on other platforms.

¹ Japan's ranking in the Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders, for example, has been steadily declining in recent years. It dropped 50 places from the world's 22nd in 2012 to 72nd in 2017.

² National surveys on media credibility, such as the one by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication and another one by Japan Press Research Institute in 2016, show people still trust legacy media much more than online sources.

³ <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2017/japan-2017/>

⁴ <http://hosyusokuhou.jp/>

⁵ <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/meet-breitbart-world-949901>

⁶ <http://lite-ra.com/>

Definitions and terms

The term “フェイクニュース feiku nyu-su [fake news]” has become part of everyday lexicon in Japan in 2017 and it seems to have replaced more nuanced Japanese words that differentiate media errors from intentional disinformation, fabricated facts, and other contentious content. The catch-all expression is now used by politicians, journalists, and just about anybody in passing remarks. In the past, one needed to be more specific -- “go ho [erroneous reporting],” “henko hodo [biased coverage],” “kyogi hatugen [fallacy or false statement],” “netsuzo [fabricated facts]” and so on and so forth -- but such nuances are no longer required when people say some information is “feiku nyu-su.”

In order to avoid confusion, this paper essentially follows the definition of information disorder outlined by First Draft.⁷ “Misinformation” refers to inaccurate or misleading content shared by people who do not recognize it as such, whereas “disinformation” denotes fabricated or manipulated information with clear intention to deceive.

Prevalent modes of misinformation ecosystem

With message boards like Futaba Channel (2chan),⁸ after which the infamous 4chan in the U.S. was modelled, and conservative online video broadcasters like Channel Sakura⁹ and Toranomom News,¹⁰ as well as public social media groups such as Houdousarenai Shinjitsu [Unreported Truth] on Facebook,¹¹ myriad small and medium-sized news and opinion outlets constitute an intricate web of information distribution networks as they copy, paste, modify, comment on and sometimes distort each other’s content.

Hiroyuki Fujishiro, associate professor at the Department of Media and Communication Studies at Hosei University, argues that the “middle media,” such as news and commentary aggregation and curation websites as well as user-driven public platforms, influence the online discourse significantly as they funnel information like conduits between the mainstream mass media and what he dubs “personal media,” which includes social media and online forums.¹²

Social media watchers like Fujishiro point out that the dispersion of microbubbles (very small communities that share information) is making it harder to detect which fraudulent news is going viral, where it originates, or the motives behind it until it is amplified multiple times through the process and reaches its critical mass by way of “middle media.”¹³

⁷ <https://shorensteincenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/PREMS-162317-GBR-2018-Report-de%CC%81sinformation.pdf?x78124>

⁸ <https://www.2chan.net>

⁹ <http://www.ch-sakura.jp/index.html>

¹⁰ <https://dhctv.jp/season/261/#data1>; Toranomom is a business district in Tokyo.

¹¹ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1535575633327343/>

¹² <https://mag.sendenkaigi.com/kouhou/201404/digital-introduction/001873.php>

¹³ Reuters’ interview with Fujishiro: <https://jp.reuters.com/article/2018-views-hiroyuki-fujishiro-idJPKBN1EF0VS>

The quality of such platforms runs the gamut. Some well-known curation news sites such as J-Cast News¹⁴ and Rocket News 24,¹⁵ whose monthly visitors are in the range of tens of millions, according to market data provider SimilarWeb,¹⁶ appear sleek and contain some original write-ups and reporting. Smaller-scale sites like anonymous post¹⁷ and netgeek¹⁸ share characteristics with typical content farms and attract a few million visitors monthly.

Other numerous micro content farms with similar posts look unapologetically amateurish, often leaving default Wordpress theme menus and other vestiges.¹⁹ There are also quite a number of blog entries with similar aggregated content and commentaries which make use of free blog services such as livedoor blog.²⁰

Actors, classification, and motivation

It is hard to detect the ownership of many small-scale news and commentary aggregation and curation websites that disseminate misinformation because they often use domain level privacy protection services.²¹ The real motives behind the production and dissemination of inflammatory “news reports” require further investigation, but it appears some content farms are banking on chauvinism and ultra-nationalism to generate more clicks while users who believe, share, and embellish the information that favors ethnocentrism and extreme conservatism seem to be politically and ideologically driven.

Observers say people with conservative political views—including Japan’s online extreme-right groups “Netto Uyoku” [internet right wingers], often called “netouyo” for short—tend to be very active in online communication, savvy in social media usage, and effective in disseminating their messages, which often contain derogatory expressions against minorities.

Prominent social media watchers like Daisuke Tsuda and Chiki Ogiue maintain that it would be hard to determine the actual population of netouyo groups or the size of their supporter base because their online messages have been tactfully amplified. In their views, this disproportionate messaging does not reflect the dynamics and varieties of political opinions in Japanese society.²²

An online harassment campaign against model and actress Audrie Kiko Daniel, known in Japan as Kiko Mizuhara, is a case study that demonstrates how nationalist sentiment can instigate misinformation and hate speech distribution online.

¹⁴ <https://www.j-cast.com>

¹⁵ <https://rocketnews24.com>

¹⁶ The SimilarWeb analysis was run by the author in November to look at the number of visitors to each site from August to October 2017.

¹⁷ <https://anonymous-post.com>

¹⁸ <http://netgeek.biz/>

¹⁹ Aforementioned Facebook group Houdousarenai Shinjitsu [Unreported Truth] contains links to many of those websites.

²⁰ <http://blog.livedoor.com/>

²¹ Many of them seem to use the domain name registration service provided by Onamae.com.

²² For example, see: http://www.huffingtonpost.jp/2016/10/07/daisuke-tsuda-interview_n_12383414.html

In 2016 the Korean-American actress, who grew up in Kobe, apologized to the people of China in a video clip after she “liked” an Instagram picture by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei that depicted a middle finger in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square.²³ In the video, she also denied being the woman in a viral photograph taken at Yasukuni Shrine which commemorates Japanese World War II dead. She also said she was not the woman posing in front of Japan’s rising sun flag in another viral photo in China.²⁴

As soon as the video became news, she was attacked by some netizens in Japan. There were a number of fallacious reports that suggested Mizuhara “begged for forgiveness using her non-Japaneseness as an excuse.”²⁵

She became prey again in September 2017 when she was featured in a series of beer commercials. The official Twitter account of the beer company, Suntory, was inundated with profane language and insults against Mizuhara who was “pretending to be Japanese even though she is not.”²⁶ Twitter Japan issued a statement promising to do more to stop online abuse.²⁷

Another clearly observable trait of many misleading and fabricated news content is xenophobia against people of overseas origin, especially permanent Japanese residents of Korean origin, and people from China. Inflammatory nationalist messages, ethnic slurs, off-color racial remarks, and condescension are almost always expressed explicitly in such stories.²⁸

In June 2017, for instance, a bogus conspiracy story about the producer of a popular morning TV program went viral through message boards. It incorrectly alleged that the producer, who works at television network TBS, is of Korean origin and that he is in charge of many popular variety shows and current affairs programs that are sometimes very critical of the Abe administration.

Various forms of the unfounded story began to surface, and all unequivocally blamed his nationality and “involvement” in manipulating people in the nation’s TV industry “against Japan.” Content farms like netgeek picked up the story as well and it spread quickly through social media. The disinformation about the producer was publicized further by other outlets such as an online video program created by Channel Sakura that featured conservative commentators discussing the story.

Even a Liberal Democratic Party legislator believed it and asked his followers on Twitter to disseminate netgeek’s content, which read “Japan has been taken over [by a foreign agent],” by “out-of-control biased reports.” The tweet went on to ask for support for his “information war.” Learning that the story was unfounded, LDP lawmaker Takashi Nagao in August

²³ <http://variety.com/2016/film/asia/no-other-love-actress-issues-apology-to-people-of-china-1201816203/>

²⁴ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-36822525>

²⁵ http://www.huffingtonpost.jp/2017/09/21/hate-tweet-on-kiko-mizuhara_a_23217972/

²⁶ <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/10/28/national/media-national/twitter-japan-confronts-hate-speech-mixed-results/>

²⁷ <https://twitter.com/TwitterJP/status/905557984675106817>

²⁸ <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2017/japan>

apologized and deleted the tweet. Netgeek also appears to have deleted the original story in September.²⁹

It is not clear whether such discriminatory remarks are adopted strategically by content farms and others to provoke internet trolls and their sympathizers, but in September BuzzFeed Japan exposed two classified ads in CrowdWorks,³⁰ one of the major crowdsourcing platforms in the country, that aimed to recruit “political writers with conservative views” who could produce blog entries that are “anti-Korean” and stories that label some opposition parties as “anti-Japan.”³¹

Misinformation related to health and medicine may be more visible than politics in the country. In 2016 a popular website with more than 6 million active users called WelQ came under fire when its content was found to be full of inaccurate healthcare and medical information consisting of a patchwork of plagiarized passages from other websites written by non-expert anonymous bloggers and alike. When the scandal broke, DeNA, the owner of the website and one of the biggest IT companies in the nation, apologized and shut down WelQ and nine other websites that were also found to include dubious claims and erroneous articles.³²

As in other countries, breaking news stories in Japan can also be another foundation for misinformation and hoaxes. In October 2017, a 25-year-old construction worker was arrested over his involvement in a car accident sparked by road rage that killed a married couple and injured two children. Soon after his arrest the contact details of an unrelated construction company and its owner, whose surname happened to be the same as that of the suspect, was published on message boards and commentary curation websites. The information went viral and the company owner was then harassed online and offline, receiving nasty messages and threatening phone calls.³³

The public broadcaster NHK closely followed what it called cases of “internet lynching” for 500 days and aired its results in November. Like the case above, there were more than a few incidents that began with groundless internet rumors.³⁴

In Japan, the online misinformation ecosystem cannot be discussed without addressing the issues of hate speech, mob mentality and cyberbullying. Fabricated stories, cherry-picked facts and manipulative information seem to be produced and shared to target and attack specific individuals in many cases. Once such a story disperses beyond microbubbles, it can inflict serious harm at the personal level.

²⁹ The original story has been cached by Wayback Machine and is still accessible as of this writing at <https://web.archive.org/web/20170813070207/http://netgeek.biz/archives/98245>; see also a news article on the case by Asahi Shimbun at <http://www.asahi.com/articles/ASK95641YK95UTIL03L.html> and by Mainichi Shimbun at <https://mainichi.jp/sunday/articles/20171025/org/00m/040/025000d>

³⁰ <https://crowdworks.jp/>

³¹ https://www.buzzfeed.com/jp/kotahatachi/hoshu-blog?utm_term=.imQgk9RQQ#.tvOX9L422

³² <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/12/07/business/corporate-business/dena-ceo-apologizes-information-website-plagiarism-scandal/#.Wkx7rBP1XUI>

³³ <https://www.j-cast.com/2017/10/19311675.html?p=all>

³⁴ <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/special/enjoyou/>

Future research to map the online landscape in the nation should take into consideration the deterring efficacy (or lack thereof) of existing laws against hate speech and related issues, such as defamation and its delicate balance with freedom of expression. These concepts are an integrated part of the motivations behind many stakeholders, including unwitting accomplices of disinformation.

Scale and impact

As spiteful and harmful as it is, most problematic information seems to stay within certain communities and rarely gains traction.³⁵ Even during the general election in October 2017, for example, the reach of political misinformation and its influence appears to have been minuscule.³⁶

Financial daily Nihon Keizai Shimbun, known as “Nikkei”, analyzed and ranked influential election-related tweets during the 12-day campaign. It found the top five posts, which have been retweeted somewhere between 43,094 and 89,579 times, were all written by individual citizens who shared information or stories that encouraged young voters to go to the polling stations, as it was only the second general election since the voting age was lowered from 20 to 18.³⁷

In contrast, “widely shared” false political claims on Twitter were retweeted less than a tenth at most—perhaps a negligible number that makes little difference in a country with more than 100 million eligible voters.³⁸ (The infamous hoax post on Facebook that Pope Francis endorsed Donald Trump during the 2016 presidential election in the U.S., in comparison, had close to one million engagements, and that particular account was not even the originator of the hoax, according to BuzzFeed).³⁹

Current solutions and efforts to combat misinformation

Currently there is almost no discussion about legislation or national policy concerning information disorder, as it is not considered a major concern in Japanese society. The country’s hate speech law was enacted in May 2016. Although it does not criminalize hate speech (there is no penalty or ban) and it is too early to evaluate its effectiveness, there are some signs that the public debate over its legislation raised awareness on the matter. After the

³⁵ CrowdTangle analyses run by the author indicate most stories produced by content farms like infogeek and anonymous post are normally shared somewhere between dozen times and a few hundred times. It is rare to see a four-digit engagement.

³⁶<http://www.niemanlab.org/2017/10/a-snap-election-and-global-worries-over-fake-news-spur-fact-checking-collaborations-in-japan/> and <https://firstdraftnews.com/jcej-debunks-misinfo/>

³⁷ <https://vdata.nikkei.com/newsgraphics/twitter-on-election--timeline/>

³⁸ Both reports in footnote 36 included a couple of politically-driven misinformation examples but those tweets were shared far less than the positive messages Nikkei identified.

³⁹ https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/the-strangest-fake-news-empire?utm_term=.ijebDdqy3v#.sgJz8NrL7a

law came into effect, for instance, the number of xenophobic rally participants using discriminatory language dropped by nearly half.⁴⁰

In November 2017, the owner of right-wing comment aggregator Hoshu Sokuho lost a civil lawsuit filed by an ethnically Korean journalist who accused the hyper-partisan website of inflicting hate speech in Osaka district court.

Fact-checking, verification, and debunking are not yet recognized as an established media practice. Nevertheless, inspired by PolitiFact, the nation's second largest newspaper Asahi Shimbun occasionally fact checks political statements and NHK's Social Listening Team has been monitoring (and debunking, when necessary) social media rumors, especially on Twitter.

In mid-2017 a group of academics, nonprofit organizations, and journalists (including a veteran journalist who covered the Panama Papers) launched a collaborative network called FactCheck Initiative Japan (FIJ). The mission of FIJ is to fight "against the diffusion of false and highly questionable information."⁴¹

Later in the year Prime Minister Abe unexpectedly dissolved the Diet, and the snap election prompted fact checking projects and collaborations among media organizations. The members of FIJ, including media watchdog GoHoo, popular online media BuzzFeed Japan, and nonprofit news site News no Tane (the Seeds of News) got together to fact-check and verify election-related information. Similar election-related initiatives were carried out by the Japan Center of Education for Journalists and Asahi Shimbun.⁴²

Some platforms recently announced their intention to do more to prevent bad information from reaching mass audiences. In December 2017, Twitter implemented new guidelines with a clearer definition of hate speech and announced it will freeze any account that doesn't comply with the new rules.⁴³ In the same month, Google Japan notified web developers that it dramatically changed its algorithms in an attempt to downgrade fallacious websites with health and medical misinformation from the search results amid increasing concerns since the DeNA incident.⁴⁴

About the author

Masato Kajimoto, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of practice at the Journalism and Media Studies Centre, the University of Hong Kong. He specializes in news literacy education and misinformation ecosystem research in Asia. Kajimoto has been leading an international collaboration among media educators and journalists to develop pedagogical methods and

⁴⁰ <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/05/22/national/social-issues/year-enactment-hate-speech-law-xenophobic-rallies-nearly-half/#.WIS6FJP1XUI>

⁴¹ <https://www.poynter.org/news/new-fact-checking-coalition-launching-japan>

⁴² <http://www.niemanlab.org/2017/10/a-snap-election-and-global-worries-over-fake-news-spur-fact-checking-collaborations-in-japan/>

⁴³ http://www.huffingtonpost.jp/2017/12/18/twitter-hate_a_23311246/

⁴⁴ <https://webmaster-ja.googleblog.com/2017/12/for-more-reliable-health-search.html>;

https://www.buzzfeed.com/jp/seiichirokuchiki/google-update-02?utm_term=.uxbGrZBOb2#.aq9k5NnOQa

teaching materials in news literacy that take into account the culture, media landscapes, and political climates in different countries. He is also an affiliate professor at the Center for News Literacy, School of Journalism, Stony Brook University.

The Philippines

By Yvonne T. Chua & Ma. Diosa Labiste

Overview

The information disorder in the Philippines is built upon the political and social barriers to free and accurate information. Recent years have been marked by the escalating proliferation of false news and cyberbullying—including hate speech—mostly directed at political rivals, state critics and even the media.

The 2016 Philippine presidential election brought to the fore how information disorder has transcended traditional platforms to permeate the internet, especially social media, and influence public opinion through tampered or manufactured reality. Dubbed “the nation’s chief purveyor of fake news,”¹ President Rodrigo Duterte has emerged as a, if not *the*, major source or creator of state-level misinformation, disinformation and mal-information delivered in conventional platforms such as press conferences, interviews and speeches, including the State of the Nation Address. He consistently plays loose with facts, especially in defense of his brutal war on drugs—the centerpiece of his domestic policy.

The fake news phenomenon also follows a pattern observable in other social issues like HIV and local armed conflict: the information was hedged in by prejudices and interests of the government and other powerful institutions. For example, the Catholic Church’s resistance to the use of condoms as contraceptive has affected the campaign to stop the transmission of HIV.² While not discounting the possibility of media bias, the government’s use of force to quell rebellion and protests from Muslim and indigenous peoples was more prominent in media reports than the silencing effects it created among these communities.^{3, 4}

Definitions and terms

The term “fake news” in the Philippines refers to false news stories, often of a sensational nature, created to be widely shared online to generate ad revenue via web traffic or to discredit a public figure, political movement, company, etc. When using the term “information disorder,” we refer to the definition and its classifications as published by Claire Wardle⁵ of First Draft News: mal-information, which is genuine information that is shared with the intent to cause harm, misinformation, which is information that is incorrect or false but shared with no intent to harm, and disinformation, which is false information shared with harmful intentions.

¹ <http://opinion.inquirer.net/107367/president-purveyor-fake-news>

² <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/12/08/fueling-philippines-hiv-epidemic/government-barriers-condom-use-men-who-have-sex>

³ <http://cmfr-phil.org/media-ethics-responsibility/journalism-review/keeping-tabs-on-the-bbl/>

⁴ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/07/25/philippine-presidents-appalling-threat-bomb-tribal-schools>

⁵ https://shorensteincenter.org/information-disorder-framework-for-research-and-policy-making/#Part_6_Recommendations

Other terms used in the report, as applicable in the Philippines, include:

- “Astroturfing” is the term used to describe the use of troll factories, click farms and automated social media accounts
- “Bots” are bits of code or software designed to interact with and mimic human users, most commonly used to inflate the number of followers of a social media account
- A “click farm” is a form of click fraud, where a large group of low-paid workers are hired to click on paid advertising links
- A “cyborg account” is a social media account jointly operated by people and software
- “Doxing” is the online practice of researching and broadcasting private information about a person or organization
- “Trolls” are humans who post behind a username or handle that publicly offend their targets to provoke emotions

Actors, classifications, and motivations

Of the motivations for spreading mal-information and disinformation in the Philippines, politics might be the most visible and the most visceral. Among the most prominent political actors is the president himself, who in the run-up to the 2016 presidential election adopted a sophisticated information strategy that amplified his messages. Duterte deployed an online posse of hyper-partisan followers (a network of influential bloggers, trolls, and bots) who call themselves “Duterte Diehard Supporters,” or “DDS,” for short. DDS members produced spin and spurious reports in different forms and on various platforms to influence voters and, ultimately, win the election.^{6,7}

Media scholars Jonathan Corpus Ong and Jason Cabanes have documented in a recent study the “architecture of networked disinformation” political candidates and parties tapped during the election, or what they say is “an organized production of political deception that distributes responsibilities to diverse and loosely interconnected groups of hierarchized digital workers.”⁸

At the top tier are “chief disinformation architects” or strategists who the study found are often senior professionals with an advertising and public relations background hired by politicians to put together and implement the communication plans.

The chief disinformation architects, in turn, assembled “digital influencers” who each maintained multiple social media accounts with about 50,000 to two million followers across

⁶ <https://www.rappler.com/nation/148007-propaganda-war-weaponizing-internet>

⁷ <https://datasociety.net/output/media-manipulation-and-disinfo-online/>

⁸ <http://newtontechfordev.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/ARCHITECTS-OF-NETWORKED-DISINFORMATION-FULL-REPORT.pdf>

Twitter and Facebook who, according to the study, were often paid based on reach and engagement.

The chief strategists also hired “community-level” fake account operators to repost and retweet the messages of digital influences to create “illusions of engagement,” the study says. The community-level workers are usually fresh college graduates, politicians’ administrative staff and online freelance workers.

Now in office, Duterte’s loaded messages spread almost in real time: through a well-oiled state media machine run by the Presidential Communications Operations Office (PCOO). With the PCOO budget (about US\$26 million) and the president’s confidential intelligence funds (US\$49.7 million), the Duterte administration has ample resources for its information machinery. The PCOO maintains strong links to the DDS as three of its leaders were appointed to the PCOO as undersecretary, assistant secretary and social media strategist.

PCOO Assistant Secretary Esther Margaux “Mocha” Uson, a former dancer whose blog has 5.4 million followers, has been singled out as one of the most prominent producers and sharers of information disorder. She heads the social media office at PCOO and is in charge of accrediting pro-Duterte bloggers with at least 5,000 followers to cover the president’s events.

Uson frequently posts mal-information and disinformation and shares links to sensational click farm content. She courted trouble for sharing the post of Duterte’s former campaign manager passing off the photo of a 9-year-old Brazilian girl raped and murdered by her grandfather as that of a victim of drug-related violence in the Philippines.

Following the visits of Vice President Leni Robredo and three opposition senators to the wake of a minor murdered by policemen in a drug operation, Uson produced a post that contained a photo of the wake of a slain intelligence police officer and dared the four officials, “When will you visit this policeman’s burial?” The photo, sourced from a leading newspaper, was taken a year earlier.

Another DDS leader, Rey Joseph Nieto, with more than a million followers on Facebook, was hired as media consultant at the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA), now headed by Duterte’s running mate in the 2016 election, a former senator known to harbor presidential ambitions.

One motivation for PCOO’s and DDS’ disinformation campaigns is to gain and maintain support for Duterte’s war on drugs, which entails promoting distorted reports and statistics (using the hashtag #RealNumbersPH) about the success of the war on drugs and about how the international community’s opinion on Philippines’ human rights situation.^{9,10,11}

On the surface, information disorder in the Philippines seems imbued with purely political motivations. On closer examination, the complex organization that distributes fraudulent and

⁹ <http://verafiles.org/articles/vera-files-fact-check-pna-replaces-its-fake-news-95-states-a>

¹⁰ <http://verafiles.org/articles/vera-files-fact-check-dfa-pcoo-spread-fake-news-about-outcom>

¹¹ <http://pcij.org/stories/realnumbersph-unreal-inexact-locked-in-riddles/>

hyperpartisan information online combines not only political but also social and, particularly, economic motivations.

Last July, Duterte admitted to spending US\$200,000 on social media in an effort to influence voters during the election. One of his campaign strategists earlier said the money was used to recruit 400 to 500 volunteers whose individual networks reached hundreds of thousands. Members of Duterte’s so-called “keyboard army” were reportedly paid from US\$10¹² to US\$60 a day, mostly for copy-and-paste services.^{13,14} Duterte says he has discontinued their services since becoming president amid allegations that paid keyboard armies persist.

Public relations firms and consultants have found it profitable to expand online. A journalist-turned-PR consultant¹⁵ admits to keeping at least 50 social media sites, some of them “fake” accounts, for his work. His goal is to have a “Big Bang Effect,” in which the manipulated messages are picked up by major news outlets and in the process gain credibility and shareability.

More than propaganda machines, a number of websites identified as part of the network of information disorder are simply business platforms that capitalize on hot topics and keywords (Duterte is certainly one of them) and target certain groups of people (Duterte fanatics, for example) to boost page views and consequently make money out of their hefty online traffic through pop-up third-party ads. These sites care little if their articles are false and badly written.¹⁶

The lure of profits could also explain the popularity of website spoofing in the Philippines. Imposter or counterfeit sites usually offer cock-and-bull stories such as death hoaxes of prominent people (one reported that former Philippine president Fidel Ramos tested positive for drugs and died in a hospital).

The network of what was initially written off as a ragtag group of avid Duterte advocates, DDS remains robust and has gained greater influence, partly due to their post-election appointments to state-owned media and government offices. In some cases, they are afforded access to coverage of the president and important state events that were once nearly exclusive to journalists. In addition to the pay checks they draw from government, the DDS leaders have achieved celebrity status and gained more followers online while a number of them are now newspaper columnists or radio talk show hosts.

Unfortunately, various political parties and candidates were quick to seize the innate potential of the digital environment to amplify messages, further adding to the information disorder in the Philippines. This strategy demonstrates how state (official) and non-state (unofficial) actors can come together to exacerbate the state of information disorder.

Alongside the effort to spread misinformation in support of political agendas is an effort to target journalists. Political actors and their followers have distributed content that is meant to

¹² The minimum wage in the Philippine capital is around \$10.

¹³ <https://businessmirror.com.ph/money-and-credulity-drive-dutertes-keyboard-army/>

¹⁴ <http://lifestyle.inquirer.net/236403/confessions-of-a-troll/>

¹⁵ <http://news.abs-cbn.com/focus/01/20/17/unmasking-the-trolls-spin-masters-behind-fake-accounts-news-sites>

¹⁶ Based on interviews with ICT expert who monitor fake news sites in the Philippines.

discredit or threaten journalists. Because of this, trust in media, freedom of expression, and journalist safety are increasingly declining in the Philippines.

Various social and religious issues are also catalysts for information disorder. Malinformation and disinformation also affected minority groups in the country including Muslim and indigenous peoples.¹⁷ The war in Marawi, sparked by the armed rebellion of a group aligned with ISIS, saw the re-emergence of anti-Muslim sentiments. This prejudice, which has deep religious and cultural roots reaching back to colonial times, also manifests on social media.¹⁸ In the aftermath of the five-month war, human rights groups demanded a probe on human rights violations that was almost absent in the news.¹⁹

A Human Rights Watch (HRW) report suggests that the misinformation on transmission and prevention HIV is attributed in part to the resistance of the Catholic Church to free distribution of condoms.²⁰ Schools run by the Catholic Church also oppose sex education that is mandated by law. The anti-condom campaign got support from some conservative politicians that stopped the free distribution of condoms from their local reproductive health projects. As the Philippines is considered at the “crossroad of an epidemic” on HIV due to increasing infection cases, misinformation, let alone absence of information, is worrisome.

Prevalent modes of misinformation ecosystem

Blogs and websites, Facebook and YouTube are preferred platforms for online misinformation, disinformation and mal-information, which easily and quickly cross from one platform to another because of the closely intertwined network of producers and sharers. A recent list assembled by a senator identifies 57 accounts on YouTube and 87 sites carrying fake news. It includes 39 accounts earlier named by Catholic bishops as fake news sites.

The growth of social media favors information disorder. Results from We are Social 2017, which provides digital statistics in different countries, show that 60 million of the 103 million Filipinos are internet users. All 60 million are active social media users. Facebook and YouTube are the most active social media platforms in the Philippines, with more than 55 percent claiming to have used them, according to the survey.

High-traffic local and foreign news sites are easy prey for information disorder, as imposter sites that mimic the appearance of legitimate sites are common. The average online reader cannot immediately tell the authentic from the fake sites just by looking at the URLs which, at first glance, can pass off as the domain names of legitimate news sites. The following are examples of sites that imitate legitimate news sources: abs.cbn-tv.com, gma-tv.com, aljazeera-tv.com, bbc-channel.com, tv-cnn.com, dai1lymail.co.uk, dw-tv3.com, fox-channel.com,

¹⁷ <http://www.rmp-nmr.org/sites/default/files/downloads/Lumad%20Discrimination%20Primer.pdf>

¹⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-militants-muslims/philippine-muslims-fear-marawi-fighting-may-deepen-communal-discord-idUSKBN19J132>

¹⁹ <http://bulatlat.com/main/2017/10/19/liberated-moro-groups-call-probe-military-rights-abuses-marawi/>

²⁰ <https://www.ucanews.com/news/filipino-bishop-attacks-condom-distribution-in-schools/77810>

france24-tv.com and theguard1an.com. Some are dormant or have been deactivated since they were exposed.

Even veteran journalists have fallen for imposter sites. A newspaper column quoting American Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley as praising Duterte was based on a fake story from aljazeera-tv.com, a spurious site.^{21, 22}

Information disorder spreads easily and frequently from one platform to another. A fake report published by the website Global Friends of Rody Duterte (GFORD) is a good case study of how disinformation moves back and forth on platforms.²³

Formed during the 2016 election, GFORD would report in August 2017 that a female opposition senator had called for EDSA 3, or another people's uprising, to topple Duterte. The article featured a 19-minute YouTube video that hosted manipulated content. GFORD then posted the fake report and the video on its Facebook account.

It turned out the same video was uploaded months earlier, in February, a day after the commemoration of the 1986 EDSA revolt that toppled the Marcos dictatorship, by another pro-Duterte Facebook page. It was shared by several other web pages, YouTube and Facebook accounts but hardly created a ripple back then. When GFORD revived the video in August, it went viral.

As in several other instances, the spurious report and video appeared on Facebook pages, majority of which belong to supporters of Duterte or the family of the late President Ferdinand Marcos, particularly his son and namesake, nicknamed "Bongbong."

Facebook's free version is being partly blamed for the difficulty Filipinos have in assessing the authenticity of online information.²⁴ The Philippines is among the first countries in the world to have access to Facebook Free, thanks to the Free Basics plan offered by the communications duopoly. All that is needed is a smartphone with a prepaid SIM card that costs less than US\$1 and requires no registration. The Philippines has 129.4 million mobile subscriptions, accounting for 126 percent of its population. About 95 percent of subscribers are prepaid users.²⁵

The Free Basics app allows users, even without a Facebook account, to connect to the free version of Facebook, which has been stripped of photos or videos. When it comes to news, users can only read the headlines and the captions of photos and videos. Facebook Free has in the process made it easy for clickbait or misleading headlines to flourish. But visuals, especially videos and memes, are more popular tools of information disorder.

The Philippines has been identified as among the countries that have employed trolls not just to amplify disinformation messages but also to bully critics or dissenters. It has been tagged among the sites of so-called "cyborg accounts," jointly operated by people and software, and

²¹ <http://www.manilatimes.net/superstar-speaks-give-duterte-space-run-philippines/352300/>

²² <http://www.manilatimes.net/cannot-put-toothpaste-nikki-haley-back-tube/352869/>

²³ <http://verafiles.org/articles/vera-files-fact-check-govt-officials-linked-website-spreadin>

²⁴ <https://globalvoices.org/2017/07/28/philippines-on-facebooks-free-version-fake-news-is-even-harder-to-spot/>

²⁵ <https://advox.globalvoices.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/PHILIPPINES.pdf>

digital campaigns that use troll factories, click farms and automated social media accounts, including bots.²⁶ Such campaigns are known as astroturfing,

Click farms in the Philippines came to public attention in 2015 when a study by Vocativ found out that 60 percent of Donald Trump’s Facebook followers came from outside the United States, with the biggest number of “likes” coming from click farms in the Philippines, followed by Mexico. One in every 27 Trump followers was from the Philippines, according to the study, which added that click fraudsters may be paid as little as US\$120 a year.²⁷ A click farm in central Philippines averages 150 Facebook phone verified accounts a day that sell from 70 US cents (bare-bones) to US\$1.50 (detailed) apiece.²⁸

The social media analytics firm Affinio found that 20 percent of all Twitter accounts that mention Duterte are actually bots said to be partly responsible for pro-Duterte messaging that has helped the president maintain his high approval rating.²⁹

Scale and impact

Overall trust in the Church and the media, also regular targets of Duterte supporters and victims of nasty memes, has stagnated.³⁰ But what appears to be a major fallout from the pervasive information disorder in the Philippines is digital security, including of the news media.³¹ Threats and intimidation coming from government and nongovernment sources make up the landscape of information distribution that is hospitable to misinformation, disinformation and mal-information.

The government has adopted the term “tokhang” (knock and plead) for its anti-drug operations linked to thousands of killings. A group that calls itself the Duterte Cyber Warriors has adopted the term “cyber tokhang” for its efforts to shut down Facebook accounts of Duterte’s critics and opponents.³²

Trolls and Duterte supporters have threatened bloggers and journalists with death, rape, harm to their family. Nieto and other DDS, for example, doxed a Duterte critic whose blog goes by the name “Pinoy Ako Blog” or PAB, exposing her picture, real name and school. Escalating threats and hate messages delivered to her Twitter and Facebook accounts forced her to take a leave from work and school. But the blogger has decided to fight back, coming forward to confirm her identity and seeking legal counsel,³³ although she now moves around with a security detail.³⁴

²⁶ <http://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/89/2017/07/Troops-Trolls-and-Troublemakers.pdf>

²⁷ <http://www.vocativ.com/usa/us-politics/donald-trump-facebook-likes/index.html>

²⁸ <https://newrepublic.com/article/121551/bot-bubble-click-farms-have-inflated-social-media-currency>

²⁹ <https://newrepublic.com/article/138952/rodrigo-dutertes-army-online-trolls>

³⁰ Chua, Y. and Labiste, Ma. D. (2017). “Duterte polemic against the Catholic Church as examples of hate speech.” Paper presented at the 25th Asian Media Information and Communication Centre Conference, Manila.

³¹ <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2017/philippines>

³² <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/24/opinion/fake-news-philippines.html>

³³ <https://pinoyakoblog.com/blog/ako-si-pab-oh-eh-ano-ngayon/>

³⁴ <https://www.pressreader.com/philippines/philippine-daily-inquirer/20180203/281479276858759>

Midterm elections in the Philippines are scheduled in 2019. Political pundits wager that Bongbong Marcos will ride on the very same information machinery that swept Duterte to power. The forecast is hardly surprising. Duterte has publicly acknowledged his debt of gratitude to Marcos' sister Imee for funding his campaign. Bongbong Marcos and his family had hosted a dinner for DDS stalwarts, fueling further speculation.

What is certain is if unchecked, the proliferation of fraudulent, false and deceptive information would further erode the credibility of the media, create fear, distrust and cynicism, and withdrawal from civic engagement. Whether it would lead people return to traditional sources of information, especially to media that is not intrusive (without algorithm) and less interactive (radio, television and newspaper), is anyone's guess.

Current state of legislation/policy

Since the government of Duterte creates and benefits from information disorder, it is unlikely the government does something about the problem. The president declared he would not support proposed laws seeking to punish the malicious distribution of false news.³⁵

Human rights advocates also take issue with potential legislation which, they say, would abridge the constitutional freedoms of speech, expression and of the press, adding that existing legislation such as pre-World War II laws against false news and libel are stringent enough.³⁶ Instead, stiffer penalties for government officials spreading false news have been proposed. In a Senate hearing, a former solicitor-general suggested the creation of what he calls an "Institute for the Integrity of Information," to police information from government officials.³⁷

Current solutions and efforts to combat misinformation

Non-state institutions and media have offered several solutions to information disorder such as condemning fake or false news (the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines in a pastoral letter),³⁸ blocking spurious sites (National Union of Journalists of the Philippines' Chrome plug-in Fakeblok) and external fact-checking projects (news organizations such as Vera Files and Rappler,³⁹ which have signed on to the International Fact-Checking Network's code of principles), media and news literacy workshops and town hall meetings. These efforts are oriented toward debunking false information and educating the public on how to detect information disorder on social media. Meanwhile, some victims of disinformation and mal-

³⁵ <http://cnnphilippines.com/news/2017/10/04/Duterte-Law-against-fake-news-wont-be-passed.html>

³⁶ <http://news.abs-cbn.com/focus/11/22/17/bill-seeking-to-criminalize-fake-news-potentially-unconstitutional-advocates>

³⁷ <http://verafiles.org/articles/institute-integrity-information-counter-death-truth>

³⁸ Labiste, Ma. D. (2017). "Journalists, bishops battle fake news." *Asian Politics & Policy*, 9: 697–700. doi:10.1111/aspp.12348.

³⁹ Rappler, however, been accused at times of being a source of misinformation.

<http://www.manilatimes.net/rappler-insists-7080-killed-fake-news-resorts-ad-hominem-arguments/318502/>,
<https://www.rappler.com/nation/193806-duterte-fake-news-outlet>

information have filed libel suits against propagators such as DDS leaders like Uson⁴⁰ and Nieto⁴¹, and Duterte critics like the Silent no More blog.⁴²

About the authors

Yvonne T. Chua and Ma. Diosa Labiste are both assistant professor at Department of Journalism, the University of the Philippines.

Ma. Diosa Labiste, Ph.D., teaches journalism and media studies. Her research interests include media and democracy, new media technologies, and community and alternative media.

Yvonne T. Chua divides her time between teaching journalism at the University of the Philippines and leading the fact-checking initiative of the media nonprofit VERA Files she co-founded.

⁴⁰ <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/932625/trillanes-files-raps-vs-mocha-uson-at-ombudsman-over-fake-news>

⁴¹ <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/946813/breaking-senator-antonio-trillanes-iv-libel-thinking-pinoy-rj-nieto-pro-duterte-blogger-president-rodriigo-duterte-drug-lord-narco>

⁴² <http://cnnphilippines.com/news/2017/11/29/Sotto-files-cyber-libel-Silent-No-More-PH-blogger.html>

Singapore

By Carol Soon

Overview

Misinformation and disinformation is not a new development in Singapore as in other parts of the world. From supermarkets selling rice made of plastic to an explosion at a waste management center, false information in Singapore deal with a wide range of topics and have no distinct themes. In January 2018, the Parliament voted to form a Select Committee to study how best address to address the problem of deliberate online falsehoods;¹ Some have expressed the concern of how legislation, if enacted, would further stifle freedom of expression.²

Definitions and terms

This report follows First Draft News' definition of the terms "misinformation" and "disinformation."³ The former is defined as the "inadvertent sharing of false information" whereas the latter "the deliberate creation and sharing of information known to be false."⁴ In Singapore, online speech could be a mixture of both misinformation and disinformation, such as the content targeted at immigrants and racial minorities. In some instances, unsubstantiated rumors promote hate, intentionally or unintentionally, among different social and racial groups.⁵

Prevalent mode of misinformation ecosystem

According to We Are Social, the top three most commonly used social media platforms in Singapore in 2017 were YouTube (75%), Facebook (72%), and WhatsApp (67%). They were followed by Instagram (43%) and Facebook Messenger (42%)⁶. Naturally, these social media and instant messaging platforms are common ground for misinformation distribution and consumption.

In Singapore, false claims and messages often see prompt reactions and clarification from the organizations and agencies involved. For instance, when the rumor of supermarket NTUC

¹ <http://www.straitstimes.com/politics/parliament-proposal-to-appoint-select-committee-to-examine-online-falsehoods>

² <https://www.mumbrella.asia/2018/03/no-need-legislation-singaporean-groups-protest-possible-law-fake-news;> also, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2018/03/05/why-singapores-moves-to-curb-fake-news-may-backfire/>

³ First Draft is a non-profit formed in June 2015 to address challenges relating to trust and truth in the digital age. See more at <https://firstdraftnews.com/about/>

⁴ <https://firstdraftnews.com/fake-news-complicated/>

⁵ The author defines this type of speech as "corrosive speech." See: Soon, C., & Tan, T. H. (2013). *Corrosive speech: What can be done*. Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies.

⁶ <https://wearesocial.com/sg/blog/2017/02/digital-southeast-asia-2017>

FairPrice selling plastic rice circulated online, the retailer debunked the message on its Facebook page and filed a police report⁷. The Agri-Food & Veterinary Authority of Singapore also conducted product testing and subsequently published an infographic on how to test for genuine rice products.

When the rumour which stated that one's Central Provident Fund (CPF) savings will be transferred to the Medisave account of one's nominee by default upon death surfaced on social media and messaging apps, debunking was done by the CPF Board, the government via Gov.sg and *FactuallySG* (the government's fact-checking website)⁸.

Official debunking was also done by The National Environment Agency (NEA) when a rumor surfaced stating that NEA was issuing S\$200 fines to people who leave used tissue behind at public eating places.⁹ However, in this case, debunking was not as effective -- members of the public were reported to be still confused about the fine more than two months after it was proven to be false.

Several other cases of misinformation stemmed from poor or inaccurate reporting, rather than an attempt to deceive. The misreporting of remarks made by the Director-General of Education in the August 2017 edition of Australian Teacher Magazine is a good case in point. An article in the magazine erroneously claimed that at an education conference the Director-General attributed Singapore's PISA success to "standardized test drilling" and "a culture of compliance," and that Singapore was "winning the wrong race" and has been "building compliant students just as the jobs that value compliance are beginning to disappear."

The story was subsequently reproduced on online news site Mothership. The Ministry of Education used Facebook to point out the errors and requested for Mothership to take down the commentary. In a separate incident, the same website published an article which wrongly attributed comments made by then-presidential candidate Salleh Marican.¹⁰ A third example of inaccurate report was Channel News Asia's report on the unverified news of three Chinese women detained in South Korea airport.¹¹

Actors, classifications and motivations

In some cases, the perpetrators of disinformation and their motivations remain unknown. In other cases, the intent behind the production of false information run a wide gamut, including mischief. One instance was an article on the All Singapore Stuff website that included a doctored photograph of a collapsed rooftop, apparently of a residential apartment block in Punggol Waterway Terraces.¹² The article led to the dispatch of the police and civil defense to

7 <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/fairprice-files-police-report-over-fake-rice-rumour>

8 <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/government-to-review-laws-to-tackle-fake-news-some-instances-of-fake-news>

9 <http://www.todayonline.com/singapore/big-read-era-fake-news-truth-may-not-always-be-out-there>

10 <https://sg.news.yahoo.com/mothership-apologises-fake-news-salleh-marican-064846943.html>

11 <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asiapacific/3-chinese-women-detained-at-south-korea-immigration-after-9299002>

12 <https://mothership.sg/2016/11/all-singapore-stuff-posts-hoax-about-collapsed-roof-at-punggol-waterway-terraces-made-spfscdf-go-down-to-investigate/>

the site. The dissemination of this fake news saw swift reactions on various fronts — mainstream Chinese newspaper Lianhe Zaobao reported that residents of the flats took to Facebook to refute this claim. The editors of All Singapore Stuff eventually deleted the article and issued an apology.

In March 2015, a young Singaporean student posted a fake announcement on the passing of Singapore first prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew. He had circulated a screenshot taken of a website that looked like the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) announcing Mr Lee's death. The website that bore the logo of the PMO misled foreign news organizations, such as CNN and CCTV, which mistakenly reported Mr Lee's death.¹³ A police report was lodged, and the student was subsequently given a stern warning for his mischief. He said he had created the image because he was frustrated with the frequent rumors about Mr Lee's demise and he had wanted to demonstrate to his friends how easy it was to perpetuate a hoax.¹⁴

Another motivation that drives the production of false information is to obtain financial gains. An online site that positions itself as a news site, Glonews360.com, is a well-known content farm in Singapore.¹⁵ It published an article wrongly stating that the Minister for Foreign Affairs collapsed at the UN Summit 2017 and was "in a critical condition."¹⁶ Besides being circulated online, this "news" also spread on WhatsApp.¹⁷ The minister took to Facebook to refute the bogus story.

It was not the first time Glonews360.com had published fabricated news. In June 2017, it reported that US President Donald Trump had cancelled a visa waiver program for Singaporeans, which the US Embassy in Singapore refuted. That same month, it also posted a false report claiming that Singaporean comedian Hossan Leong had died in a car crash in Johor.

Scale and Impact

Recent surveys point to a growing recognition among Singaporeans concerning the problem of misinformation and disinformation in media sources. A 2017 survey of 1,000 Singaporeans aged 15 years and older conducted by market data agency Blackbox Research¹⁸ found that 42% of Singaporeans regularly wonder if the news they read is fake, and 61% say they worry about fake news either 'a lot' or 'some' of the time.

The Blackbox survey also found that Singaporeans thought that news sites belonging to the mainstream media or legacy media organizations (e.g., Singapore Press Holdings that

¹³ <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/student-who-posted-fake-pmo-announcement-on-mr-lee-kuan-yews-death-given-stern-warning>

¹⁴ <http://www.todayonline.com/singapore/teen-who-posted-fake-announcement-mr-lee-kuan-yews-death-issued-stern-warning>

¹⁵ The owner of Glonews360.com is not known at this point.

¹⁶ <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/vivian-balakrishnan-calls-out-fake-news-that-says-he-collapsed-at-un-summit>

¹⁷ <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/vivian-balakrishnan-debunks-fake-news-about-him-collapsing-at-9244342>

¹⁸ <http://www.blackbox.com.sg/fake-news-also-growing-worry-singapore/>

publishes *The Straits Times*, MediaCorp that owns television channels, and the Yahoo! Singapore website) are less likely to publish fake or misleading news, compared to digital-only sites (e.g. *Mothership* and *The Middle Ground*).

According to another survey conducted in 2016 by researchers from Nanyang Technological University with 2,500 residents, about 12% said they would report what they believed to be false news on social media. Another 12% would comment to say the post is wrong; 11.4% would message the source to say the post is wrong; and only about 6% would post a correction on their own social media account.¹⁹ The majority said they ignored fake news seen on social media.

Current state of legislation/ policy

At a forum on fake news and news credibility organized by *The Straits Times* and the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA) in June 2017, Singapore's Minister for Law and for Home Affairs, Mr K Shanmugam, said the government is looking into enacting new legislation to tackle the spread of fake news and consulting with various stakeholders from the media industry.²⁰

What the minister said then shed light on the approach that the government may adopt — the legislation would involve “working with technological platforms to de-legitimize fake news, to help people identify what is fake news.” According to a poll conducted by the government, more than 90 percent of Singaporeans supported strong laws to remove or correct fake news²¹.

Singapore's constitution guarantees freedom of speech but with caveats. It prohibits speech that erodes the integrity of the judiciary, and racial and religious harmony.²² Based on the Sedition Act, a person who promotes feelings of ill will and hostility between different races or classes of the population of Singapore be fined up to S\$5,000 or jailed for up to three years, or both.^{23, 24}

In Singapore, existing laws govern speech, both in the offline and online context. The existing laws are contextualized within its geopolitical, historical and social context, and the country's small size and dense population. Based on the latest figures released by the Department of

¹⁹ <http://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/its-up-to-you-yes-you-to-stop-fake-news>

²⁰ <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/new-laws-on-fake-news-to-be-introduced-next-year-shanmugam-8958048>

²¹ <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/new-laws-on-fake-news-to-be-introduced-next-year-shanmugam-8958048>

²² Article 14 of the Constitution of the Republic of Singapore.

²³ Sedition Act, Rev. ed. Cap 290, 1985.

²⁴ The most recent case involved *The Real Singapore* website. The editor was sentenced to eight months' jail, while his co-editor (his wife) was sentenced to ten months' jail. The pair published articles that sowed discord between Singaporeans and foreigners for economic gains. <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/trs-co-founder-yang-kaiheng-jailed-8-months-for-sedition>

Statistics, Singapore multiracial and multi-religious population is about 74.3% Chinese, 13.4% Malay, 9% Indian and 3.2% other.²⁵

Another law is the Penal Code, which was amended in 2007 to allow greater prosecutorial discretion and cover online transmission. It aims to preserve “religious and racial harmony in the new global security climate.”²⁶ Other regulations that govern online speech include the Internet Code of Practice,²⁷ a new licensing regime for websites that regularly carry local news content introduced in 2013²⁸ and the Protection Against Harassment Act.²⁹

While misinformation in Singapore thus far has yet to do any major harm to the society as a whole, the government is keen to keep it that way. As mentioned earlier, the government convened a Select Committee to examine the problem of deliberate online falsehoods, its causes, consequences and the counter-measures needed. The Select Committee received a total of 164 submissions and heard evidence from about over 60 individuals and organizations.³⁰

During the hearings, academics, experts and community leaders highlighted how Singapore’s multi-cultural makeup and high Internet connectivity make it an easy target of disinformation campaigns. While there were some conflicting views on whether or not the government should legislate against deliberate online falsehoods, there was consensus that legislation cannot be the only solution and a suite of interventions comprising promoting media literacy, fact-checking and self-regulation, is required.

Current solutions and efforts to combat misinformation

Other than the impending legislative measure, there is an ongoing governmental initiative to promote fact-checking through its website called Factually.³¹

In 2012, the Ministry of Communications and Information set up Factually to clarify and dispel false information that has gained sufficient public attention (e.g., refuting WhatsApp rumors concerning Singaporeans’ CPF savings). It also clarifies common misperceptions relating to government policy and debunks inaccurate content that has the potential to harm Singapore's social fabric.

²⁵ http://www.singstat.gov.sg/docs/default-source/default-document-library/publications/publications_and_papers/population_and_population_structure/population2017.pdf

²⁶ <http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/aol/search/display/view.w3p;ident=f78529a4-d36f-4b5c-aa78-88b181a240ba;page=0;query=DocId%3A%22c2ed2ae6-c106-4435-a7be-b4f1300c71c1%22%20Status%3Apublished%20Depth%3A0%20TransactionTime%3A20150519000000;rec=0>

²⁷ <https://www.imda.gov.sg/-/media/imda/files/regulation-licensing-and-consultations/codes-of-practice-and-guidelines/acts-codes/19-policiesandcontentguidelinesinternetinternecodeofpractice.pdf?la=en>

²⁸ <https://www.imda.gov.sg/about/newsroom/archived/mda/media-releases/2013/fact-sheet--online-news-sites-to-be-placed-on-a-more-consistent-licensing-framework-as-traditional-news-platforms>

²⁹ <https://www.mlaw.gov.sg/content/minlaw/en/news/press-releases/protection-from-harassment-act-in-force.html>

³⁰ <http://www.straitstimes.com/politics/select-committee-on-deliberate-online-falsehoods-begins-public-hearings-on-wednesday>

³¹ <https://www.gov.sg/factually/>

The Ministry selects issues to clarify based on feedback from within and outside the government, as well as through the government's public engagement exercises where doubts and concerns are surfaced by members of the public.³²

With the exception of Fact Check Singapore which is run by three volunteers who have received flak for remaining anonymous³³, there is a paucity of industry- or community-led fact-checking initiative to date. However, in October 2017, the National University of Singapore and Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD), supported by Google and the Media Literacy Council, organized a hackathon that saw the participation of 140 tertiary students to generate ideas on how to fight fake news. The winning team, from SUTD, proposed a platform where individuals work together to check on the authenticity of articles.

About the author

Carol Soon, PhD, is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, the National University of Singapore. Dr Soon has a PhD in Communications and New Media from the National University of Singapore. Her research interests are in media regulation, digital inclusion, new media and activism, public engagement, and Singapore as a digital village. She has published her research in the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *Asian Journal of Communication* and *Journal of Information Technology and Politics*. Dr Soon is also the Associate Director of the Asia Journalism Fellowship and a member of Singapore's Media Literacy Council. The author made a written submission to the Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods in her personal capacity.³⁴

³² <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/factually-website-clarifies-widespread-falsehoods>

³³ <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/fact-check-singapore-what-do-we-know-about-the-fake-news-10098968>

³⁴ <https://www.parliament.gov.sg/docs/default-source/sconlinefalsehoods/written-representation-62.pdf>

South Korea

By Hailey Jo

Overview

South Korea's recent political climate has contributed to a spike in misinformation and partisan propaganda disguised as news. Use of the term "fake news" on the internet surged during the impeachment trial of former president Park Geun-hye in 2016¹ and continued to rise until the end of the ensuing presidential election in 2017.

However, falsified news is not something new in the country. It was considered an emerging issue as early as 2005, according to the Journalist Association of Korea, which stated that fake news could damage "news outlets, journalists, and internet users."² The Association also said increasing numbers of individuals, businesses, and news outlets were being damaged by online falsehood that emulated news produced by legacy media—sometimes falsifying a real journalist's byline. It also noted that fabricated content created by internet users was sometimes picked up by journalists and appeared in various news reports from traditional media outlets.

According to Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2017, about 77 percent of people consume news on portals such as Naver and Daum, whereas only 4 percent on news websites and 8 percent on social media.³ As of March 2018 more than a dozen proposals to amend existing laws to tackle "fake news" are pending in the National Assembly. Despite their differences in details, about half of such proposals aim to hold responsible information and communications services providers, including the operators of search engines, online news portals, and social networking services, requiring them to regulate and manage false content and penalizing them for failing to do so.

Definitions and terms

In South Korea, the popular term for false or fabricated information, regardless of motive, is "ga-jja-new-su," which is the literal translation for "fake news." For the purpose of this report we will, for the most part, also use "fake news" to describe various forms of information disorder to reflect how related issues are being discussed in the country.

¹ <http://www.yonhapnews.co.kr/bulletin/2017/03/20/0200000000AKR20170320159300033.HTML?input=1179m>

² <http://www.journalist.or.kr/news/article.html?no=10034>

³ <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/>

Prevalent mode of misinformation ecosystem

Fake news primarily spreads through mobile messaging apps, such as KakaoTalk and Naver Band, and social networking platforms. Sometimes, fake news also evolves into print media campaigns.⁴

For example, in 2016 then president Park Geun-hye was accused of abusing her power and colluding with her long-time friend, Choi Soon-sil, to solicit bribes from some of South Korea's largest companies (a crime for which she was later impeached). As Park's administration became more immersed in the corruption scandal, it began to distribute partisan and fabricated information first through online platforms, then through nationally distributed newspaper-like pamphlets.

About three million copies of the paper pamphlets were produced by small online media sites⁵ such as News Town,⁶ No Cut Ilbe,⁷ and Freedom News. Groundless online rumors were also featured in such pseudo-newspapers.⁸ A bogus story saying that the 2014 Sewol ferry accident that killed 304 people was actually "ordered by North Korea," for instance, originated from an online post⁹ on the public bulletin board for Korean-Americans called Korea Unity Press TV USA.

Actors, classifications, and motivations

Chong Eun-ryung, director of the Fact Check Center at Seoul National University, says that there is little evidence that fake news is being made for financial gain. Political polarization, public distrust in politics, and partisan media, on the other hand, are attributing factors to South Korea's misinformation ecosystem.

Like in many other countries, Chong says, people tend to perceive the news that does not align with their political identity or preferences as "fake" news, and a lack of political tolerance has led to an overall decline in media trust. Mobile messaging apps, in particular, have allowed politically conservative senior citizens with no digital skills to become targets for, and active distributors of, political content, she says.

The 2017 presidential election is a good case in point. During the campaign weeks, Shin Yeon-hee, the head of Gangnam Ward in Seoul, posted unconfirmed corruption rumors against Moon Jae-in (then the presidential front-runner) more than 140 times in several KakaoTalk group chat rooms. These chats rooms reached more than 600 users including current and

⁴ <http://www.sisapress.com/journal/article/167732>

⁵ http://biz.khan.co.kr/khan_art_view.html?artid=201702242058005

⁶ <http://www.newstown.co.kr>

⁷ <http://www.nocutilbe.com>

⁸ <http://www.yonhapnews.co.kr/photos/1990000000.html?cid=PYH20170126151300013&input=1196m>

⁹

http://unitypress.com/index.php?mid=freeboard&search_target=title_content&search_keyword=%EB%8B%A8%EC%9B%90%EA%B3%A0&document_srl=161667

former legislators, a former police chief, government employees, right-wing politicians, and pro-Park group members.

According to South Korean broadcaster JTBC, some 707 pieces of disinformation was shared in groups in which Shin was also a user. Those unfounded rumors originated from Youtube (42.8 percent), far-right online news websites (23.8 percent), blogs (12.7 percent), far-right online communities such as Ilbe (10 percent) and Parksamo (6.7 percent), Naver Band (2.1 percent) and others (12.5 percent). Phrases such as “do not trust media,” “the only thing we should trust is social media,” and “share this message at least 20 times” were frequently found in the chat rooms.¹⁰ Shin was later sentenced to a fine of 8 million won (US\$7,330) by the Seoul Central District Court for repeatedly disseminating false and derogatory information about a presidential candidate and for failing to remain politically neutral as a public official.

Scale and impact

An analysis by Daumsoft, a Seoul-based data research company, shows there were 820 articles online that used the Korean term for “fake news” in 2015, but that number rose to 11,239 in 2016, and 77,257 in just the first three months of 2017.¹¹ Among them, 33 percent of the instances were found in reports relating to politics, especially extreme-right or extreme-left groups. This was followed by reports on elections (28 percent), crime (20 percent), the economy (8 percent), hate speech (7 percent), and war (3 percent).¹²

The impact of frequent usage of the term is taking a toll on the public’s perception of news media. A survey conducted by Korea Press Foundation in May 2017 found 76 percent of respondents were suspicious of the news, even when the news stories were validated, because they had been frequently exposed to fake news. About 84 percent said fake news was a serious social problem and it was exacerbating societal division.¹³

The impact of fake news was striking in the 2017 presidential election. The fake news task force, comprised of the police department, public prosecutor’s office, and the national election commission, was tasked with “malicious propaganda” crimes, which have risen by 48 percent from the previous election, while also dealt with less poll-related bribery cases.¹⁴

The National Election Commission’s Electoral Cyber Crime Center announced two weeks prior to the election that it removed¹⁵ 31,004 pieces of misinformation that did not comply with the Public Official Election Act.¹⁶ More than 76 percent of them were spread on social media. Naver Band, a mobile social networking app that allows users to create invitation-only, closed

¹⁰ <https://youtu.be/zpc4ju76z70>

¹¹ <http://www.yonhapnews.co.kr/bulletin/2017/03/20/0200000000AKR20170320159300033.HTML?input=1179m>

¹² <http://www.yonhapnews.co.kr/bulletin/2017/03/20/0200000000AKR20170320159300033.HTML?input=1179m>

¹³ 미디어 이슈 3 권 3 호 ‘일반 국민들의 ‘가짜 뉴스’에 대한 인식 조사’ 한국언론진흥재단 오세욱, 박아란 2017.03.29

<http://www.kpf.or.kr/site/kpf/research/selectMediaPdsView.do?seq=574068>

¹⁴ <http://www.yonhapnews.co.kr/bulletin/2017/05/10/0200000000AKR20170510077100004.HTML?input=1195m>

¹⁵ <http://news.joins.com/article/21518811>

¹⁶ https://elaw.klri.re.kr/eng_service/jomunPrint.do?hseq=38405&cseq=1003504

groups for communication accounted for 26 percent, Facebook accounted for 24 percent, Twitter accounted for 22 percent, and KakaoStory accounted for 5 percent.

An open internet advocacy group, Open Net Korea, issued a statement condemning the Election Commission's move and its crackdown on the distribution of false information. The statement said, "it is an act of censorship that violates the public's freedom to express political opinions and right to know, based on some of the provisions of the Election Law" and "there is a risk that any doubts or claims raised about politicians, for which evidence is yet unavailable, can be considered a false fact under the article 250 [of the Public Official Election Act]."¹⁷

Current state of legislation/ policy

Beginning in early 2017, South Korean lawmakers of various political parties have proposed legislative amendments to tackle fake news. More than a dozen amendment proposals are pending in the National Assembly,¹⁸ but lawmakers haven't come to a consensus on how to define fake news, as each bill defines it differently.

For instance, the bill proposed by Kim Kwan-young of the centrist People's Party defines fake news as "false and misleading information in a news article format." Another bill by Joo Ho-young of the center-right Bareun Party defines it as "false facts in a news article format deliberately manipulated for political or financial gains." Another bill by Ahn Ho-young of the center-left Democratic Party puts it as "information, which is not verified as facts, in a news article format that was created with an intention to deceive people politically or financially."

About half of the proposed law changes are amendments to the Promotion of Information and Communications Network Utilization and Information Protection Act. Despite their differences in details, such proposals aim to impose responsibility on information and communications services providers, including the operators of search engines, portal websites, and social networking services, requiring them to regulate and manage false content and penalizing them for failing to do so. Under the bills, the service providers would have an obligation to take immediate measures to delete false information, misleading content, manipulated content, and illegal information on their sites, or they may face a fine.

After reviewing the proposed amendments, the Science, ICT, Broadcasting, and Communications Committee of the National Assembly suggested that a clearer definition of fake news would be necessary for effective execution. It also pointed out the risk of over-regulating the service providers as well as curtailing the users' freedom of expression. It noted practical impossibility for the service providers to monitor all the content, especially online videos and mobile messaging. Under the current South Korean law, defamation and malicious distribution of false information are punishable offence but information and communications service providers are not liable for content posted by their users even if it is false.

¹⁷ <https://opennet.or.kr/13461>

¹⁸ All amendment proposals can be read at <http://likms.assembly.go.kr/bill/main.do>

Current solutions and efforts to combat misinformation

Popular online portals such as Naver and Daum, the two most popular news outlets in South Korea,¹⁹ ask news content providers go through an evaluation process called “Evaluation of News Partnership,”²⁰ making it impossible for fake news outlets to syndicate content through them. In the Evaluation of News Partnership, media outlets are evaluated on the production volume of news articles, proportion of original stories, and the quality of journalism, ethics, and users. Only the newspapers, periodicals, broadcasters, and online news media that have been in operation for at least one year can apply for the evaluation, according to the partnership policy.

The level of trust in media in South Korea was the lowest among the 36 countries that were surveyed in the 2017 Reuters Institute Digital News Report. The public distrust in news media, with the proliferation of fake news, seems to have contributed to the dominance of online portals in news consumption and citizens are demanding greater transparency and accountability of the portals.

Even before the recent concerns over the rise of fake news, several websites and broadcast segments have dedicated their focus on verifying online rumors, hoaxes, and controversies in the country.²¹ Initiatives such as OhmyNews’s OhmyFact²² (launched in May 2013), JTBC’s Fact Check²³ (September 2014), Ilyo Shinmun’s Truth or False Poll²⁴ (November 2014), and Newstapa’s Really?²⁵ (March 2015), have been in this space for more than a few years.

Under the current political climate, however, there is still increasing demand for fact-checking. According to a recent research by Korea Press Foundation and Korea University, 94 percent of the respondents said fact-checking is necessary, and 86 percent said it should be made mandatory.²⁶ In addition, 72 percent said news organizations are most responsible for fact-checking, followed by the government (66 percent), mobile messaging service providers (56 percent), social networking platforms (55 percent) and educational institutions (49 percent).

Almost all major South Korean newspapers and broadcasters launched fact-checking initiatives to curb the proliferation of misinformation during the 2017 presidential election campaign.²⁷ Some were created in collaboration with academia, such as SNU FactCheck,²⁸ a fact-checking platform launched in March 2017 by Seoul National University, where 26 news outlets can cross-check disputed information.

¹⁹ <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/>

²⁰ <http://www.engdaily.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=7593>

²¹ <https://www.poynter.org/news/whats-behind-south-koreas-fact-checking-boom-tense-politics-and-decline-investigative>

²² http://www.ohmynews.com/NWS_Web/Issue/special_pg.aspx?srscd=0000011077

²³ http://news.jtbc.joins.com/hotissue/timeline_issue.aspx?comp_id=NC10011176

²⁴ <http://poll.ilyo.co.kr/?ac=poll&tac=main>

²⁵ <http://newstapa.org/tag/%EC%A0%95%EB%A7%90>

²⁶ <http://www.yonhapnews.co.kr/bulletin/2017/10/21/0200000000AKR20171021036000033.HTML?input=1179m>

²⁷ <https://www.poynter.org/news/whats-behind-south-koreas-fact-checking-boom-tense-politics-and-decline-investigative>

²⁸ <http://factcheck.snu.ac.kr/>

About the Author

Hailey Jo is a former radio producer from South Korea. She earned a Bachelor's degree in Economics from Ewha Womans University and is currently pursuing a Master's degree in Journalism at The University of Hong Kong with a focus on data journalism.

Taiwan

By Lihyun Lin

Overview

After four decades of authoritarian rule, Taiwan transitioned to democracy in the late 1980s. A series of media deregulation since then has laid foundations for a robust, and one of the freest, media environments in Asia.¹ However, it is not immune to different types of misinformation and disinformation.

This report analyzes Taiwan's media landscape in the light of its political development, including contexts, actors and actions taken against "fake news."² Political partisanship, competition among commercial media, and interference from China³ contributed to fraudulent news reports. Political parties, commercial media, pro-China media owners, and Mainland China operatives on the Internet are seemingly motivated to influence public opinion; some of whom gain economically in the process.

To combat misinformation, the media industry has established professional organizations, while citizen groups have adopted measures to rebut rumors and fake news. Government intervention, which is widely considered in other Asian countries, is not favored by many in Taiwan. Instead, industry and citizen groups plan to establish fact-checking mechanisms to provide news consumers with accurate information and the skills needed to recognize, and prevent the spread of, misinformation.

Definitions & Terms

News consumers in Taiwan are no strangers to the term '假新聞' or 'fake news.' While the world only caught on to the expression during the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the word '假新聞' had already emerged in Taiwanese mainstream media back in the early 2000s.

The news audience generally acknowledges 'fake news' as inaccurate news. In this report, both misinformation (inaccurate information unknowingly shared by people) and disinformation (false or misleading content distributed with the sole purpose to deceive) will be used to address the issues in Taiwan.

¹ <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2017/taiwan>

² This paper has situated fake news within the larger context of misinformation and disinformation. See the discussions of fake news in Tandoc, Lim and Ling's work: Tandoc, E. C., Lim, Z. W., & Ling, R. (2017). Defining "Fake News". *Digital Journalism*, 1-17. doi:10.1080/21670811.2017.1360143

³ Hsu, Chien-Jung (2014). China's Influence on Taiwan's Media; *Asian Survey*, Vol. 54 No. 3, May/June 2014; (pp. 515-539) DOI: 10.1525/as.2014.54.3.515; see also <https://rsf.org/en/taiwan>; https://www.mofa.gov.tw/en/Content_List.aspx?n=218D65026C0F1D37

Prevalent modes misinformation ecosystem

Like in many countries, misinformation is most commonly spread via social media like Facebook and online chat applications such as LINE. Fierce competition among hundreds of television channels also contributes to false news content.

Media academics and experts say online sites from mainland China disseminate false content as a political tool to undermine Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen's government policies. Microblogging social networks such as Sina Weibo and an extremely popular social communication app throughout the region, WeChat, serve as tools to spread false information.

Adding to the list of sources of false information is content farms.⁴ Websites like COCO01.net contain a large amount of low-quality, news-like content mainly gathered by news aggregators or produced by freelance writers for the purpose of generating advertising revenues or to purposely spread false information.

Historical context of misinformation

In Taiwan, political propaganda is a huge source of misinformation. Such practice dates back to the island's authoritarian rule by the Kuomintang party. During that time, Kuomintang influenced the island's major news media to publish misinformation about its political opponents. By 1987, Kuomintang was able to control the news media through the use of wartime regulations (such as martial law) and through the manipulation of economic resources. As a result, content from major news media tended to toe the ruling party's line and rarely covered the pro-democracy opposition movement (which, despite efforts to silence it, eventually led to Taiwan's democratization).

Following the 1979 Kaohsiung Incident (or Formosa Incident) during which police and troops brutally broke up a human rights demonstration, the Kuomintang-controlled media portrayed the human rights and democracy campaigners as "terrorists," "traitors," "instigators," and labelled them a "mob," endangering national security and social stability. Meanwhile, news reports neglected to show the violent actions of the police.⁵ To counter the skewed coverage, opposition groups illegally published magazines that showed the public another side of the conflict, resulting in a gradual win of significant public support.

After martial law was lifted in 1987, the ruling party was unable to control the resources needed by the media, yet it still tried to influence through personal ties. Meanwhile, a new generation of journalists founded an independent professional association, the Association of Taiwan Journalists (ATJ), in 1995. Since then, ATJ has played an important role in promoting

⁴ Cole, Michael J. "Taiwan Confirms China's "Black Hand" Behind Anti-Reform Protests," Taiwan Democracy Bulletin Vol.1 No. 10, Taiwan Foundation for Democracy July 18 2017 <https://bulletin.tfd.org.tw/tdb-vol-1-no-10-china-black-hand-protests/>

⁵ For the media coverage of the opposition movement, please see the works by Chen (1991) and Lin (1997). Chen, S. (1991). The media representation of social movement in Taiwan, PhD dissertation, National Chengchi University. Taipei. Lin, L. (1997). Transformation of state-press relations in Taiwan, 1945-1997, PhD dissertation, University of Westminster. London.

media freedom, raising professional standards, protecting the independence and autonomy of news workers, and working to fulfill the responsibilities of the news media as an institution for public interest.⁶

Actors classifications and motivations

Since the cold war era, Taiwan-China relations have been unstable. In 2008, as part of its Great Propaganda Plan (大外宣計畫), China took steps to manipulate the Taiwanese media as a way to influence Taiwan's public opinion⁷. China demonstrably adopted an even more hostile attitude towards Taiwan after the pro-independence party swept to election victory in 2016⁸.

Some of the disinformation designed to promote China's interests comes from within Taiwan. Taiwanese tycoons who have made fortunes in China began acquiring media in Taiwan in 2008, seemingly as a tool to advance their interests in the Mainland. For example, since the purchase of Taiwanese newspaper *China Times* by food manufacturer Want Want, it has been accused of publishing pro-China ideology. The media group was also criticized for making up stories to attack its opponents, such as a research fellow at Academia Sinica who was wrongly accused to have paid people to take part in a protest against the merger.⁹

Nevertheless, Want Want has continued to take a more pro-China stance, reporting on news in favor of China. News of its founder Tsai Eng-meng speaking in support of mainland China¹⁰ or exclusive interviews with officials of the Chinese People's Liberation Army and the Communist Party, who vowed to take over Taiwan by 2020 in a missile attack are often published.¹¹ At the same time, the paper has been losing readership in Taiwan. According to a survey by XKM International Corporation, the readership of *China Times*, the lowest among four major newspapers, has continued to drop in readership from 6.72% in Winter 2016 to 4.04% in Summer 2017.¹²

In the digital age, misinformation spread on the internet has also influenced the conflict over the Taiwan Strait. China, with formidable cyber capabilities, is believed to have established an internet military (網軍), manufacturing messages targeting at the Taiwanese audience.¹³

⁶ <https://sites.google.com/site/atj23419944/guan-yu-ji-zhe-xie-hui/aboutatj2>

⁷ Dr. Tai (2013) has done analysis on China Tai, Y. (2013). China's "Go Global" Policy: The Role of Chinese Private Capitalists and Overseas Media Mergers and Acquisitions after 2008, Chinese Journal of Communication Research No. 24, 3-41.

⁸ https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FH_FIW_2017_Report_Final.pdf

⁹ Lin, L., & Lee, C.Y. (2017). When Business Met Politics: A Different Type of Media Capital in Taiwan, the Case of Want Want. *China Perspective*(2), 37-46.

¹⁰ <http://www.chinatimes.com/newspapers/20171029000522-260301>

¹¹ <http://www.chinatimes.com/newspapers/20170304001477-260301>

¹² <http://www.xkm.com.tw/HTML/report/rngresearch/2016Q4RNMM.pdf>;

<http://www.xkm.com.tw/HTML/report/rngresearch/2017Q2RNMM.pdf>.

¹³ <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/will-chinas-disinformation-war-destabilize-taiwan-21708>

For example, in December 2016, the Chinese People's Liberation Army Air Force uploaded a photograph on its Sina Weibo social media account showing a Xian H6K long-range bomber flying over Taiwan's Jade Mountain; a apparent move to provoke fear to Taiwanese citizens. The photo went viral on social media, despite the Taiwanese Defense Ministry's declaration that the photo was fake and urged the public not to circulate the fabricated information.¹⁴

Adding to the pool of misinformation is the polarizing views on controversial issues. Social problems that were once considered taboos, such as labor rights, gender parity, and indigenous identities are now being discussed. While social media increased the amount of information available to the society, erroneous information has become problematic.

The issue of legalizing same-sex marriage is a good case in point. Since the early 1980s, gay communities in Taiwan have been fighting for marriage equality. Today, nearly half of the Taiwanese population supports the reform, considering it as a reflection of Taiwan's democratic values and respect for diversity and human rights. Responding to this demand for change, the Democratic Progressive Party proposed a revision of the Civil Code to recognize the legal status of same-sex marriage when it came to power in 2016.

However, opponents of the reform argued that the legalization would affect the existing family system. Some people formed a "family protection union" (護家盟), which is widely thought to have spread false information on social platforms (especially through LINE, which is popular among the older generations in Taiwan). Activists insisted that same-sex marriage would shatter the family system and that the education system would promote homosexuality.¹⁵ Another claim made during a debate on public television was that the number of patients with AIDS would increase, causing a crippling of Taiwan's national health service due to projected medical costs of around NT\$300,000 (approximately US\$10,035) per patient, each year.

Later, the government's health bureau advised that there was no link between same-sex marriage and the prevalence of AIDS and disputed the cited cost of treatment.¹⁶ To counter the misinformation, gay communities also started rumor rebuttal campaign online.¹⁷ Despite efforts to quash the rumors, they continued to spread not only through social media but also through communities like churches that helped the union mobilize support street demonstrations against the legalization. Such false information further divided the society, but in the end, Taiwan's highest court ruled in favor of same-sex marriage in May 2017.

Another contributor to the spread of misinformation in Taiwan is sensationalism prompted by competition among media outlets. The Taiwanese government's deregulation of broadcast media in the 1990s led to aggressive competition among news channels. During this time, the government also legalized the development of a cable television system with minimum

¹⁴ <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/front/archives/2017/01/03/2003662413>

¹⁵ <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2016/12/10/commentary/sex-marriage-sparks-culture-war-taiwan/#.WiQK0bT1VTY>

¹⁶ <http://www.cdc.gov.tw/info.aspx?treeid=45da8e73a81d495d&nowtreeid=1bd193ed6dabae6&tid=0579D4F36FF0AF94>

¹⁷ <https://hotline.org.tw/blog/1111>

restrictions on ownership, the number of channels and domestic content. Media proliferated; Taiwan's 23 million people can now choose from more than 100 channels, including eight 24-hour news channels.¹⁸ To compete for ratings and to reduce the cost of production, these news channels tended to produce unverified reports and dramatize news events. Media observers say news standards, as a result, plummeted with false and misleading information constantly presented to viewers.

Scale and Impact

While fabricated news content in Taiwanese media is usually contained, false content reported by media outlets can, at times, snowball into a larger problem. One clear example is the bizarre incident known as “Meals for the Dead Incident” (腳尾飯事件). Yu-Cheng Wang, a Taipei city councilor who also hosted a television talk show program, wanted to promote himself as being a defender of public interest. In June 2005, Wang sent a videotape to all news channels in which Taipei restaurants near National Taiwan University were shown accepting rice that, the video alleged, had been used as an offering at funerals. The offering, known as “Meal for the Dead,” is a bowl of rice left at the feet of the dead, so they will have energy for their long journey to the afterlife. It is not for human consumption.

After receiving this videotape, all major news channels broadcasted its content without checking its validity, and some channels added to the report by claiming such rice was “served in cafeterias, restaurants and used in food factories,” alleging that consumers had unknowingly consumed rice prepared for the dead.¹⁹ Restaurants in the area suffered a loss of business.²⁰ Wang subsequently admitted that the tape was fabricated by his staff. After the affected restaurants filed a lawsuit against Wang, the court ruled that Wang should pay compensation of more than NT\$3 million (then about US\$93,000) to the restaurants. Consequently, Wang withdrew from public life, including his talk-show program.

After the incident, the television industry in 2006 formed a self-regulating organization, the Satellite Television Broadcasting Association (STBA). The organization was given the mandate to regulate industry standards and promote professionalism and discipline.²¹ Though the self-regulation mechanism was unable to correct the vicious competition of commercial media, the participants have discussed how to draw the lines in such cases. For example, in covering the result of the 2014 presidential election, news channels exaggerated the number of votes the candidates received in order to attract attention and increase viewership, to the extent that some of their figures were greater than the final result. Following the official results from the Central Election Commission, the STBA established rules for covering the results of elections.

¹⁸ Chen, P. H. (2002). The role of the state in shaping Taiwan's cable industry. *Media Asia*, 29(1), 37-41.

¹⁹ For an analysis of the media coverage, please see the work by Ho and his colleagues. Ho, J., et al. (2008). Manufacturing panic: the media coverage of “rice at the feet incident”. *The Journalism Forum*(7), 109-125.

²⁰ <http://englishnews.ftv.com.tw/read.aspx?sno=A159A23CAEDF63B1CC0E866EA5450A18>

²¹ <http://www.stba.org.tw/list.aspx?id=20160828121855>

Current solutions and efforts to combat misinformation

Despite an influx of misinformation on all fronts, Taiwan currently has no law governing the flow of fabricated content. The Taiwanese government had considered waging counter-attack on disinformation with a draft “anti-infiltration act” (反滲透法) to tackle “fake news” that could affect its internal policies and national security. However, the draft was abandoned due to concerns over press freedom.²² Non-profit foundation Taiwan Media Watch, opposed restrictions on media because of their association with authoritarian rule.²³

Instead, the Taiwanese government hopes to enable citizens to be better informed about what they read in the media. The government has set up rumor rebuttal sections on its agencies’ websites, initially covering health and food and drug safety.²⁴ It also plans to implement new media literacy education at different levels of the school system, with aims to help students develop critical thinking in using social media and to identify false news.²⁵

In addition to the government’s efforts, Taiwan’s non-government organizations have also taken action against information disorder. For example, Media Watch Taiwan has launched a fact-checking project through which consumers can raise questions about news stories, prompting further verification.²⁶ Also, an informed netizen community in Taiwan (known as GOV) established a news debunking website called News Helper (新聞小幫手), attracting more than 6,000 users who check for mistakes in news stories and share findings with the wider society.²⁷

About the Author

Lihyun Lin, Ph.D., is a Professor of Journalism at National Taiwan University. Her research interests include the media of East Asia, media and political transition, intellectual history of media studies, and the origins and future of public service broadcasting. Among her publications, the book *History of Communication Research in Taiwan* (2004) won a prize awarded by the Tseng Hsu-Pai Journalism Foundation. Her research papers, entitled “Studies of Communication History in Taiwan” (1999) and “Authoritarian State and Television: A Comparative Study Between Taiwan and South Korea” (2005), have won best paper awards from the Chinese Communication Society in Taiwan. A member of Media Watch Taiwan and the Campaign for Democratic Media, she has given public lectures on the media and democracy to NGO groups and local communities. She has written media criticisms in newspaper forums and taken part in policy debates.

²² <http://m.focustaiwan.tw/news/asoc/201703140028.aspx>.

²³ <http://mediawatch.org.tw/news/5094>

²⁴ <http://www8.www.gov.tw/egov/downloadfiles/piyao.htm>

²⁵ <http://time.com/4730440/taiwan-fake-news-education/>

²⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/mediawatch/>

²⁷ <http://newshelper.gov.tw/>