

# [***In Taiwan, a group is battling fake news one conversation at a time — with a focus on seniors***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BP6-P611-JC5B-G29V-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

TAIPEI, Taiwan — Their days often began at the crack of dawn.

They’d head out to a church, a temple, a park and set up a stall. They’d seek out seniors in particular, those who are perhaps the most vulnerable citizens of the information-saturated society that has enveloped them. To get people to stop and listen, they’d offer free bars of soap — a metaphor for the scrubbing that they were undertaking.

They’d talk to people, ask them about their lives and their media consumption habits. They’d ask: How has fake news hurt you? They’d teach techniques to punch through the static, to see the illogic in conspiracy theories, to find the facts behind the false narratives that can sometimes shape our lives.

Nearly six years later, with just one formal employee and a team of volunteers, Fake News Cleaner has hosted more than 500 events, connecting with college students, elementary-school children — and the seniors that, some say, are the most vulnerable to such efforts.

Its people are filling up lecture halls and becoming a key voice in an effort as pressing here as anywhere: scrubbing Taiwan of disinformation and the problems it causes, one case at a time.

**BATTLING THE EFFECTS OF STORIES THAT AREN'T REAL**

Like any democratic society, Taiwan is [*flooded with assorted types of disinformation*](https://apnews.com/article/taiwan-election-china-disinformation-vote-fraud-4968ef08fd13821e359b8e195b12919c). It touches every aspect of a person’s life, from conspiracy theories on vaccines to health claims aimed at promoting supplements to rumors about major Taiwanese companies leaving the island.

Despite its very public nature, disinformation has a deeply personal impact — particularly among Taiwan's older people. It thrives in the natural gaps between people that come from generational differences and a constantly updating tech landscape, then enlarges those gaps to cause rifts.

“They have no way to communicate," says Melody Hsieh, who co-founded the group with Shu-huai Chang in 2018. “This entire society is being torn apart, and this is a terrible thing.”

Chuang Tsai-yu, sitting in on a recent lecture by the group in Taipei, once saw a message online that told people to hit their chest in a way that would save them in the case of heart discomfort. She said she actually tried it out herself.

Later, she asked her doctor about it. His advice: Go directly to the emergency room and get checked for a heart attack.

“We really do believe the things people will send us,” Chuang says. “Because when you’re older, we don’t have as much of a grasp on the outside world. Some of these scammers, they will write it in a way that’s very believable.”

Chuang is fortunate: Her son has explained some of the things she sees on her phone — including disinformation about health on the Line app. Not everyone is as lucky, though. When it comes to misinformation, there's a lot of work to do.

Taiwan is already home to several established fact-checking organizations. There's Co-Facts, a well known AI-driven fact-checking bot founded by a group of civic hackers. There are the Taiwan Fact Check Center and MyGoPen. But such organizations presume that you're at least somewhat tech-savvy — that you can find a fact-check organization's website or add a fact-checking bot.

Yet many of the people most affected are the least tech-savvy. Fake News Cleaner believes addressing this gap requires an old-school approach: going offline. At the heart of the group’s work is approaching people with patience and respect while educating them about the algorithms and norms that drive the platforms they use.

Hsieh says she was moved after seeing too many instances of division because of fake news: a couple that divorced, a mom who kicked her kid out of the house. Many such stories surfaced in 2018 when Taiwan held a national referendum on a number of social issues including on nuclear energy, sex education, and gay marriage.

At their second-ever event, Hsieh and Chang met a victim of fake news. A vegetable seller told them he'd lost sales because people had read that the vegetable fern he planted and sold, known locally as guomao, caused cancer. Business faded, and the vendor had to sell off part of his land. For a year, even restaurants didn't order from him.

Keep up the work, he told them — it's needed.

**DETERMINING WHY FAKE NEWS IS SO COMPELLING**

At a community center hosted by Bangkah Church in Taipei’s Wanhua neighborhood, a crowd of seniors listen to 28-year old Tseng Yu-huan speak on behalf of Fake News Cleaner.

The attendees, many of whom come daily to the church’s college for seniors, are learning why fake news is so compelling. Tseng shows them some sensational headlines. One: A smoothie mix of sweet potato leaves and milk was said to be a detox drink. Another: rumors that COVID-19 was being spread from India because of dead bodies in rivers. He used mostly examples from Line, a Korean messaging app popular in Taiwan.

With just one formal employee and a team of volunteers, Fake News Cleaner has combed Taiwan’s churches, temples, small fishing villages and parks, spreading awareness. While they started with a focus on seniors, the group has also lectured at colleges and even elementary schools. Early on, to catch their target audience, Hsieh and her co-founders would get to the hiking trails near her home by 5 a.m. to set up a stall while offering free bars of soap to entice people to stop and listen.

Now the group has a semester-long course at a community college in Kaohsiung, in addition to their lectures all across Taiwan, from fishing villages to community centers.

For Hsieh, her personal experience helped shape the approach to battling disinformation.

In 2018, ahead of a referendum on gay marriage, Hsieh had started to lobby her father. He was well-respected in their community and could command a lot of votes. “I wanted his vote,” Hsieh says.

It seemed unlikely: She says he opposed gay marriage and had said homophobic things. The two had often clashed on this issue before, she says, devolving into screaming matches to the point where he had thrown things on the floor. But when she decided to change his mind, Hsieh discovered a new level of patience.

“After we fight, the same night, I’d apologize, and say my attitude is very bad,” she says. “And I’d make him a cup of milk or a coffee, and then after he started feeling better, I’d say ’But! I believe \u2026”

Through the course of three to four months, Hsieh lobbied her father, sending him articles to counter the things he had been reading online or explaining patiently what the facts were. For example, he had read online that AIDS came from gay people. In actuality, the virus was actually from chimpanzees and had made the leap to human hosts in the 20th century.

What finally turned the page after months of lobbying, Hsieh says: She connected the issue to her father’s personal experience.

When he first started doing business, decades ago, some Taiwanese suppliers did not want to sell to him because he'd come from China after the civil war between the Communists and the Nationalist party. When he proposed, his future wife’s father threatened suicide because he was not of "Taiwanese” background. Hsieh saw an opportunity in that.

“Just because they’re gay they can’t marry the person they love?” she asked, confronting him.

Her father, Hsieh says, is now a staunch supporter of gay marriage.

**MISINFORMATION UNDERMINES EVEN DAILY INTERACTIONS**

Fake News Cleaner avoids ***politics*** and takes no funding from the government or political parties. This is because of Taiwan’s highly polarized political environment, where media outlets are often referred to by the color of the political party they back. Instead, the group focuses lectures on everyday topics like health and diet or economic scams.

Hsieh's experience with her father informs how volunteers interact with their students — an approach that goes beyond showing people a fact-check claim. The key is to teach people to think about what they’re consuming. “What we are dealing with is not about true or false," says Tseng, the teacher. “It’s actually about family relationships and tech.”

At Bangkah Church, the audience watches Tseng as he lectures the audience about content farms, websites that aggregate content or generate their own articles regardless of the truth, and how these content farms make money. He also asks: Do the articles have bylines? Who wrote them?

Fake news relies on emotion to generate clicks. So often, headlines are sensational and appeal directly to three types of emotions: hatred, panic or surprise. A click or a page view means more money for the websites, Tseng explains. The retirees watch him, engrossed.

Everything goes smoothly until it comes time to work with the technology, Tseng tries to get his students to add the Line account of MyGoPen, a well-established Taiwanese fact-checking organization. A step that typically takes a minute ended up taking 20. Teaching assistants scour the room, helping seniors. Loudness and confusion prevail.

Many elderly people end up with expensive phones bought by their children that they don’t know how to use, says Moon Chen, Fake News Cleaner’s secretary-general. Sometimes their children open a Facebook or Line account for them but don't explain the phone's fundamentals.

That produces trouble. Algorithms serve up pages that the phone user hasn't followed to fill up the page, the provenance of information becomes hazy and people can get confused.

After the class, seniors could be heard saying they could ask a question to MyGoPen, the fact-checking bot they were told to add.

Lin Wei-kun, a Taipei resident, who attended the class, said he knows better than to believe all the information that he sees online, especially the ones that claim miracle uses for everyday foods. But he appreciated the group’s class because he says many people out there do believe it.

“These days, there’s a lot of information online. I usually just delete it,” he says. “For example, cilantro is just a garnish. But if they write a post saying cilantro has these miraculous uses, a lot of people out there would believe it.”

It’s one more small step forward in Fake News Cleaner’s mandate — one person in Taiwan learning one thing, and becoming a bit more aware of a virtual world of misinformation that grows more complex by the day.

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